

# Subversively Surreal

Review

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a review of

Ron Sakolsky's *Surrealist Subversions: Rants, Writings, and images by the Surrealist Movement in the United States*. Autonomedia 2002. Please see page 55 for details on how to order your copy.

"Surrealism can help us break the constraints of social realism and take us to places where Marxism, Anarchism, and other isms in the name of revolution have rarely dared to venture."

—Robin D.G. Kelley

Since their formation in 1966, the Chicago Surrealist Group has remained the most visible and influential surrealist group in the English-speaking world.

Coming from radical and counter-cultural backgrounds such as the IWW, the Rebel Worker group, Solidarity Bookshop, and the Louis Lingg Memorial Chapter of the SDS, it's no surprise that Franklin and Penelope Rosemont and their allies have forcefully asserted surrealism's revolutionary essence to combat widespread misunderstanding, especially prevalent in the United States.

Many elements of the surrealist project have been down played or completely ignored by academia, the media, the art establishment and others who seek to keep us under control.

Co-opted and de-revolutionized, imitation surrealism has been the focus since Salvador Dali landed in New York, flaunting his popular appeal and consumerist/fascist sympathies. It's no wonder that it took so long for the first indigenous group in the US to arrive and start cleaning up the mess left by art critics and idiots.

In his introduction, anthologist Ron Sakolsky gives us a comprehensive overview of that first group's development, from the Roosevelt University Anti-Poetry Club and RU Wobblies, the Rosemont's meeting with Andre Breton and their months-long participation in the Paris Surrealist Group, through the infamous Gallery Bugs Bunny and Gallery Black Swan on up to the present. Sakolsky illustrates how the Chicago Surrealist Group and its affiliates from coast to coast who compose the larger Surrealist Movement in the US have always had an organic, reciprocal relationship with not only workers' struggles and the anarchist movement but also a wide variety of heretical and librist currents.

This 750-plus page anthology is compiled from the Chicago group's sporadic journal *Arsenal*, as well as the Surrealist Insurrection wall-poster series, Surrealism: The Octopus-Typewriter, collaborations such as Free Spirits, special issues of *Cultural Correspondence* and *Race Traitor*, as well as newer, unpublished material.

Unlike the recent *The Forecast is Hot*, which focused on Chicago's collective statements, it centers mainly on individual statements. Divided into various sections and subsections whose titles themselves are inspiring, the book explores the concentrated interests of the Chicago group and expands upon the first principles of Surrealism in an explosive and diverse assembly of voices.

Since Surrealism is more than an art or literary movement, but rather a way of acting and being in the world that makes use of a variety of expressive mediums, emphasis is made on a sweeping critique of the repressive social and psychic structures which hinder the realization of the Marvelous.

Work, capitalism, the state, white supremacy, patriarchy and sexual oppression, religion, ecocide, imperialist war, including the so-called 'war on terrorism,' and last but not least the rule of socially confined superego consciousness over everyday life, are condemned as upholders of exploitation and misery.

As the 1989 editorial "Now's the Time" states, "We are living, precariously enough, in a strange place called the United States, a nation founded on genocide, and whose government, the most murderous in history, is the deadliest enemy of human freedom in the world today...we surrealists are more than ever communists, anarchists, atheists, irreconcilable revolutionaries, implacable enemies of things as they are, unrepentant seekers of a truly free society"

As surrealists recognize the social context that creates what we call reality, the book offers lucid and insightful criticism of Western Civilization. In "Freedom Now Sweet: Surrealism and the Black World" Robin D.G. Kelley writes, "Surrealism may have originated in the West, but it is rooted in a conspiracy against Western Civilization...the surrealist practice of pure psychic automatism—which dates back to 1919—was much more than a modern technical invention, for it quickly led to the recognition that entire cultures had methods of thought and communication that transcended the conscious...Related more to shamanism and trance states than to modernity as it was understood in the West, automatism is a struggle against the slavery of rationalism, a means to allow the imagination to run free."

