

A VISIT TO BRUSSELS, 1978

My trip to Brussels in the summer of 1978 took place at a very early stage in my research into surrealist photography, when I was still uncertain as to which direction it would take. But a small book of Magritte's photographs had recently been published, entitled *La fidélité des images*, and I wanted to find out more about these pictures.

I wrote (probably a handwritten letter) to Georgette Magritte and she replied, inviting me to visit her to look at the photos. I also wrote to Louis Scutenaire and Irène Hamoir and to Marcel Mariën. All replied positively and I set up a series of visits over two or three days.

The Magritte's last house at 97 rue des Mimosas was a perfect bourgeois villa, evidence of his post-war success. The only sign that all was not as it seemed was one of his sculptures, a bronze version of *The Labours of Alexander* (the tree stump grasping the axe), sitting in the middle of the front lawn. Ringing the doorbell, I was greeted by Mme Magritte, wearing a floral dress and curly rimmed glasses, and ushered into the kitchen. We sat at the table and she offered me whisky (it was late morning) and biscuits. The whisky was a brand called Hankey Bannister – I'd had it once in Britain and it was awful.

Then, as I've recounted elsewhere, she offered to show me the photographs. These were small snapshot prints which she kept unordered in a cardboard box (possibly a shoe box?). They were unlabeled and untitled, though I recognized quite a few from the book. She watched and answered questions about who was who, as I laid the pictures out on the kitchen table and scrutinised them.

When I had finished, she asked if I'd like to see her husband's studio. This, as is well known, was upstairs, next to their bedroom, and Magritte's final unfinished canvas was still on the easel, his brushes and palette next to it. From what I saw of the rest of the house, it seemed immaculately furnished in a traditional bourgeois style except for the paintings that hung around the walls (mostly Magritte's own, but I also remember a de Chirico and a Man Ray photo on the stairs).

The next evening, I went to visit the Scutenaires, whose home on the Rue de la Luzerne was much more crowded and filled with a variety of objects. But dominating the space, hung all over the walls, were Magritte's *vache* paintings, which Scutenaire and Hamoir had particularly collected. They are now in the Magritte Museum, but no museal display could compare with their excessive presence in the domestic context of the Scutenaires' flat.

Scutenaire told me something of how *La fidélité des images* had been produced. It was, he insisted, entirely a project from the Ministry of Culture who had published it, but he had been happy to provide captions for the photos as he had previously for Magritte's paintings. He thought of it, in its own way, as a protest against

conventional taste and the too easy acceptance of Magritte's usual way of working, just as the *vache* paintings had been.

And, again as I have recounted, Scutenaire and Hamoir showed me their own photograph albums, with pictures stuck in, organized by year, and containing many of the same pictures that I had seen on Mme Magritte's kitchen table. The photos were, they explained, often made collectively by the group at their meetings and on outings and they all got copies of the resulting prints. In their albums, these 'Magritte' photos were intermixed with other sorts of images - I remember a fine solarized portrait of Irène Hamoir by Raoul Ubac.

Otherwise, we talked about literature. Scutenaire told me that his favourite English novelist was Thomas Hardy and his favourite Hardy novel was *Le Retour au pays natale*. It took me a few seconds to realize this was *Return of the Native*. When I left, he gave me a copy of *La fidélité des images* which I still treasure, with the inscription written inside the cover: 'pour Ian Walker qui est venu le promener rue de la luzerne, Scutenaire'.

The next day, I went to visit Marcel Mariën, who lived in a much more working-class part of town. My introduction to him was via John Lyle, the surrealist bookseller who I had visited previously in Devon. Lyle had been initially suspicious, but rather softened when I bought a box of books from him, including some by Mariën. From Mariën himself, I likewise bought a recently published compendium of the early issues of his journal *Les Lèvres nues*.

As one might expect, Mariën was very cynical about the publication of Magritte's photographs, which he saw as another small step in the commodification of Magritte. But much of the edge that might once have been a feature of his comments was gone, replaced rather by an amused shrug. We mainly talked about his own work with photography and particularly the way it was used in *Les Lèvres nues*, which I felt echoed the ascetic feel of *La Révolution surréaliste*. He agreed that was deliberate.

We talked in English (his was very good due to his earlier travels) and whereas I had discussed Hardy with Scutenaire, with Mariën it was English sit coms. A lot of shows were apparently available in Brussels via Dutch TV; he said his particular favourites (and one has to say these with a Belgian accent) were *Are You Being Served?* and *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*.

My encounters with these various survivors of Belgian Surrealism were very different. But my main memory of those few days in Brussels is the great generosity they all showed, their willingness to open their doors and talk to me just on the basis of a letter. Also, in different ways, I was struck in each case by a particular attitude of irony - at least I think that was there in the Magrittes' house - and the wry amusement with which they regarded the process whereby their surrealism, once so unacceptable, had been assimilated by official culture. I got a strong sense of how

important all these qualities were for Brussels Surrealism and I get the same feeling every time I go back there.

Addendum

On Saturday, September 27, 2014, I visited the Art Book Fair at the Whitechapel Gallery where, at Marcus Campbell's stand, I skimmed through the £10 Sale box. I almost passed over a torn and battered paperback, once cream, now a dirty brown. But something made me stop as I realized this was Louis Scutenaire's book on Magritte, published in 1947 and therefore understandably showing its age.

The book would have meant little to most who saw it and they would surely consider £10 a lot for a book in this condition. For me, though, it is another treasure and £10 was very little to pay for the way the book opened a door back into the memories recounted above and particularly my visit to the Scutenaires.

Published five years before I was born, the book also gives me a very physical sense of what Magritte's work meant before he was so famous, and, in particular, what it meant within that small group of Brussels surrealists. It is helpfully divided into short paragraph-long sections, some anecdotal and some analytical, some just quotations, ending with a list of Magritte's titles. And other sections seem deliberately banal and stupid – 'bêtises' – to match both the *vache* paintings I saw on the walls of the Scutenaires' apartment and the parodies of snapshot conventions in the group photographs.

So, despite its distressed state, I now take great care of this book and it nestles on my bookshelf next to the little volume of Magritte's photos.