

**REPORT ON A CONVERSATION CONDUCTED BY KRZYSZTOF FIJALKOWSKI,
MICHAEL RICHARDSON AND IAN WALKER WITH BERTRAND SCHMITT, BRUNO
SOLARIK AND JAN ŠVANKMAJER OF THE CZECH-SLOVAK SURREALIST GROUP
CONCERNING THE WITHDRAWAL OF JAN ŠVANKMAJER FROM PARTICIPATION IN
THE CONFERENCE ‘SURREALISM LAID BARE 6: QUERYING/QUEERING SURREALISM’**

The discussion began by noting that during the conference there seemed to be a perception that surrealism had a prejudice against homosexuality and that Švankmajer's withdrawal from participation in the conference had something to do with this.¹ Švankmajer said that this was nonsense as must surely be apparent to anyone who has seen his films; indeed Krzysztof Fijalkowski mentioned that at the conference he had been told after the film was shown at the conference that *Virile Games* could be read in the light of Queer Theory. Švankmajer said that people often find whatever they want in his films and recounted that an Israeli once told him that his film *Otesanek (Little Otek)* was an allegory of the Middle East conflict. Although he thought this ridiculous, he has no objection to people responding to his film in any way they like. However, they should not attribute their subjectively formed views to him.

The discussion then moved on to a more general issue of misrepresentation and especially of the disturbing tendency to make judgements about the past based upon contemporary issues and terms that the actors of the past could not possibly have known about. In surrealist criticism, for instance, Nadja's madness and Breton's response to it are often anachronistically treated as though Breton should have been aware of all of the developments in the treatment of the insane that have taken place since that time. This seems to represent a failure of a sense of history. In the same context and returning to the question of homosexuality, the participants all said that they had never discovered any evidence of any surrealist being excluded on the grounds of their homosexuality. Those who have tried to claim that surrealism has been intolerant of homosexuality have frequently distorted facts or taken them out of context and a tendency was especially noted in which the simple fact of not having spoken about a subject provided evidence of repression. The number of homosexuals who have participated within surrealism gives the lie to the idea that surrealists have anything against homosexuality as such.

A concern was raised that the West Dean conference responded to the increasing managerialism at work throughout modern culture. In its themes and how its overall framework had been established, it seemed to have taken up a fashionable discourse in a way that may have had more to do with the requirements and agendas set by funding organisations than by a need to address vital issues in a rigorous way. This was equated with current difficulties faced by the Czech-Slovak Group, since the new governments in Czechia and Slovakia seem to be embarked on a course which, following economic logic, will lead inevitably to the destruction of living culture through the promotion of a false cultural heritage that serves nothing but the needs of tourism.

The question was then raised as to why, given these facts, Švankmajer had accepted the West Dean invitation in the first place? He replied that he had done so, as he always did on such occasions, out of friendship, specifically because he had been asked by Dagmar Motycka Weston, but also out of respect for Dawn Ades and Roger Cardinal, whom he understood were participants and whose work he respected. He was unable to read anything of the conference literature since he does not understand

¹ Švankmajer's principal objection was to the following statement: *'...Surrealism continued to be a significant cultural force long after its official heyday was over. Surrealism is morphed into something both different and 'queerer' than the original by a number of its would-be disciples. Arguably these inadvertent or deliberate departures from a strict Bretonian orthodoxy helped to preserve Surrealism from obsolescence.'*

It was this that he was specifically responding to in making this statement explaining his withdrawal: *'There have been many questions and misunderstandings in the last few days about why I decided to cancel my attendance at the West Dean symposium.'*

As it appeared to me evident from the invitation paper, which I was only just able to read in Czech – the attitude of the organizers to authentic surrealism, tends to directly confuse it with the outlandish aesthetics of fashion [in other words, what is currently fashionable - eds] experiments, and, on the other hand, identifies authentic surrealism as some "strict Bretonian orthodoxy" which – as is stated in the invitation paper - some "would-be disciples" morphed into something different "than the original".

This is exactly why I couldn't take part in the symposium.

I prefer the original.'

Jan Švankmajer

(on behalf of the Czech-Slovak surrealist group)>>>

English, but when concerns about its import were raised within the Czech-Slovak and Leeds Surrealist Groups, he had the documents translated into Czech and was appalled by what he considered to be such a falsification of surrealism that he could not accept to be part of it. He felt he had been invited in order to play a kind of puppet role that would give authenticity to a phenomenon he has observed especially among Czech art historians whereby they construct a so-called 'surrealism' which responds not to what surrealism itself is or has been but to what they want it to be – they use the word 'surrealism', but speak about something else. He had thought that things were better in Britain, but this incident has made him realise that this is a broader problem. He emphasised that he will never collaborate with falsification and has refused many invitations in the past because he felt that those inviting him were doing so for dubious reasons, notably a few years ago he withdrew from speaking at an exhibition in Prague devoted to 'Imaginative Art' when it became apparent that it involved serious distortions of surrealism. The problem is that so many people seem to see surrealism only in their own narrow, usually aesthetic, terms, which they detach from the living reality of what surrealism actually is.

