

The Exploding Rose

Surrealism in Portland

M.K. Shibek

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I first encountered André Breton's surrealist manifestoes as a young anarchist in the late '80s, and was attracted to the ideas within.

Surrealist poetry had a familiar resonance: I recognized how psychic automatism existed in my own experience. The quality of that expressive revelation reminded me of how long sentences, scenes and pictures would unfold before me, independent of conscious direction, as I was near sleep. Breton even mentions such hypnagogic phenomena in the first manifesto. But I had no idea anything like a surrealist movement still existed until I saw a review of *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversions* in a midwestern anarchist publication.

I wasted no time in ordering the fourth issue of the Chicago Surrealist Group's journal. The contents of *Arsenal* were a catalyst for a new approach not only to creativity, but to all of life as well, which complimented my punk/anarchist sensibility.

More than an art movement, surrealism, like anarchism, appealed to my sense of intuitive rejection of the socialized ego identity wage slave complex, and affirmed that reality included much more than what I'd been raised to expect.

The demand for revolution as collective creation, where personal and social restraints are undermined by a materialized imagination, reflected aspirations, and seemingly impossible hopes. Surrealism draws from peak moments in everyday life and in history, and informs the content of our dreams as they attempt to realize themselves.

As a college student I explored automatic writing and objective chance, pursued various creative/destructive endeavors, and issued agitational leaflets, but other than a few casually interested friends, I was unable to find, or form a truly surrealist group. A few years later, I moved to the west coast and, with Kayenne Sevaratim, co-created *Razor Petalled Flowers*, a series of public music and movement explorations in Portland, Oregon. We also gathered a dozen friends to disrupt trendy/recuperative Dada Ball.

Two texts prepared for the occasion were later reprinted in *Drift Talisman*, a "mini-magazine promoting surrealism, creative revolt and empowerment" which I first published in 1998. Shortly before the "Battle of Seattle," I visited surrealists from the Bay Area, Ribitch and Ronnie Burk, who'd collaborated with the Chicago group as well as the *Blue Feathers* project from Minneapolis.

In early 2001 I met lifelong Portland resident and Wobbly organizer Morgan Miller, whose conception of surrealism is tied into an ongoing study of the land and culture of the Pacific Northwest, with inspiration from indigenous peoples and hidden/radical history. Not long after, we met Brandon Freels, author of two chapbooks and an FAQ on surrealism. Local events prompted a general gathering, and we met Victoria Garcia, who later became a consistent collaborator, along with several others who participated in the early activities of the Portland Surrealist Group, officially formed in August. We have weekly meetings at the Red and Black, a Wobbly café.

Affirming the continuity of surrealism by referring to the coelacanth—a fish once thought to be extinct—our introductory statement "Surrealism: A Fish" reads in part: "Our ambition is to make a surrealist presence in Portland

by way of collaborative creation/revelation, and through a collective loathing of what culture has made itself: A fossilized vat of distilled boredom that works in opposition to life and the environment rather than reflecting them. We intend to exalt life through the sharing of dreams and ideas, hallucinations and intoxications, experiments, chance encounters, and more...this is an attempt to start a conversation.”

Word of mouth and placement of this flyer in surrealist books in bookstores helped us meet others. In addition to discussions about past and present surrealism, news events, sharing of dreams, ideas, and games, we made preliminary explorations of the city and became active in the online surrealist community. At their best our gatherings have been a generalized laboratory for subversion, realizing to some degree what painter André Masson called “the collective experience of individualism.”

Our second statement was in defense of a homeless community facing repression. “Direct Action is Contagious” supported Dignity Village and condemned the city and police as servants of capitalist property values: “The callous tyranny of Portland’s political elite, and its business peers, is exposed as they continuously make villagers move with an underlying official sadism and disregard. Meanwhile, they masturbate over their plans for gentrification...they dream of well-scrubbed, white consumers and commuters bustling about in a set made for working and shopping, with an ever-expanding police presence. Until we are able to live on the earth without restraint, and as long as the land is owned for profit, there will always be those...who cannot pay the ever-increasing price of survival.” This text was reprinted in *The Rearguard*, a radical student paper, and on Dignity’s website.

In December, we realized the Surradio project, thanks to KBOO’s Circle “A” Radio host Honey Mud, a forest defender and friend of the group. The hour-long show was envisioned as a counterpoint to a previous radio broadcast on Dada and Surrealism, which had notable weaknesses and omissions.

Recorded poems, word-games, music, essays and discussion were provided by members of our group along with Dale Houstman of Blue Feathers from Minneapolis, John Adams from Texas, Parry Harnden from Canada and Gypsy Sherred, editor of *Paramithsa*, from the UK.

Our next statement was inspired by a Creative protest against the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, built in Larry Eaton’s neighborhood south of Portland. “Against Prisons: An Open Letter To Larry Eaton” applauded Eaton’s “planting” of five or more school buses “like monstrous straws of steel wheat” in his and neighbors’ yards.

But while Eaton’s main concern was property values and aesthetics, we denounced the social conditions which created and sustain the prison industry, and proposed “a widespread revolt against-the controlling institutions, followed by the founding of a new culture based on freedom, love and imagination.”

Eaton didn’t respond to our mailing, but has continued to bury buses. Our first public intervention was an appearance at First Thursday, a monthly capitalist/elitist art gallery event.

Three surrealists and four friends used costumes, face paint, sidewalk chalking, duck calls and ranting to make our point. A text was circulated which announced our lack of confidence in the conformist ambiance and asked,

“What explorations of the imagination found within these galleries cannot be amplified a thousand fold by an inspired uprising in the streets? In solidarity with the street performers and sidewalk outsiders we protest the city’s permit requirement and long for an unauthorized creative atmosphere with an empowered, revolutionary essence. We dream of endlessly fluxing interactive galleries and transient celebrations evolving from intoxicating play, impulsively overwhelming streets and cities. We long for the creation of voodoo vandalism and childlike chalk art, and slow dancing in burning churches and bubble baths!”

Although the yuppies and art consumers were scared away, many others were friendly, helping pass out the text “Ze Rouge” (inspired by the highly flammable Vodun spirits related to Haitian revolts) and dancing and talking with us.

This action was accompanied by a humorous example of objective chance in that a large fire somewhere in the distance began pouring smoke over the area. Two friends, loose on wine taken from the galleries, found and wore some discarded plastic fire hats.

Although still inexperienced as a group, we’re excited to be carrying on the surrealist project in the Pacific Northwest and hope to build a larger community of cross-fertilization between surrealists, anarchists and radicals, and rogue creative networks of all sorts.

Tentative areas for future activity include surrealist events/parties, a black humor festival, dream collection, collaboration with the free school, creative vandalism, discussions of various movements and cultures, history projects

and field trips, guerrilla museums, music and motion research, drifting, various public interventions, and a group show. Forthcoming this summer in our bulletin, Flying Stone.

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