

Surrealism : prospects and boundaries

Catherine Vasseur and Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/105774>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.105774

ISSN: 2265-9404

This article is a translation of:

Le Surréalisme : perspectives et limites - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/105764>
[fr]

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 1998

Number of pages: 11-12

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Catherine Vasseur and Simon Pleasance, "Surrealism : prospects and boundaries", *Critique d'art* [Online], 11 | Printemps 1998, Online since 28 July 2023, connection on 30 July 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/105774> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.105774>

Surrealism : prospects and boundaries

Catherine Vasseur

In other words, the comparison of two books that are totally unrelated, except for a common denominator of their respective titles, beyond which, thanks to an eloquent alternative, two irreconcilable approaches to Surrealism emerge: on the one hand, an historical fresco (Durozoi), on the other, the exploration of experimental terrain (Fleig). After thirty years of discussion about the death of Surrealism, Durozoi begins to draw up an assessment of what was done rather than the results. In this respect, the absence of any methodological exposition doubtless comes to the same thing, for the author, as asserting its uselessness. The choice, which consists in going straight to the genesis of the movement ("three young people [...] published" the review *Littérature* in 1919), and then departing from it by referring to the successive flops of reviews appearing after Breton's death, points quite clearly to the fact that the word is here given over to the events and the players. Where Durozoi's book is most successful—in addition to its rigour and clarity—is in the changing around of the data about a *movement* that is being forever re-interpreted. The surrealist adventure is dealt with here like a (dramaturgical) *stage*, which, once set, becomes the—moving but symbolic—scene of a constant clash with history, and with the alleged mechanisms of its "progression". The chronological follow-up is punctuated by a thematic division linking the events with the sets of problems which they provoke, thus reincorporating debates, alliances and ruptures in the future evolution of the initial approach. This book (generously illustrated and annotated) is undeniably a comprehensive work, but it also attests to the author's ready ear when it comes to the challenges in question. He winds up his thesis by giving his opinion about the possibility of "infinite prospection" offered by Surrealism to those who would like to "make of their life something other than the mere fulfilment of a plan for which they are not responsible". The sober tone of this declaration is in keeping with the qualities of a book whose informative scope cannot be divorced from the topicality of the issues it raises.

Alain Fleig's book is a singular work, but in a different way. A foreword, at once Sibylline and peremptory, makes a point of mentioning the innermost urgency with which it has been written, thus explaining the (obviously noteworthy) absence of illustrations. We find ourselves hoping for the best.. or dreading the worst. The foreword spells out the bias: examining the history of photography by freeing it from aesthetic classifications, by giving priority to a consideration of what is "photographed". Thenceforth, the question: "What is a surrealist photograph?" straightaway has within it a rejection of the concept of surrealist (photographic) art. A reading nevertheless creates sustained suspense as much for the import of the response as for the subject matter, which seems to be paced by a line of thought

Durozoi, Gérard. *Histoire du mouvement surréaliste*, Paris : Hazan, 1997

Fleig, Alain. *Etant donné l'âge de la lumière I : photographie et Surréalisme en France entre les deux guerres*, Neuchâtel : Ides & Calendes, 1997, (Pergamine)

with a random itinerary. We are actually witnessing a progressive location of photographs marked by the New Vision, whose formal concerns reveal, in some way or another, a "taste for the weird", which links up with the surrealist criteria of beauty: exploding-statis, circumstantial magic, veiled erotic. If Fleig makes use of these hallowed formulae to establish different visual styles, these differences (immediately unverifiable) are still less persuasive than the main idea, according to which the surrealist quest finds "objective" echoes in what photography then shows of the "unconsciousness of (a) world", just emerging from the war, where the development of the media heightens the jumble of nostalgic temptations, ideological challenges, and economic dictates prompted by the image. Fleig even detects in the "missed *rendez-vous*" of photography with the surrealist movement a condition that is favourable to the burgeoning of similar experimental approaches. When earmarked for special assignments, and stripped of its own status (neither art, nor, strictly speaking, science, it enjoys a distribution area, so to speak, of embryonic theorization), photography paradoxically enough forms an informal field that is all the more open to the research of which it is the *revealing* topic, both of its own gropings, and of the trends which pass through it. Surrealism here refers to an historical backdrop that gives rise to a vague, loose state of mind—and not a planned approach. This angle prompts the author to bring together practitioners hailing from every geographical and professional sphere—fashion photographers trained by Hoyningen-Huene, personalities from the world of science (Painlevé, Laure Albin-Guilhot), people working for Deberney & Peignot, as well as Man Ray, Cahun, Tabard, and Ubac—while he omits from his inventory surrealist artists such as Hugnet, Ernst and Dali. This small book, with its lively insights, brims with references to contemporary writings, but has a questionable finish to it (a meagre bibliography, some howlers in the form of misprints, highly unlikely syntactical turns of phrase. It is the outcome of a project in gestation—which in no way detracts from its interest.

The dissimilarity of these two books has an illustrative value: the "word" Surrealism still describes a "thing" that is being perpetually reassessed, and cannot be reduced to the rigid nature of concepts. Its approach and use give rise to a re-introduction of its boundaries, and refer to the essentially dynamic properties of an idea which has never been anything other than the questioning of a line of thinking conceived of as a command to the detriment of a line of thought conceived of as a movement. Should we thus have a preference for the consideration of an historical moment or that of a field of acknowledgements? To make this decision would doubtless be the same as not knowing what we are talking about. Surrealism does not call for a resolution of contradictions. It calls for making their terms more fertile, by grasping them, to borrow the name of a surrealist game, one in the other.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY SIMON PLEASANCE & FRONZA WOODS