

## Introduction

### Permanence et diversité du surréalisme

## The Permanence and Diversity of Surrealism

Gilles Rioux

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## Introduction

### PERMANENCE ET DIVERSITÉ DU SURREALISME

Que les dates fixes du calendrier et celles, fastes entre toutes, des commémorations viennent chronométrer le flot de nos hommages, voilà qui nous paraît arbitraire et convenu; aussi ce numéro de *Vie des Arts* ne prend prétexte d'aucun anniversaire, surréaliste ou autre, d'ici ou d'ailleurs.

Aux trois quarts de la course de ce siècle, il est désormais acquis que la relation de l'homme face au monde et vis-à-vis de lui-même s'est trouvée significativement modifiée depuis qu'André Breton et quelques jeunes gens avec lui, également insatisfaits de la vie qui s'offrait à eux au sortir de la première guerre, mus par la poussée insurrectionnelle de leur âge et soutenus par la ténacité de leur désir, décidèrent de porter plus loin, par tous les moyens, les frontières des libertés. Intellectuelle et morale, cette mobilisation gouvernera la vie entière de certains, manifestera sa vitalité sous les formes variées de la littérature, de l'art, du comportement et de la politique, et n'a toujours qu'un nom: Surréalisme. A leur suite et à leur exemple, d'autres jeunes gens sont venus, et d'autres encore viendront assurer la permanence et la diversité du Surréalisme.

A ces titres, notre seule ambition est de présenter un choix de démarches artistiques ou bien cautionnées par Breton, ou bien exprimant une convergence vers le surréalisme; soit encore qu'elles témoignent en sa faveur ou qu'elles offrent avec lui une compatibilité suffisante. Loin de nous l'idée de dresser un inventaire de tous ceux dont l'œuvre présente des caractéristiques surréalistes, ce qui serait dénué de sens, aujourd'hui qu'un certain surréalisme, plus ou moins trafiqué, fait partie du bagage mental de tout un chacun.

Si notre panorama semble modeste par son envergure et ses dimensions, c'est qu'il reste à la mesure du fait surréaliste ici. Nous considérons ceux de nos artistes qui ont travaillé dans l'entourage et l'amitié de Breton, ceux qui ont trouvé leur voie à la lumière de la comète surréaliste et ceux dont l'activité, à un titre suffisant, voisine le surréalisme. A l'intérieur de ce cadre restreint, on remarquera l'absence, délibérée, des Automatistes dont la valeur historique ne se trouve point minimisée ni éclipsée pour autant; nous estimons tout juste qu'individuellement et collectivement, ils ont fait l'objet de publications, d'expositions et d'études plutôt nombreuses, et qu'il était maintenant opportun de mettre en évidence quelques autres démarches artistiques, parfois contemporaines de celle des Automatistes, et susceptibles, elles aussi, d'être considérées sous l'angle du surréalisme qui les a inspirées, ou continue de les guider.

Breton mort, le groupe surréaliste dissous, c'est aujourd'hui à l'état diffus que le surréalisme s'étale sur la planète, à la faveur (et au profit) d'une industrie culturelle florissante. De là naissent les confusions... On ne saurait trop souligner qu'à la différence de tous les *ismes* qui l'ont précédé, le surréalisme n'est pas réductible à une esthétique, à une manière, à un style; pour s'en convaincre il suffit de jeter un coup d'œil sur la diversité des œuvres que Breton a revendiquées et regroupées pour le surréalisme. Une œuvre surréaliste n'est pas identifiable, comme telle, par son contenu ou ses apparences. Et depuis que des publications de plus en plus nombreuses propagent la peinture surréaliste, on ne saurait pouvoir préciser combien d'œuvres ont pu être provoquées par cette insémination visuelle... Si notre temps fut témoin d'un impressionnisme languide, aussi bien que d'un cubisme itératif et d'un laxisme de l'abstraction, y aurait-il matière à étonnement de voir se prolonger un surréalisme d'écolage? Pourquoi de nouvelles formes d'académisme ne pourraient-elles pas surgir? S'agit-il d'un processus historique inévitable? Ou bien est-il marginal? Breton avait raison: ayant tôt perçu que la diffusion des œuvres surréalistes susciterait pastiches et relâchement, il préconisait l'occultation du surréalisme.

