

Ceci n'est pas un tableau: les écrits surréalistes sur l'art by *Elza Adamowicz*, Lausanne / Paris, L'Age d'homme, coll. Bibliothèque Mélusine, 2004, 259 pp., ISBN: 2-8251-1875-3 (paperback)

From Baudelaire's famous assertion that 'the best account of a painting would be a sonnet or an elegy,'¹ to Reverdy's description of cubism as a 'plastic poetry,'² writers have often used a literary frame of reference to account for developments in visual art. As a result, their art criticism reveals more about their own literary concerns than it does about the paintings in question. With this in mind, Adamowicz's study of surrealist writings on art resituates the writings of Breton, Aragon, Bataille, Leiris and others in their original literary and art-critical contexts, exploring the often polemical intertextual references 'which mean that a text is a network of multiple texts' (230). Studies that examine, without condemning, the ways in which writers used the genre to promote their own agendas are rare. More often, art criticism is read as a guide to the images that it describes or dismissed for its apparent lack of perspicacity.³ In counteracting this trend, Adamowicz's book is an important contribution, not only to surrealist studies, but also to the expanding literature on word/image relations.

If all art criticism interprets visual art from a literary perspective, surrealist writing on art is particularly problematic since the poets and critics associated with the movement were suspicious of the very concept of 'surrealist' painting. Like their symbolist predecessors, they considered visual art inferior to literature. For Max Morise, for example, writing in the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (April 1924), visual images offered only a 'mediated' reflection of the unconscious mind, unlike words, which could express thought directly.⁴ Moreover, in promoting a global aesthetic that transcended disciplinary boundaries, surrealist writers simply annexed painting to a larger sphere of surrealist activity which they defined as essentially poetic or revolutionary. Just as symbolist critics used poetry as a model for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, bestowing upon it a universal quality to which painting could only aspire, the surrealists' all-encompassing poetic vision assimilated, and therefore subordinated, the visual.

Far from abolishing distinctions between the disciplines, Adamowicz insists on the mismatch between poetic theory and pictorial practice. Noting that surrealist writers on art, from Breton to Desnos, to Aragon, consistently avoid discussing pictorial technique or materials, she argues that the literary definition of surrealism as psychic automatism that took hold following Breton's 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto* fails to account for works as diverse in medium and approach as Ernst's collages, Miró's dream images and Masson's automatic drawings.



However, while this observation allows painting a medium-specificity often denied by surrealist writers, it does not fully explore why painting, which Adamowicz describes in Morise's terms as 'a form of mediated expression' (22), supposedly lacks writing's untrammelled access to the psyche. Similarly, while her argument that Breton's texts project 'beyond the picture' (71) makes the important point that they serve, not to explain painting, but to enhance its mystery, it also reinforces the sense that the visual is merely a springboard for a more far-reaching literary invention (as the painter transforms reality, the poet transforms painting).

More alert to the risks of over-simplification in the literary realm, Adamowicz dismantles the category of 'surrealist writing' as a coherent body of literature. Apart from a few key texts specifically devoted to analysing the relationship between surrealism and painting, most obviously Breton's 'Le Surréalisme et la peinture' (1925-7), surrealist writing on art, she demonstrates, more often appears in the guise of a catalogue preface, public talk, correspondence, novel or poem. As a performative 'text,' it can even take the form of an exhibition layout or a particular juxtaposition of word and image on the pages of a journal. She therefore considers each text, not as representative of a particular genre, but as the product of a specific encounter or set of circumstances, showing in each case how its argument or analysis is determined less by its ostensible object – an artist, exhibition, or work of art – than by the underlying discursive context of contemporary aesthetic and political debates.

Whether charting the shifting priorities of individual writers, notably Breton and Aragon, or analysing recurrent or divergent themes in the critical literature relating to a single painter, such as Miró, Dalí and Picasso, her comparative case-studies effectively convey the extent to which writers, co-opting artists to their cause, mixed painting with poetry, politics or polemics. Chief among these was the ideological divide between Breton's 'orthodox' position and that of the 'dissident' group around Bataille and *Documents*. Adamowicz demonstrates how this quarrel structured the differing responses of these writers and their associates to Miró and Dalí in particular, contrasting, in the case of the former, fairy-tale eroticism with fetishistic violence, and in the latter, transcendent and materialist interpretations of scatological imagery.

In both of these cases, the artists themselves contributed to the literature on their work, raising the question of how artists' accounts fit into the self-referential network of texts by surrealist writers that Adamowicz has uncovered. Dalí, she shows, manipulated the debate by adopting, and at the same time distancing himself from, aspects of both Breton's and



Bataille's opposing positions, forging his own theory of the paranoiac-critical method. With Miró, however, it is less clear how his automatist poems might differ in their method or purpose either from his own paintings or from other texts inspired by them, such as those by Leiris or Eluard. Is an image like Eluard's 'libellules des raisins' ('grape-dragonflies,' from his poem 'Joan Miró') 'essentially verbal' (90) because it cannot be related directly to Miró's iconography, or because it privileges specifically verbal properties of sound and rhythm?

Such details do not detract from the book's success in mapping the themes and agendas of surrealist writings on art. Consistently sensitive to the complexities and contexts of art criticism, Adamowicz reveals how each text evades direct contact with the image it describes, particularly where matters of technique and material are concerned, connecting instead with other texts in the field. This investigation of the intertextual themes and interpersonal rivalries which structure a body of critical writing on art also makes the work a significant addition to the broader field of word and image studies.

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¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1846,' *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, Paris, 1975-76, vol. 2, 418.

² Pierre Reverdy, 'Le cubisme, poésie plastique,' *L'art*, February 1919, in *Oeuvres complètes: Nord-sud, Self Defence et autres écrits sur l'art et la poésie*, ed. Etienne-Alain Hubert, Paris, 1975, 142. Reverdy insists on the precedence of poetry in the development of a non-representational art: 'Ce sont les poètes qui ont créé d'abord un art non descriptif, ensuite les peintres en créèrent un non imitatif' ('It was poets who first created a non-descriptive art, and then painters who made it non-imitative').

³ One notable exception addressing the Symbolist period is James Kearns's *Symbolist Landscapes: The Place of Painting in the Poetry and Criticism of Mallarmé and his Circle*, London, 1989, which analyses the tendency of Symbolist writers to 'assimilate visual values within verbal models of meaning as part of their search for a synthesis of the arts' (ix).

⁴ Max Morise, 'Les Yeux enchantés,' *La Révolution surréaliste*, no.1, April 1924, 26-7; Adamowicz, *Ceci n'est pas un tableau*, 13.

