

Deserving the Best

The Continuing Appeal of Surrealism

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a review of

Surrealism: Inside the Magnetic Fields by Penelope Rosemont. City Lights Books 2020

I used to know an amazing old working-class philosopher (an electrician) and practical utopian who had a wonderful phrase to sum up his inspired anarchism: “We deserve the best.”

“The best” means, as Penelope Rosemont shows in this book, what the surrealists call “the marvelous,” a world of beauty, joy, and goodness. “We,” means everybody, of course.

The great promise of the most life-affirming and world-affirming forms of anarchism has always been our participation in creating (really the Earth creating, through us) such a world for all. This is the spirit of ecstatic anarchy that animates Penelope Rosemont’s writing, and which she exudes through her own life.

It is easy to associate anarchism with protest, radical critique, and that old classic, struggle. But what wins people over is such a vision of the world of “the best” for all, and, even more, the actual existence of small communities of people beginning to realize it in their everyday life. This book is about that kind of community creating that kind of world.

It begins in the Fall of 1964, with the meeting of youthful student revolutionaries and visionaries Penelope and Franklin Rosemont. Together, they discovered the enchanted world of surrealism and gave birth to the North American surrealist movement. From that point on, they were to be at the center of that movement, or perhaps we should say, that magic circle, that enchanted vortex.

Penelope recounts their exploits with their “proto-surrealist” Rebel Worker group. The group took its name from its mimeo publication with that title, inspired both by surrealist rebellion and that of the anarchists and Wobblies whose history surrounded them in Chicago. The group ran the Solidarity Bookstore, which sold surrealist, anarchist, Marxist, and IWW literature. As Penelope has explained, their goal was nothing less than total revolution, beginning right where they were, and then radiating out in every direction.

The Rebel Worker was a key part of their “revolution in the service of the marvelous,” to borrow the title of one of Franklin’s books. Penelope says that they “were fascinated by the printed word.” She adds that “Even now I’m amazed at the ability of the word to conjure up images, images leading to thoughts, to ideas, to states of mind, to a whole psychic chain of perception that, in fact, is capable of renewing the world.”

Thus, surrealism is about creative rebirth, regeneration, and the pulse of life. And the Word is part of that process. She refers to the surrealist project of “rescuing the verb.” Yes, the Word is a verb, a very active one, and is the expression of motion and vital force. This idea is reminiscent of the Word or *Logos* of the ancient dialectician Heraclitus. It is that ever-transforming flow into which you can’t step, even once. You’re already in it, and if you allow it to overwhelm you, it carries you away to extraordinary places.

With this inspiration, Penelope and Franklin and their comrades began to explore the many regions of Surreality: convulsive beauty, the secrets of the unconscious, automatic writing, and their own ability to create miraculous new images. They were Rebel Workers With A Cause, a cause which included producing and distributing three

thousand copies of the magazine, at a time when publishing was a much more demanding labor of love than it is now. And since they had a good sense of priorities, they also found time to help a group of nine-year-olds produce materials of propaganda for their grade school anti-war protests.

However, even in the midst of all this frenetic creative fervor, Penelope and Franklin dreamed of “wandering the streets of Paris directed by chance alone,” and of meeting André Breton and other famous surrealists. So, in December 1965, during a lull in the creative Maelstrom of Chicago they decided to make their dreams an immediate reality, and were soon off, first for a stop in England, and then for Paris itself.

As Penelope relates in one of the greatest of her many great stories, the dream almost turned into a nightmare when they landed in England. Thanks to—big surprise!—the state. Suspicious of their beatnik looks and Franklin’s prime draft age, the agents of the Repressive State Apparatus carried out their assigned task. Rejecting his claim of a student deferment, they tagged the couple as radical draft-resisting beatnik would-be illegal immigrants who should be sent back to the U.S. on the next plane. But fortuitously, when the British officials found that there was a more expedient means of purging the UK of these dangerous subversive elements, they were put on the next plane for France instead.