Au stade présent, tout donne à croire que le vocabulaire et la syntaxe de l'art surréaliste constituent un idiome si largement partagé que plusieurs peuvent désormais composer des *variations* sur un thème surréaliste. A témoin, une œuvre de Rafael Barrios, *I've never met Duchamp*, qui rend hommage à cet ancêtre exemplaire entre tous. Il s'agit d'un simple constat, exprimé par un emprunt ironique, dénué de nostalgie: nombre de jeunes artistes ont pour seuls torts et démerites d'être nés trop tard et trop loin pour avoir été, en 1913, les contemporains de Duchamp! Et maintenant que le geste iconoclaste de Duchamp a été introduit dans le temple de l'art et qu'il est vénéré, il sert de modèle à la fabrication de nouvelles icônes. Par son caractère hybride, cette paraphrase de Duchamp souligne la position ambiguë de l'artiste contemporain, coincé par le discrédit frappant les modes traditionnels d'expression, sollicité par de nombreuses avant-gardes qui lui procureront la conviction d'être dans la ligne du progrès, à condition qu'il sache sans cesse se mettre à jour!

Le pastiche et le maquillage d'œuvres anciennes ne pouvant qu'accessoirement être apparentés au surréalisme, quels caractères viennent, aujourd'hui, authentifier une démarche surréaliste? Les œuvres des principaux artistes surréalistes et les commentaires de Breton sont venus, en leur temps et pour leur temps, tracer le profil du surréalisme. Tel une division sur le front, le surréalisme adapte son action aux conditions d'un lieu et d'une époque, se déplace et ajuste son tir au gré des urgences. Le témoignage visuel laissé par une activité surréaliste atteste cette mobilité. Et si, au cours des cinquante années de son existence, le surréalisme a recouvert, par exemple, certaines formes d'art abstrait, on ne saurait trop rappeler qu'il n'a partie liée avec aucune esthétique et qu'il n'est pas engagé dans la course aux avant-gardes. En conséquence, il importe moins de s'attacher aux modes d'expression de l'art surréaliste que de retrouver les conditions morales des manifestations du surréalisme en art. Là réside la valeur exemplaire des œuvres surréalistes anciennes. Dans ses formes, le surréalisme d'aujourd'hui sera autre ou ne sera pas.

Le surréalisme ne peut naître que dans un état d'extrême vigilance face aux situations spécifiques d'une époque; il est une rébellion permanente contre les compromis, les conformismes et les facilités dont se tissent la plupart des existences individuelles et collectives. Pareille lucidité se fait d'autant plus pressante qu'à la révolte fondamentale tend à se substituer le mythe de la révolution, cette vue de l'esprit à laquelle tout un chacun peut souscrire sans danger, et qui sert souvent d'alibi à des entreprises fort diverses.

Autant l'esprit surréaliste commande une conscience lumineuse, autant il plonge des racines profondes dans les zones obscures, ou interdites, du terreau humain. L'ouverture des écluses de l'imaginaire, l'insertion des suggestions oniriques dans le tissu de la vie diurne, l'exaltation des grandes pulsions érotiques, l'obéissance aux sollicitations du hasard, voilà autant de surgissements intérieurs qui, restitués dans toute leur violence primordiale, deviennent les fers de lance du surréalisme. Pour quiconque croit que les combats pour la liberté ne sont pas tous définitivement gagnés, il faut compter plus que jamais sur ces forces vives et les opposer à l'opportunisme du moment, au massicotage de masse et à l'hypocrisie des messies qui vont se multipliant. Et en dépit des apparences, peut-être que la subjectivité n'a jamais été aussi redoutée et brimée qu'aujourd'hui: outre les entreprises proposant un surcroît de *personnalité* et dont la vocation mercantile reste facile à détecter, nous assistons à la prolifération de mouvements et de sectes affairés à prodiguer des soulagements factices et dont l'action réelle consiste à disperser et dissoudre les énergies vitales de l'homme.

Partout où la dignité de l'homme est mise en danger par l'homme, il se crée un état d'urgence où le surréalisme est appelé à se manifester.

Ici comme ailleurs.

Gilles RIOUX

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# TEXTS IN ENGLISH

## THE PERMANENCE AND DIVERSITY OF SURREALISM

By Gilles RIOUX

It seems to us arbitrary and conventional that the appointed dates on the calendar and those, auspicious among all, of commemorations, keep the time of the flood of our tributes; therefore this issue of *Vie des Arts* makes a pretext of no anniversary, surrealist or other, here or elsewhere.

At the three-quarter mark of this century, it is henceforth established that the relationship of man to the world and to himself has been found

significantly modified since André Breton and a few young people with him, equally dissatisfied with the life presented to them at the end of the first war, driven by the spirit of revolt of their age and sustained by the tenacity of their desire, decided to expand further the frontiers of freedoms, by any means. Intellectual and moral, this mobilization would govern the whole life of some, and would manifest its vitality under the varied forms of literature, art, behaviour and politics, and always has only one name: Surrealism. Following them, and according to their example, other young people came, and still others will come to assure the permanence and the diversity of Surrealism.

