

# Surrealist Manifesto

**2024 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formal announcement of surrealism in the *Surrealist Manifesto* written by French poet, André Breton. It gathers strength today as it combines with anarchism to shout: ALL POWER TO THE IMAGINATION!**

David Tighe

2024

a review of

*Surrealism and the Anarchist Imagination* by Ron Sakolsky. Eberhardt Press, 2023

“Contrary to prevalent misdefinitions, surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine, nor a philosophical system, nor a mere literary or artistic school. It is an unrelenting revolt against a civilization that reduces all human aspirations to market values, religious impostures, universal boredom, and misery.”

—Franklin Rosemont, *André Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism*

*Surrealism and the Anarchist Imagination* is Ron Sakolsky’s most recent book in a string of texts exploring different aspects of the fertile crossroads of surrealism and anarchism. It contains fifteen pieces, ranging from poems and collective manifestos to longer essays.

These pieces argue passionately that it is precisely at the crossroads of these two currents that surrealists and anarchists are at our rebellious best. For that insight alone it is a very valuable book. Early on, the surrealists described themselves as “specialists in revolt”, and it is the spirit of total refusal that has kept surrealism a vital force for more than 100 years. The surrealist slogan, “All Power to the Imagination,” rang out in Paris during the revolutionary events of May 1968 and is still ringing today.

Throughout the book Sakolsky gives examples of the intersecting of anarchist and surrealist currents. From the anarchist/feminist/surrealist publication *The Debutante* to the visual art of Maurice Spira; from anarchist involvement in indigenous land defence to Hakim Bey’s concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, which was influenced by and critical of surrealism.

In *Undoing Reality*, Sakolsky examines the surrealist concept of miserabilism and his related concept of mutual acquiescence. It is crucial for us to reject miserabilism: “a way of life rooted in the rigid assumptions of a status quo finality that constitutes ‘reality.’” Sakolsky points to John Clark (and his surrealist alter-ego Max Cafard) as seeking “to subvert such realist thinking by examining the miserabilist basis of the ubiquitous popular culture meme of ‘It is what it is!’”

Clark argues, “From the viewpoint of dialectical thinking, the crucial challenge is to see the ways in which things are not what they are. It always is what it isn’t and isn’t what it is. Getting trapped in the world of ‘it is what it is’—what I call Isisism—is the royal road to delusion, disaster, and domination. The right road to illumination and liberation is what I call Isisntism.” The essay ponders the “question of why we are willing to surrender our individual and collective autonomy to the repressive demands of ‘reality.’” Equally important, it examines what tools anarchism and surrealism can provide us to resist and overturn this “absence of the will to revolt.”

Free Jazz: Imagining the Sound of Surrealist Revolution is the longest essay in the book and a tour de force of radical scholarship. It provides all the facts that you need, but suffused with rebellious energy. Surrealists value

free jazz because “as a musical form of insurrection, free jazz improvisation is a convivial creative practice that fully embodies the surrealist search for a revolution of the mind (which pointedly includes a critique of the dreariness of the commonsensical in favor of an explosion of the insurgent imagination) and is emblematic of the flowering of its libertarian aspirations for society as a whole.”

Sakolsky points to these aspirations as having a “particularly powerful resonance with the Black Liberation movement.” Archie Shepp is an example given of a free jazz musician dedicated to Black Liberation who also had a strong connection to surrealism, but he isn’t the only one. There is a long list of prominent figures within free jazz who have had short or long term connections with surrealism.

Joseph Jarman and Henry Threadgill were participants in the 1976 International Surrealist Exhibition in Chicago and both composed pieces specially for the exhibition. Doug Ewart’s Sun Song Ensemble performed there as well. Pianist Cecil Taylor was in attendance at the exhibition and also contributed to *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, the international journal of the Chicago Surrealist Group. William Parker, who played with Taylor for more than a decade, is quoted in the piece as saying, “black surrealism is a vision that has come to me most of my life.” Sakolsky invokes the potent mixture of radical political vision and the visionary power of the human imagination present in free jazz. “In combination, these improvisational acts can provide the sparks that ignite the powder keg of surrealist revolution.”

