

Surrealist

TRANSFORMAcTION

Harpford, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 0NH

Editor: John Lyle



16 Jan., 1983

Dear Edouard,

There are three reasons for my warning catalogue-note about the Dictionnaire: 1) that it is unreliable in its data, 2) that it is misconceived in plan, and 3) that JHM and MR present a caricature of the surrealist movement in Britain so distorted as to be damaging to the movement as a whole.

(1) The first customers to whom I offered the Dictionnaire - David Sylvester, The Menil Foundation, and three art librarians - refused it because they found too many errors in the data to allow it to be used as a reliable reference. To confirm this, in my own very small area, I find TRANSFORMAcTION misprinted throughout in such a way as to make the title meaningless, and JHM's entry to consist of a number of false statements.

(2) I concede that it is a very difficult enterprise to compile such a dictionary accurately: but it is a pointless enterprise to compile it if it is not accurate. It is doomed to criticism from the start by reason of conflicting opinions about who is included and who omitted, and especially about the relative evaluation of the contribution to Surrealism of each person, even if the Dictionary had been limited to factual biography, bibliography and chronology of events. But when it incorporates theoretical, critical and analytical entries, its shortcomings become positively dangerous. I do not criticize the ability of the writers or their good intentions (for the most part), but the effect of being obliged by the limitations of space to discuss complex, subtle and unresolved matters in a few sentences is to reduce them to bald, simplistic statements, which, with the authority of the Dictionary behind them can rapidly be turned into dogma which will both mislead, misrepresent, and stifle further enquiry and discussion. I do not doubt that the Dictionnaire will succeed on the level of publicity and sales-promotion for Surrealism, because this kind of treatment will be eagerly accepted by schoolteachers and Philistines... to the great detriment of the movement as a living force.

(3) The long tally of third-rate clowns, poseurs, apparatchiks and opportunist painters living and dead emphasized by MR as being the protagonists of Surrealism in Britain, taken with the false statements, omissions, and derogations about those who have been and are now the real protagonists, printed without reference or enquiry, is taken by all my correspondents, without exception, to be a crushing attack on the surrealist movement in England. I myself believe it to be more a matter of ignorance, bad scholarship, and bad faith, reinforced by the fatal vanity of trying to make an impression by listing a lot of names, however absurd and irrelevant they may be. I do not intend to bore you by listing the many details which give rise to these objections, as it has long been obvious that the compilers were bored by surrealists in England even before the Dictionnaire was written.

Whether or not M. Rémy is "objective" depends upon whether he claims to be a friend or an enemy of surrealism. When I know the answer to that, I'll be able to tell you what I think of his "objectivity". Meanwhile, TRANSFORMAcTION - now the longest-running journal in the history of the Movement - will continue to give the lie to the picture given by MR, JHM and the Dictionnaire.

I regret that these views must displease you - the more so as I intend no criticism of your own 300 entries, other than the unavoidable effects of an enforced Procrustean brevity. Nor do I contest the commitment of G. Legrand and his friends to surrealism, even if they do seem perfectly indifferent to the fate of surrealism in Britain. My views, in any case, are unlikely to disturb anyone, since the book will not be on sale in Britain and nobody in France is likely to read them, or to give them any credence if they do. I write only to answer your reproach.

Payment for your invoices will follow by c. c. p. fairly soon. I look forward to seeing the "Tchec." catalogue, confident that it will contain work much superior to some of the horrible examples in the "Angleterre" catalogue. As for the periodicals, I can't catalogue those without seeing them, and I can no longer afford to add items to my own collection, in consequence of our appalling Government economic policies and the disaster of twins being born to my wife... but a "disaster" only in the economic sense, certainly.

I regret the necessity to write to you in English, but your letter seemed to need a quicker reply than I could have made in French, and also a reply that would not be misunderstood - the usual fate of my essays into your language.

Best wishes for 1983,

SL

P.S. I don't think the omission of Jennings from 'Chambre' is very important. I'd much rather have seen Bill Brandt, a great photographer, and one who has influenced surrealists here as much by the constancy of his views as by his photographs.

The only other serious omission is the American Ralph Eugene Meatyard. It's curious to find this true explorer of the hidden face of Reality and spontaneous recorder of unconscious perception left out, when a mere window-dresser who presents heavily thought-out and self-consciously contrived images - J.C. Loughlin - is included. It's the difference between surrealism-in-essence and 'surrealism'-in-the-bazaar!

But this is not a criticism - just a small regret. Considering the immense number of surrealist photos, ~~conscious & unconscious~~ deliberate & undeliberate, in existence, I think your book is a remarkable achievement. Also a model to historians, because of all subjects, the history of photography has been the most chauvinistic, with English, French & German writers each claiming for their own country the important discoveries and the monopoly of good photographers. Why is that?

SL