In the light of these circumstances, our only ambition is to present a choice of artistic developments either well approved by Breton or well expressing a convergence toward Surrealism; still whether they bear witness in his favour or whether they offer a sufficient compatibility with him. Far be it from us to draw up a list of all those whose work shows surrealist characteristics, which would be bereft of sense, today when a certain surrealism, more or less practised, is part of the mental impedimenta of everyone.

If our view seems modest in its scope and its dimensions, it is because it rests in the measure of the surrealist fact here. We are considering those of our artists who have worked in Breton's circle and friendship, those who have found their way in the light of the surrealist comet, and those whose activity, in a sufficient

degree, is close to surrealism. At the interior of this limited framework, we will notice the intentional absence of the Automatists whose historical value is not at all minimized or eclipsed, in any case. We judge precisely, individually and collectively; they have been the subject of publications, exhibitions and rather numerous studies; and now it is advisable to put forth some other artistic development sometimes contemporary with those of the Automatists and also able to be considered from the angle of the surrealism that inspired them or continues to guide them.

With Breton dead and the surrealist group dissolved, to-day it is in a diffused state that surrealism is spreading over our planet, by means of (and to the profit of) a flourishing cultural industry. From whence confusions arise... We cannot emphasize enough that surrealism is not reducible to an aesthetic, a manner, a style; to be convinced of this, it is enough to glance at the diversity of the works that Breton claimed and regrouped for surrealism. A surrealist work is not identifiable as such by its contents or its appearance. And since more and more publications have been spreading surrealist painting, we could not explain how many works were able to be instigated by this visual insemination... If our time witnessed a languid impressionism, as well as a reiterated cubism and a laxness of abstraction, would there be anything astonishing in seeing a school of surrealism prolonging itself? Why could not new forms of academism arise

Is it a matter of an inevitable historical process? Or else is it marginal? Breton was right: having perceived early that the distribution of surrealist works would inspire imitations and laxity, he advocated the occultation of Surrealism.

At the present stage, everything leads us to believe that the vocabulary and the syntax of surrealist art form an idiom so widely divided that many will henceforth be able to compose *surrealist variations on a theme*. As witness a work by Rafael Barrios, *I've never met Duchamp*, which pays its respects to this ancestor, model for all of them. What is in question is a simple statement, expressed by an ironic borrowing, devoid of nostalgia: many young artists are wrong and without merit only because they were born too late and too far away to have been the contemporaries of Duchamp in 1913! And now that Duchamp's iconoclastic gesture has been introduced into the temple of art and is venerated, it serves as model for the making of new icons. By its hybrid character this paraphrase of Duchamp emphasizes the ambiguous position of the contemporary artist, thwarted by the striking disrepute of traditional fashions of expression; sought by many avant-gardes who will secure for it the conviction of being in the line of progress, on condition that it can unceasingly come to light!

The imitation and faking of old works can be connected only in an accessory capacity to surrealism. Which characters to-day authenticate a surrealist step? The works of the principal surrealist artists and Breton's commentaries have drawn the profile of surrealism in and for their time. Like a front-line division, surrealism adapts its action to the conditions of a place and a period, moves and adjusts its aim at the will of emergency. The visual evidence left by a surrealist activity bears testimony to this mobility. And if, during the fifty years of its existence, surrealism has gone along with some forms of abstract art, for example, we could not repeat too much that it is bound to no aesthetic and that it is not engaged in the avant-garde race. Consequently, to cling to ways of expression in surrealist art is less important than to find the moral conditions of the manifestations of surrealism in art. Here rests the exemplary value of the old surrealist works. In its forms, the surrealism of to-day will be otherwise or it will not be at all.

Surrealism can be born only in a state of extreme vigilance in the face of the specific situations of a period; it is a permanent rebellion against compromise, conformity and the facilities of which individual and collective existences are woven. A similar lucidity becomes all the more urgent as fundamental revolt tends to take the place of the myth of revolution. This view of the mind to which all may subscribe without danger, and which often serves as alibi for very different enterprises.

The surrealist spirit commands a luminous awareness as much as it sends deep roots into obscure or forbidden areas of the human soil. The opening of the flood-gates of the imaginary, the introduction of dream-like suggestions into the fabric of daily life, the glorifying of great erotic pulsions, the obedience to the demands of chance, these are so many wild inner waves that, restored in all their primordial violence, become surrealism's spear-heads. For whoever believes that the struggles for liberty are not all finally won, it is necessary to count more than ever on these living forces and to set them against the opportunism of the moment, mass pruning and the hypocrisy of the Messiahs who are becoming ever more numerous. And in spite of appearances, per-

haps subjectivity has never been so much feared and belittled as to-day: beyond ventures offering an increase of *personality*, whose commercial bent remains easy to detect, we are witnessing the proliferation of movements and sects busy at squandering artificial reliefs, whose real action consists of dispersing and dissolving the vital energies of man.

