

A BRIEF REPORT

On the International Surrealist Mini-Conference

Chicago, March 6-10, 2006

Surrealism in Chicago has been even more than usually lively in recent weeks. On February 22, we enjoyed an animated afternoon discussion with Robin D. G. Kelley, largely focused on the Black Surrealism project, now nearing completion. At a later gathering, Kelley discussed another major work-in-progress, his biography of Thelonious Monk. And in the evening he gave a superb talk and slide-show on "Another Reconstruction? Debating Reparations and Race in Post-Katrina America" to a large crowd at nearby Loyola University.

On March 1, Michael Löwy from the Surrealist Group in Paris also visited us for a few hours. We discussed ways and means of bringing the Chicago and Paris groups closer together, despite the language barrier. Much attention was given to the international "Swan Constellation" game, proposed by the Paris friends, and in which several members of the Chicago group participated. Two "sequels" to the game were also remarked: one an incident of "objective chance" from Chicago, and the other an elaborate contribution of "Analogical Recognitions" by our good friend Jan Hathaway in Hawaii. We also discussed, albeit briefly, Michael Löwy's teacher (from many years ago), Lucien Goldmann, and a related topic: the interest shown by André Breton, Benjamin Péret and other surrealists in the seventeenth-century Port-Royal "heretics."

Following these fruitful and invigorating meetings, the Chicago Surrealist Group hosted a week-long international surrealist mini-conference, starting in the evening of March 6th and continuing through the late evening on Friday the 10th. A leading figure in the Paris Surrealist Group, Guy Girard (painter, poet, theorist; a regular contributor to the journal SURR), and Jill Fenton of the London Surrealist groups (yes, there are two groups at the moment; see below) joined fourteen participants in Chicago Surrealism for many and wide-ranging discussions on the situation of the surrealist movement today, surrealist games (old and new) and numerous other matters.

Taking part in one or more of these discussions were: Gale Ahrens, Jen Besemer, Dennis Cooper, Amy England, Jill Fenton, Beth Garon, Paul Garon, Guy Girard, David London, Eugenie Morin, Ruth Oppenheim-Rothschild, Theresa Phare, Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, Tamara L. Smith, and Joel Williams.

Unfortunately unable to attend were Matt Christensen (traveling in Europe), Miriam Hansen, Ayana Karanja, David Roediger (out of town), Don LaCoss (ill, but since recovered), and Louise Simons.

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The meetings were informal. Most were held at restaurants, cafes, or the homes of members of the Chicago Surrealist Group; at least one took place in the lobby of the Palmer House Hotel. No minutes were taken. Discussions were often interspersed with surrealist games. What follows are a few hurried notes and jottings contributed pell-mell by various participants, touching on at least some of the many matters which, at one point or another, came up for discussion.

Jill Fenton summarized the current and complex situation of surrealism in England: the recent split into two small London groups, and her hopes of bringing them back together. It was noted by others that surrealist activity in London has lacked stability for many years, as a succession of short-lived grouplets produced a broadsheet or two and then dissolved.

Guy Girard in turn summarized the current situation of the Paris group, which includes—as has always been the case—a number of "satellite" members who live elsewhere in France. The Paris group too suffered a split some years ago, when some younger participants withdrew over political issues. The current group continues to be very active, however, as evidenced by its recent tracts and the diversity of material in the new (fifth) issue of SURR.

Specific problems of various groups were also touched on. In France, for example, a number of aging ex-surrealists, having convinced themselves that surrealism could not survive their own defection from it, regularly clutter the media with the tired old falsehood that surrealism as a movement no longer exists. In the U.S., a plethora of moronic pseudo-surrealist websites perform a similar confusionist function.

Guy Girard pointed out that, despite problems in one or another group—and despite the cynical ex-surrealists and pseudo-surrealists—the surrealist movement internationally has been steadily growing in recent years. Active Surrealist groups now exist in Chicago, Paris, London, Leeds, Prague, Amsterdam, Madrid, Athens, Ioannina, Sao Paulo, and Santiago (Chile). Smaller groups exist in Portland and St. Louis in the U.S.; and active individuals—and/or reports of groups-in-formation—in Dublin, Ireland; Dusseldorf and Koln (Germany); Buenos Aires, Brussels, Lisbon, Montreal and Vancouver.

None of those present had had any word in a long time from the groups that formerly existed in Sweden, Serbia or Australia: The question arose: Are these groups still active?

In regard to politics, we all shared a basic revolutionary view: no affiliation with any parties, but friendly relations with anarchists and a few Marxists.

