
Submerging Images: Getting to the Source of the Change in Artists' Visual Culture

Tristan Trémeau

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/130>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.130

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

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

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2010

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Tristan Trémeau, « Submerging Images: Getting to the Source of the Change in Artists' Visual Culture », *Critique d'art* [Online], 35 | Printemps 2010, Online since 01 April 2010, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/130> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.130

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Submerging Images: Getting to the Source of the Change in Artists' Visual Culture

Tristan Trémeau

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Molderings, Herbert. *L'Evidence du possible : photographie moderne et surréalisme*, Paris:

Textuel : Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art, 2009, (L'Ecriture photographique)

Georges Sadoul : *portes, un cahier de collages surréalistes*, Paris : Textuel, 2009, (L'Ecriture photographique)

La Subversion des images : surréalisme, photographie, film, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2009

- 1 Twenty-four years after *Explosante-fixe: photographie et Surréalisme*, brainchild of Rosalind Krauss, Dawn Ades and Jane Livingston¹, the Centre Pompidou is devoting a major exhibition and a comprehensive publication to the multi-faceted use of photography within Surrealist circles, informed by research undertaken by Quentin Bajac, Clément Chéroux, Guillaume Le Gall, Philippe-Alain Michaud, and Michel Poivert. The authors have divided up the essays on the basis of the issues that stake out their own fields of research, and define the differing functions of Surrealist photography : the group portrait which questions the collective identity and foolish, irrational presentations (Poivert), Atget's influence in the urban quest for marvels (Bajac), photomontage and its links with film and dreams (Michaud), scopic influence and inner vision (Le Gall), the model of automatic writing and its reverberations in the praxis of the photogram (Poivert), the convulsions of reality caused by experimental processes inspired by fun photography (Bajac), and the influence of Surrealist imagery on fashion and illustration (Chéroux). The whole volume, with its essays and reproductions, constitutes what the accepted

expression calls a *summa*, which has all the qualities of the art historical book vital to the libraries of researchers, critics, artists and art-lovers alike, all keen to be able to make reference to precise documents.

- 2 A reading of all the seven essays, written between 1986 and 2008, which go to make Herbert Molderings's *L'Evidence du possible*, introduces other extremely interesting factors to an examination of the Surrealist photographic corpus, in particular because the author tackles the connections and differences between the modernist (Constructivism and Nouvelle Vision) and Surrealist ideologies to do with the uses and challenges of photography. This comparison is called for because photography is a "blind spot" (Molderings) in Surrealist theoretical writings, in spite of the ubiquity of this medium in the group's exhibitions and publications, and it is in the writings of the Constructivist László Moholy-Nagy that we find the first hints of a theoretical approach to Surrealist photography². The first essay in Molderings's book, "Les Origines de la photographie moderne" (2008) provides a key to this connection between the Surrealists' approach, and Moholy-Nagy's: their shared interest in "fun photographs", "optical farces" and "photographic recreation and entertainment"—otherwise put, deformed and distorted pictures, doctored with the help of anamorphic procedures, and multiplying and dividing the image.
- 3 Impurity, grotesqueness, an interest in bad taste, fairground tricks, and "idiotic images" (as Poivert writes, calling to mind Rimbaud's liking of "idiotic paintings"), not to say "dreamlike kitsch" (to borrow a concept developed by Walter Benjamin, and aptly quoted by Michaud) are actually not a domain exclusive to the Surrealists. In the same period, they informed Moholy-Nagy's photographic experiments. This latter, like the Surrealists, collected such images, at that time assured of a popular success among an amateur public by way of editions designed to teach entertaining photographic techniques. What is more, the popularity of Surrealist pictures probably had to do in large part with the interest shown by this imagery in techniques and pictures that were themselves popular. Added to this, and carrying on from Dada, was a "use of images as cultural and anthropological entities", as Poivert writes, a "form of entertainment involving re-uses and displacements, game and disguise, and hybridism, in a nutshell, techniques where it is [...] less a matter of a language than a praxis, of saying rather than doing". Illustrative of this is the Surrealist interest in photomontages, taking on the look of visual make-believe based on cut-outs made in the swathe of imagery formed by magazines, post cards and posters, made possible by technical reproducibility.
- 4 Here, Molderings clearly underscores what sets Surrealism apart from modernism—which, on the contrary, claims for photography the same symbolic recognition as any art by making it distinct from amateur and commercial uses. The analysis put forward by the German historian of Man Ray's book, *La Photographie n'est pas l'art* (1937), is noteworthy in this respect: the captions that the artist associated with common-or-garden, ready-made photographs (for example "Un vide air utilitaire" beneath a low-angle view of the Empire State Building) make fun of the "absolutization of vision" advocated by the pure photography of the period from 1920 to 1930. Likening it to a Dadaist and Duchampian gesture, they rail against the claim of the photographer's model as an artist in a context where the economics of modern artistic photography underwent a significant growth, publications-wise. Another aspect of this institutional issue (recognizing photography as an art, or not) is unfortunately sidestepped in all these essays: the issue concerning the hypothesis of an art produced by young "common people" whose visual culture is

essentially dominated by the culture industries. Attesting to as much is the publication, by Textuel, of a facsimile of *Portes*, a notebook of Surrealist collages put together by the film historian-to-be Georges Sadoul, when he was 21 (late 1925-early 1926) and living in Surrealist circles in Paris. This late publication (for many years the notebook was in the hands of Sadoul's friend André Thirion, until, in 1982, Dominique Rabourdin was involved in its acquisition by the Museum of Art and History in Saint-Denis) describes the influence of Surrealist automatic writing and photomontage procedures on a young man issuing from the middle classes of Lorraine, who was keen to experience, in-depth, an urban and artistic modernity in Paris. An approach stemming more from 'cultural studies' would help to imagine, by the yardstick of this notebook filled by a Surrealist travelling companion, the photographic activities of that movement as the symptoms of a, at the time, partial and increasingly striking change from Pop Art to today, of what makes the visual culture of artists. Studying these issues would considerably fuel the critical approach to teaching and research in art schools.

NOTES

1. Ades, Dawn, Krauss, Rosalind, Livingston, Jane. *Explosante-fixe : photographie et Surréalisme*, Paris : Centre Pompidou : Hazan, 1985
2. Moholy-Nagy, László. "Surrealism And The Photographer", *The Complete Photographer* (New York), vol. 9, n° 52, 1943, pp. 3337-3342