

Why Surrealism?

“Deliriously & Simply Total Liberation!”

Penelope Rosemont

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Introduction

As we explore routes out of today's stifling, mechanized, crisis-bound world the FE staff opens the magazine's pages to many forms of subversive research and many flavors of anarchic revolt.

The Chicago Surrealist group Penelope Rosemont discusses below was inspired by the Surrealist movement that began in Europe in the 1920s. Surrealism is a conscious project for utilizing the discoveries of Freudian psychology to subvert the ruling order by images and words, elaborating forms through which people can express and gratify their repressed desires and challenge societal oppression.

Over the years, various Surrealists have developed complex cultural and political relationships with anarchist as well as with socialist and communist ideas and groups, while some well-known Surrealists, such as Salvador Dali, became adepts of the capitalist marketplace.

The Chicago Surrealist group wanted not only to ridicule the existing order, but also to change it. With this in mind, they joined their cultural critique with the direct action traditions, analyses and methods of the revolutionary workers' movement embodied in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Urban Uprisings, Youth Revolt, 1966. Cities were being torn up and burned. For us, this chaos showed the flame of revolt had not been extinguished; the passion for freedom not forgotten. People chose once again to step onto the stage of history.

We wanted to be part of it, and we were. The first leaflet issued by the Chicago Surrealist Group was passed out at a civil rights rally in Chicago, July 10, 1966, following a week of rioting a month earlier.

The main speaker was Martin Luther King, Jr. Inspired and impatient, our tract demanded not only civil rights, but “deliriously and simply Total Liberation!”

The leaflet celebrated the Negroes (as blacks were generally called at the time) of Watts, the Puerto Ricans of Chicago, the Provos of Amsterdam (counter-cultural, anarchist-inspired activists), the Zengakuren of Japan (All-Japan League of Student Self-Government, organizers of massive demonstrations, including dramatic confrontations with police), the Nat Turner slave insurrection of 1831, wildcat strikers, deserters, and youth.

All those who knew “the struggle for freedom cannot be guided by the rulebooks of priests and politicians.”

Liberated souls, we wrote, “have an historical role as cosmic architects armed with hammers, electric guitars, and apocalyptic visions, but more significantly, armed with the exhilarating knowledge that we are able to...build a new everything.”

We modestly signed it, The Surrealist Group, The Anarchist Horde, and The Rebel Worker group. Mostly college drop-outs and draft resisters and IWW members, we began the Solidarity Bookshop on Armitage Avenue in 1964, and published a magazine, Rebel Worker.

It was a hangout for all sorts of dissidents who came to buy books, magazines (ranging from *Fifth Estate* to *Internationale Situationniste*), and to plan an alternative future. We wanted the place to be a center for a growing movement—and it was.

It was also harassed, so we moved a lot. The bookshop's main participants were me, Bernard Marszalek, Robert Green, Tor Fagre, Franklin Rosemont, and Simone Collier and Joan Smith, who worked with Bernard at Chicago's main post office. (Their front group was the PO Chess Club.) Soon, we were joined by Paul Garon from Louisville, bringing with him the songs of early 20th century St. Louis bluesman, Peetie Wheatstraw.

1966 began as an incredible year for me—formative, no turning back in terms of life choices. Franklin Rosemont and I returned from Paris in May 1966 after meeting Surrealist founder, André Breton in February, Guy Debord of the Situationist International in March, English Situationist, Charles Radcliffe in April, UK Freedom Press anarchists in May, having begun on January 1 at the Paris Surrealist New Year's Eve party organized and acted out by Breton's group.

An anarchist friend from New York City, Jonathan Leake, editor of *Resurgence*, the mimeographed organ of the Resurgence Youth Movement, was in Chicago on June 6. We were sure that the apocalypse was at hand-666. Writer Robert Anton Wilson encountered Jonathan and began his book (later a trilogy) *Illuminatus!* with characters inspired by Solidarity Bookshop participants.

What path to take? For me, in my twenties, the path was not found at the university, though ardently sought. It was in Surrealism I found a key of great value, the possibility of social and cultural change, of meaningful revolution—the re-enchantment of everyday life. Surrealists, masters of the image, understood its use to penetrate the mind, beyond conditioning, beyond repression, to liberate thought.

As one or two people or a small group, we realized we had little power against the armed might of the state. But we knew that human beings live not only in a bureaucratic political state, not only in the world of work, but in an ocean of images, words, symbolic actions, gestures, magic—a complex network. One where there is a constant struggle between the forces of repression and liberation.

While Surrealism has discovered the method behind the creative process, art and poetry, it does not stop there. It demands a creative political perspective and action in the real world. We are not academics, not outside observers of politics, of life. That is one of the major differences between Surrealism and art (abstract expressionism, minimalism or other styles). Our politics and our anti-religious stand tend to make us pariahs for the art world, but so much the worse for the art world.

As Surrealists, we defend the marvels of the world, defend the wilderness of the world, both in the natural world and in ourselves. We are in love with the natural world, from the Tardigrade to the Great Blue Whale. We understand the power of the image to remake the world, to remake it after our own desires.

For Surrealism, "the poet is a seer," as Emerson wrote. Realizing that revolutionary change that does not change everyday life cannot be lasting, Surrealism in its ever-changing, multi-dimensional perspective has that potential. It demands constantly a reevaluation of all values.

Our world today: fantastic, horrible, creative, repressive, nothing can be changed, impossible, everything is possible, all quicksand, it's the end of the world, tomorrow never comes, perhaps a new beginning. Every day we face a choice.

Armed with our Surrealism, mad love, poetry, and humor, we must choose total Liberation.

Penelope Rosemont edited *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, and wrote *Dreams & Everyday Life: Surrealism, Rebel Worker, Sods & the Seven Cities of Cibola*, Charles H. Kerr, publisher, a memoir.

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