As it turned out, the state had done them the great favor of expediting their arrival in surrealist Paris. It was just in time for the famed International Surrealist Exhibition, *L’Écart Absolue*, or “Absolute Divergence.” Not only were they about to see works of Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Max Ernst, and many other surrealist eminences, they would almost immediately find themselves at the Paris Surrealists’ 1965 New Year’s Eve party, celebrating well into the early morning with skits, charades, stories, songs, “riotous laughter,” a chorus line and a striptease, all in grand surrealist style. They were transported to another world, the milieu of the merveilleux. And, much of this book consists of tales of the surrealists they met there.

We learn of Jean-Claude Silberman, who assumed the role of Surrealist Investigator, wandering the streets of Paris posing to pedestrians such non-pedestrian questions as “If someone came to the door and said the police were after them, would you let them in?” Or, visiting the lost and found of the Paris Metro to undertake an analysis of the nature and psycho-ontological implications of found objects.

We also discover the amazing Ted Joans, African-American “Surrealist Griot,” poet of Black Power and Beatitude, and founder of a movement to rename Lake Victoria in east Africa, “Lake Satchmo.” Franklin went on to co-edit the groundbreaking collection *Black, Brown and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (University of Texas Press, 2009), which is dedicated to Ted Joans, and includes several of his works.

Another principal protagonist is Mimi Parent, who contributed to the *Écart Absolue* exhibition the anti-militarist installation “*Arc de dérouté*,” or “Arch of Defeat.” This wooden-legged détournement of the Arc de Triomphe was large enough for visitors to walk under—and perhaps come under its subversive spell.

We also encounter the early gender revolutionary Toyen, a gifted painter and one of the founders of Czech surrealism. She, along with her friend Styrsky, cofounded the artistic movement “Artificialism,” which took the pursuit of maximum imaginativeness as the supreme aesthetic value, and prefigured abstract expressionism.

The longest section on a single person is devoted to Leonora Carrington, who is a huge presence in the book. Its cover features Carrington’s enigmatic and haunting painting *Ikon*. Penelope says that Carrington had a “profound effect” on her, and that the latter was responsible, in fact, for “making a feminist out of her.” This leads to a final major aspect of this book.

No one has done more than Penelope has to establish beyond question the central place of women in the surrealist movement. She does this above all in her massive and magnificent 1998 collection, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, and she does it again in the present work. In the Anthology, Penelope writes of her goal of “preparing the way” for a “fortuitous encounter” between “feminism’s visionary, utopian, romantic, anarchist, and revolutionary socialist heritage,” and the universe of surrealism.

Her work is an unexcelled effort to unite these two revolutionary tendencies in a common quest for a world of beauty, joy, wonder and creativity for all, and in a common struggle to finally extirpate the absurd and brutal form of insanity called patriarchy.

She offers a strikingly beautiful evocation of what the romantic, anarchistic, revolutionary, surrealist, feminist utopia means in concluding the book with a wondrous, whimsical, and wise vision of an imagined “Restless, Reckless Rendezvous of Women Surrealists.”

Before reading this book, I asked it for a message about itself. I opened it randomly and it replied, “subtle but sure.” How true, O Book! Penelope’s account of the world of surrealism has none of the usual heavy-handed presumptuousness of those self-proclaimed experts on art and cultural movements who offer authoritative guides to the uninitiated.

Instead, she relates her own experience: how she subtly but surely, in amazing feats of negative capability, opens herself up to the magic and magnetic forces that pulse and vibrate through the real and surreal, and then transmits the magic and magnetism to us, her fortunate readers.

Out of this subtle force, the wuwei of effortless doing without doing, arises a tremendous creative and transfigurative power and energy.

On finishing the book, I asked it for a final message about itself. “A loud splash,” it replied. I imagine Basho’s “frog jumping into water.” I imagine the Big Bang!

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