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Books, especially books written by surrealists, occupied much of the discussion. Guy Girard's new and important collection of short essays, *L'Ombre et la demande* (published by the Atelier de création libertaire), arrived a couple of days before he himself landed in Chicago, and aroused great interest. We hope to translate at least some of it in the not-too-distant future.

Also recently received were the latest series of the always very interesting pamphlets by Jean-Pierre Guillon—on Sade, Karel Teige, Arturo Ripstein, etc.

Chicago Surrealists have also published many books in the past couple of years. It has been a long time since we have featured new titles on our website, so here goes: a list of current and new titles by participants in the Surrealist Movement in the U.S.:

Paul Garon: *What's the Use of Walking If There's a Freight Train Going Your Way: Black Hoboes & Their Songs*, with a 25-track CD (Charles H. Kerr);

Gale Ahrens: *Lucy Parsons, Freedom, Equality & Solidarity—Writings & Speeches, 1878-1937* (Charles H. Kerr); David Roediger: *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (Basic Books), and *History Against Misery* (Charles H. Kerr);

Franklin Rosemont: *Revolution in the Service of the Marvelous: Surrealist Contributions to the Critique of Miserabilism*, and more recently, with Charles Radcliffe: *Dancin' in the Streets: Anarchists, IWWs, Surrealists, Situationists & Provos in the 1960s*, as recorded in the pages of *The Rebel Worker* and *Heatwave* (Charles H. Kerr).

Ron Sakolsky: *Creating Anarchy* (Fifth Estate).

And eagerly awaited, Guy Ducornet's book on surrealism and atheism.

During the discussion of these new titles, it was emphasized that Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press) has continued to exert a strong influence. According to Jill Fenton, it is currently a key text among the surrealists in England, and has stimulated much discussion there, as well as in Paris. Noted, too, was the ongoing impact of Penelope Rosemont's *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (University of Texas Press), still selling well eight years after publication.

What Is Surrealism? and *Surrealist Subversions* also remain popular.

Guy Girard delivered to us a series of books by our friend Ngo Van, kindly sent by Héléne Fleury. (Ngo Van, who died last year, was a major figure in Vietnamese revolutionary history; an anti-Stalinist, he evolved from Trotskyism to a strong libertarian Marxism, and was a longtime friend and co-worker of Benjamin Péret). The books received included *Utopie Antique et Guerre des paysans en China* (Ancient Utopia, and Peasant War in China, Editions Le Chat que Pêche), and a French edition of Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy*, with a splendid introduction by Héléne Fleury (Editions Paris Méditerranée).

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At the Art Institute we showed our friends the curious paintings of Giovanni di Paolo (d. 1482), in some respects a forerunner of Giorgio de Chirico. Guy Girard called attention to the "Chinese" quality of this artist's landscapes; and later, looking through a book, we marveled at the authentically surrealist character of some of his illustrations for Dante's *Paradiso*.

Our friends were curious about the history of Native American culture in Chicago and Illinois (once known as Nouvelle France), and about the couriers du bois. Are Francis Parkman's works available in French translation?

Poetry was a major and recurring topic. Early on we discussed the poetry of our now-deceased Romanian friends, Gherasim Luca, Gellu Naum, and Paul Paun. The work of our early friend and mentor Claude Tarnaud was repeatedly invoked. The critical work of Nicolas Calas was also brought up. We hope to make the poetry of our very close friend Philip Lamantia better known to our French comrades. We also discussed two late 19th-century American poets—Francis Vielé-Griffin and Stuart Merrill—who lived in France and wrote in French. Part of Mallarmé's circle, they were also anarchists and highly regarded by André Breton. When one of us mentioned that their works were scarcely known in the U.S., Guy Girard replied that they were no longer well known in France, either.

We talked about black music, past and present, from blues to the free jazz of our friends in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

Friday the 10th was a frantic day. A discussion on the art and literature of alchemy, and the works of Martinez Pasqualis, Fabre d'Olivet, Hoene Wronski and Saint-Yves d'Alveydre was unfortunately interrupted. Guy Girard and Jill Fenton were completing papers to be read at a geographers' conference the following morning: Jill's on "Geographies of Hope," and Guy's on Poetry as an emancipatory social force in a more and more troubled world. Several of us, including our visitors, took part in a large immigrants' rights demonstration (100,000 strong) in downtown Chicago. All day, we talked a lot about maps.

This activist conclusion to a week of lively discussion and games set the tone for the next two weeks as well. A week later, a large anti-war demonstration took place downtown; and the week after that (according to the local news) some 250,000 students were rioting in France.

Surrealism continues! Revolution Now and Forever!