Kelley mentions the anti-colonialist positions that helped politicize the original Surrealist Group in Paris and important African contributions to surrealism made by the groups around the journals *Legitime Defense* and *Tropiques* in the 30s and 40s, highlighting the importance of Thelonious Monk, Joseph Jarman, Jayne Cortez and Ted Joans, who move in the spaces where surrealism and African consciousness intersect.

Drawing from a variety of social theorists and writers such as Herbert Marcuse, C.L.R. James, St. Clair Drake, Wobbly humorist T-Bone Slim as well as marginalized figures (some of whom they've re-introduced into public discourse) and elements of Tribal, African and Western culture which exemplify vernacular surrealism, the book demonstrates how a latent desire for the revolution that surrealists and anarchists call for is a widespread component of consciousness, and a crucial factor in creating situations that can take us beyond the death-race that modern social life has become.

Suzanne Cesaire wrote in a 1941 issue of *Tropiques* (cited by Kelley): "Far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting our revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us, endlessly reinforcing the massive army of refusals. And I am also thinking of tomorrow" Kelley complements this thought with his assertion that, "Surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity rather than rationality."

Among surrealism's popular accomplices, a favorite of the Chicago group has always been Blues and Jazz. Paul Garon's "Blues and the Poetry of Revolt" recognizes that blues champions "the primacy of the passions and thus must be considered in the service of human freedom."

Meanwhile, Franklin Rosemont's "Black Music and the Surrealist Revolution" constructs an analogy between surrealist automatism (originally inspired by the free association of psychoanalysis) and the improvisation of Free Jazz musicians like Cecil Taylor, who "are not mere allies but, objectively, active participants in the surrealist revolution."

Elsewhere in this collection, Phillip Lamantia reflects on old-time radio shows like *The Shadow*, Joseph Jablonski pays tribute to Lord Buckley, while David Roediger and Franklin Rosemont provide us with evidence of the surrealist relevance of *Bugs Bunny*.

Other noteworthy contents include explorations of youth culture, the Los Angeles rebellion of '92, protests against the WTO in Seattle, a critique of zoos, and much more.

Surrealist Subversions also includes material from more recent participants in the movement, among them Gale Ahrens, Anne Olson, Jen Besemer, and Jennifer Bean. The latter three, Chicago residents, are active in the renewal of counter-cultural oasis Bughouse Square, where Olson encountered the Surrealist Group.

New Yorker Cassandra Stark Mele provides a striking account of her personal struggle against parental and social oppression in "Your World, Not Mine." This essay shows the tragic consequences of adult repression of yearnings for the Marvelous in children, as well as how this trauma can be overcome. A child's response to life reveals deep truths about imposed social behavior, which can't be ignored.

Ronnie Burk looks at the murderous humanitarianism of "The U.S. AIDS Crisis in Africa", Nancy Joyce Peters writes of "The Heresy and History of Love," Daniel Boyer calls attention to the implications of "Mental Illness and the Belief in Whiteness," and Penelope Rosemont advocates "Breaking the Chains of Gender." There are also pieces about surrealist games such as Exquisite Corpse and Time Traveler's Potlatch, Lamantia's excellent "Poetic Matters," critiques of the traditional left, and numerous articles on "Liberating the Visual Imagination," "Defending the Marvelous," and "The Realization of Poetry in Everyday Life."

Regardless of reservations readers may have with particular points, this book should be read and discussed widely by today's revolutionary milieu. The international surrealist movement continues to mobilize energies for anarchists and all oppressed peoples to overcome capitalist-hierarchical civilization, along with nuclear-armed, oil-hungry, murdering elites and their immobilizing cultural distractions.

As Franklin Rosemont writes in his foreword, this book is aimed at "the young rebels of all ages who, since Seattle '99, have been creating vital outposts of resistance, revolt and revolution worldwide." *May Surrealist Subversions* resonate with, and amplify, our most radical longings.

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