In every place where man's dignity is endangered by man a state of emergency is created where surrealism is called upon to show itself. Here as elsewhere.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

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### TAKING STOCK OF SURREALISM

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By André BRETON

It is not so long ago, already several years, that, in a Canadian publication, surrealism recognized itself as in a mirror. This publication was inspired by our friend, Paul-Émile Borduas, whom I greatly regret not having met during the summer of 1944 as I was loafing in Montreal before leaving for the Gaspé or on returning from St. Agathe.

Paul-Émile Borduas, while pursuing his work as a painter, one of the best-defined productions of to-day, revealed himself an animator of the highest degree by gathering around himself a pleiad of young poets and artists whose fundamental aspirations merged with those of surrealism, even though in being tested differences due to the generation gap would appear. The publication involved, *Refus global*, borrowed its title from the very lucid and courageous manifesto that opened it, written by Borduas and countersigned by fifteen of his young friends.

The reading of this declaration convinced me fully of the identity of the ways of seeing and understanding the world in the most advanced spheres in Canada, as here. In both places, there is the same need to react against stifling, considerably increased lately by the threat of a new conflict, this time destructive. The same concern for attacking the roots of the evil, while there is still time, for drilling the earth at the very least in search of them. It is thoroughly understood, in fact, that the progress of humanity that is to-day proving demented, admits, within the economic conditions whose more and more obviously insoluble character points to inevitable catastrophe, other causes lying, in the last analysis, in the mind of man. It is certain that this mind, at a given time in its history, made an abnormal choice between its faculties, deciding to develop some of them to the extreme and deliberately leaving the others to lie fallow. It is still against this choice, from which it starts off the present process of breaking up that, whether we like it or not, involves us all, that surrealism has constantly opposed itself. It is the whole system of values promoted by this choice that surrealism has persisted in attacking, in destroying. The one it opposes, the one it will not stop before replacing, is what is emerging and co-ordinating better and better, from a keener and keener feeling of frustration.

Let us take stock of Surrealism to-day. This is the same as wondering to what degree in 1952 its initial theses and demands are maintained. If recent events, new conjunctures, while bringing an appreciable corrective to the data of the problem, have not produced certain revisions on its part. It is true that there has been, at the origin of surrealism, a profound revolt and even a moral insurrection against conventional manners of thinking and feeling, it is true that life itself was able to be staked on this denial, but criticism allowed itself too quickly to be deceived by this aspect and much too quickly concluded in favour of pessimism and the will to destruction. We must not forget that the first concern of surrealism was to open wide the windows that were closed before it or at most let through a breath of air: such were the dream, the recourse to certain liberating powers of language, the supernatural in all its forms, love directly recognized as one of the poles of this wonder. To-day we no longer have to open these windows, we hold them well and truly open and we have only to prevent their being closed again. Doubtless this no longer requires exactly the same violence nor the convulsive qualities put forth before, which some people remember with nostalgia. Interior horizons were discovered, places of resolution were glimpsed: the important thing is to advance further to meet them. If surrealism has often been the expression of intolerance, of disgust, even of hatred, it must be understood that this was so in the name of love; I mean that what it remains opposed to is everything that combines in our time to bring about man's loss of the power to love. Perhaps we shall discover some day that this power to love is all that surrealism has sought to restore, sometimes desperately!

It is not a matter only of glorifying the love of man and woman, but of the recovery of a kind of lost innocence, of the reconquest of all that could make life worth while. That, it seems to me, is the side of its programme on which one could not insist too much, to-day; were it only to set it against that of existentialism, wholly pessimistic, which aims at apprehending the «I» as being before the «nothing», without offering the least loop-hole to the consciousness that it plunges into misfortune. During these last years, surrealism has often had the occasion of evaluating all that could link the poetry of this last century to initiatory tradition. Previously, in *Arcane 17*, which I wrote in Canada, I expressed the conviction that the process of artistic discovery is enfeoffed in the form and in the means of advancement of high magic. To-day it is well established, we have proof of it, that esoteric thought strongly attracted or influenced most of those who embraced surrealism, such as: Hugo, Nerval, Bertrand, Fourier, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Jarry, Roussel, Kafka. To the degree to which surrealism obeys historical determinations passing through them, it is clear that it could not fail to be close to the esoteric in its turn; that even while withdrawing within the poetic plan, it would be led to absorb certain fundamental esoteric theses. For a long time it had begun to have a presentiment of it; the important thing is that it should be assured of it from now on. We know that surrealism began with the systematic recourse to the unconscious; in the so-called reasoned phase of its activity it occupied itself in applying the benefits of the results of its exploration to consciousness, that is, with what it brought out from the depths of the unconscious it undertook to extend the limits of the conscious. I think that we can find here the beginning of a dialectical