Opening the Floodgates of the Utopian Imagination: Charles Fourier and the Surrealist Quest for an Emancipatory Mythology is another of the long essays in the book. It discusses the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century Utopian Socialist Charles Fourier who has been a figure of fascination for surrealists and anarchists alike. Sakolsky explores the history of surrealist engagement with Fourier starting at the very beginning of the Paris Surrealist group in the 1920s.

Fourier’s refusal to be limited by political realism infuriated his later critics Marx and Engels but has endeared him to anti-authoritarians. Fourier dreamed so wildly that he imagined the political equality of women and coined the term feminism. He imagined a world of passionate attraction and refused to be limited by the tyranny of what is (deemed) possible.

The essay also discusses the rejection by progressive movements of mythology, which French philosopher George Bataille saw as one of the factors that led to the spread of fascism. The lack of any emancipatory myth left a vacuum for the fascist nightmare. Recent translations into English of Bataille’s journal *Aciphale*, as well as public lectures that he gave around the same time, have provided more detail of his thoughts on this subject. Sakolsky argues that Fourier could provide at least parts of an emancipatory myth for anarchists and surrealists. It is very heady stuff and a fascinating discussion.

The third long essay in the book is *Chance Encounters at the Crossroads of Anarchy and Surrealism: A Personal Remembrance of Peter Lamborn Wilson A.K.A. Hakim Bey*. It is a remembrance of Sakolsky’s 35 year long friendship with Wilson. As the title implies, it provides details about Wilson’s engagement with and critique of surrealism, and how Wilson’s critiques encouraged Sakolsky’s own explorations of the crossroads of surrealism and anarchy.

It is a touching tribute to Wilson, a long-time anarchist comrade of Sakolsky’s, not to mention prolific author and contributor to *Fifth Estate*.

The shorter pieces in the book have a lot to offer too. *A Spark in Search of a Powder Keg: An International Surrealist Declaration* is a strong reminder that the surrealist movement is vibrant, not a dead historical art avant garde. It provides a glimpse of the internationalism of surrealism. There are signatories from the US and Canada, Central and South America, North Africa and the Middle East, Australia, and all over Europe. It highlights the surrealist spirit of total refusal in opposition to Canadian pipeline projects and the violence of the police. The declaration is a strong voice for solidarity with Indigenous land defence and radical environmentalism.

It is well known that André Breton and many of the French surrealists had an interest in and affinity with West Coast Indigenous art. The declaration states: “as surrealists we honor our historical affinity with the Kwakwaka’wakw Peace Dance headdress that for so long had occupied a place of reverence in Breton’s study during his lifetime before being ceremoniously returned to Alert Bay on Cormorant Island by his daughter, Aube Elleouet, in keeping with her father’s wishes.”

The authors also draw connections to outrage and resistance in response to the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis which occurred during the period that signatures were being gathered for the declaration. A postscript points out that it “was only fitting that in solidarity with the uprisings about police brutality kicked off by George Floyd’s execution/lynching at the hands of the police, anti-racism protesters in the United States would take direct action by beheading or bringing down statues of Christopher Columbus, genocidal symbol of the colonial expropriation of Native American lands.”

Uncovering the Surrealist Roots of Détournement is an excellent short examination of what the Situationists termed détournement, the subversive appropriation of popular imagery, usually a comic combined with radical text, and its roots in surrealist practice. The piece is accompanied by an example of contemporary anarcho-surrealist détournement, a collaboration between Sakolsky and John Richardson. The same image and 20 others, along with an introduction by Sakolsky can be found in their recently co-authored book *Surrealist Détournement*, published by Dark Windows Press.

*Surrealism and the Anarchist Imagination* benefits from a beautiful printing job by Eberhardt press and full color art throughout by Rikki Ducornet, Maurice Spira, Zigzag, Peter Lamborn Wilson, Sheila Knopper and many others, which contributes greatly to the effect of the book. Surrealist visual art is a powerful aid to help fire the anarchist imagination.

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# fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/415-summer-2024-2/surrealist-manifesto>

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