It was noted at this point that during the West Dean conference delegates had stated that surrealists have contempt for academics. Bruno Solarik and Bertrand Schmitt both responded that this was patent nonsense, as a glance at *Analogon* will immediately reveal. From the beginning it has been edited in collaboration with some of the leading Czech and Slovak intellectuals. There are currently six non-surrealists on the editorial board, two of whom (Jirí Brabec and Josef Zúmr) have served since the very first issue in 1969, which is longer than any of the surrealists. Each issue of *Analogon* includes many essays not only by Czech and Slovak intellectuals and historians unconnected with surrealism, but also translations of important texts from around the world on any topic that is of interest to the current concerns of the group. What they object to among some academics, however, is the way in which new categories are so often introduced to say something 'new' purely for the sake of it or to advance the career of the researcher and in a way that has no basis in fact. A particular case was cited of the text on Toyen published in the current *Papers of Surrealism*, which both Solarik and Schmitt had read in the previous few days, and which each considered to be a concoction responding to nothing but the author's own subjective interpretations. It makes numerous dubious and unsupported statements about Toyen and shows a woeful ignorance not only of surrealism but also of Czech culture. In particular it ignores the fundamental fact that in surrealism art work is not personal *expression* but an *activity of the spirit* expressed through exploration of themes of particular concern to the artist. Toyen's painting was concerned to explore a range of experiences that were of interest to her in a broad sense and her work cannot simply be taken as evidence for her own sexual preferences. This article they considered to be a particularly bad example of an increasingly common trend by which academic research is turned into a commodity. What the surrealists are opposed to is not academic research but bad scholarship, that is academic research which narrows its subject, ignores or distorts moral and existential issues, and is not based upon empirical fact. This leaves the way open for gross ideological and conceptual distortions and encourages intellectual opportunism. Of course, there is nothing wrong with developing new angles and perspectives, but this should emerge from empirical engagement with the material and not be imposed on to it in order to conform with theories that happen to be currently fashionable.

At this point the discussion was brought back to West Dean and another issue which led Švankmajer to withdraw from participation, which concerns an essay written by Roger Cardinal on 'Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject', originally published in 1993 in *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* (eds Maurice Tuchman and Carol S. Eitel), Los Angeles County Museum of Art & Princeton University Press. František Dryje (who doesn't read English), had commissioned a translation of this essay as a lead article for issue 60 of *Analogon* concerned with 'outskirts, periphery and margins', and including a selection on Outsider Art. Upon reading the translation, however, Solarik, Kateřina Piňosová and Bertrand Schmitt were appalled by what they considered its anti-surrealist argument. Solarik at first thought it must be a bad translation and therefore read the original but was astonished to find that it was perfectly correct. He then began writing a critique of the article, which he happened to have finished just as Švankmajer had become aware of the content of the West Dean programme. When he read the translation and Solarik's response he equated the two issues and, since Roger Cardinal was a participant at West Dean, it was a further factor that made it difficult for him to attend the conference. Švankmajer stated that for him this was an issue of friendship and respect. He admired Cardinal's work and this was one of the reasons he had initially been happy to accept the invitation. However, he considered this article a kind of betrayal in its approach to surrealism and madness, which he felt capitulated to the worst misunderstandings about surrealism and appeared to have been written with a view to flattering its intended audience rather than presenting a properly considered scholarly argument. What was especially offensive was the contention that Artaud, by

actually becoming insane, was the true surrealist, something which not only distorts surrealist ideas but also trivialises the personal tragedy of Artaud's life. The direction of the argument seemed to merge with the apparent aspirations of the organisers of the West Dean conference to establish a false and ideologically inflected opposition to surrealism as it actually is and has been throughout its history.

The question of Queer Theory was then raised. How was it understood in Czechia? Solarik said that he understood it as having to do with the formal fashion for emancipation, with an emphasis on the rights of sexual minorities. Fijalkowski, Richardson and Walker explained their understanding of it. In response, Schmitt said that it seems to be a variant of gender studies, which has been especially popular in France. The participants wondered if Queer theory was something specific to Anglo-American academic culture which had not been diffused into a broader international context.

This report has been agreed by Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Michael Richardson, Bertrand Schmitt, Bruno Solarik, Jan Švankmajer and Ian Walker as an accurate rendering of their discussion that took place on Friday 2nd July 2010 at Horní Staňkov, Czechia.

Note for English speakers: This report uses 'Czechia', the preferred designation for the country, rather than the 'Czech Republic' as it is usually called in the English speaking world.