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## SURREALISM: A CHALLENGE TO THE 21ST CENTURY

Excerpts from the Introduction to the concluding section of  
*Surrealist Women: An International Anthology**New beauties kindle, and new joys arise!*  
—Phillis Wheatley

In a 1981 symposium on "Surrealism Today and Tomorrow," David Roediger suggested that "the maturation of major women surrealist theoreticians will vastly expand the already wide horizons of the movement." Certainly, in the world such as it is today, there is plenty for surrealism's critical theorists to do! The recent writings of Haifa Zangana, Eva Svankmajerová, Alena Nádvorníková, Silvia Grenier, Hilary Booth, Nancy Joyce Peters, Rikki Ducornet, Alice Farley, Elaine Parra, Ivanir de Oliveira, Nicole Reiss, and the poems (which double as manifestoes) by Jayne Cortez, Carmen Bruna and Petra Mandal, are examples of bold, adventurous inquiry, rejection of dogmatism, critical interpretation as a poetic activity, absolute divergence from ruling ideologies, and a fresh start of the most desirable kind of utopian dreaming. . . . In surrealism today, poetry, critical theory and revolutionary activity are perceived as one and indivisible. In their search for ways out of the social prison of the global commodity economy, such writings help fulfill Leonora Carrington's recent call for "surrealist survival kits" to enable us to get through these terrible times.

Since 1968, as we have seen, surrealism has been increasingly recognized throughout the world as a forerunner and catalyst of many of the most daring and creative developments in contemporary culture and politics. However, surrealism's current viability—as a continuing current of ideas and as a living and organized movement—is a question that most critics and historians have chosen to ignore. Surrealism has been pronounced dead so many times (André Breton told an audience of U.S. college students in 1942 that its obituaries had appeared just about every month since the movement began) that few writers have bothered to look at the plentiful evidence of its present-day vitality.

This favoring of the past over the present is part of the *modus operandi* of the disciplines which thus far have taken surrealism as a field of study. It is no secret that art criticism, art history, and museum curatorship have generally been bastions of social conservatism. Those whose job it is to preserve and protect the traditions of the status quo prefer to look on surrealism as a dead cultural artifact. *Living* surrealism remains an embarrassing problem, an irritating nuisance that they prefer to ignore.

At the time, the 1960s surrealist resurgence did attract considerable attention, even in the U. S. That was because the volatile cultural/political climate of those years fostered the growth of worldwide countermedia (radical and "underground" press, films, etc.) which in turn made it harder for Establishment media to ignore the real (*i.e.*, eye-opening, revolutionary) news of the day. In stark contrast, the great majority of recent academic literature on the subject in the U.S. pretends almost unanimously not to notice that anything has happened in surrealism since World War II.

One reason why contemporary surrealism seems to provoke so much consternation among critics and scholars as well as the general public is because it "fails" to copy the "classic" models of surrealism now on display in museums, and therefore is not "entertaining" enough. Prisoners of frozen categories who complain, viewing a painting by Eva Svankmajerová or an object-box by Michele Finger, "*That doesn't look like surrealism to me!*" show only that they have missed the whole point. The liberation of the imagination can never be reduced to a mere style of art or a type of literary production, much less a form of amusement. In poetry, painting, collage, sculpture, photography, film, dance, games, critical theory and politics, surrealism is always new because the subversive imagination is always *right now* when you need it, ready or not.

What is perhaps most noticeable about surrealism today is the greatly enlarged field of its researches and applications. Entire fields that surrealists in the past either bypassed altogether or considered marginal—such as music, dance architecture, and animated film—are now important areas of surrealist inquiry and activity. A heightened interest in Black music, for example, especially jazz and blues, has been highly visible throughout the international surrealist movement since the 1960s. This passional attraction has led to several important books and numerous articles, as well as to an informal but fruitful collaboration and exchange of views between surrealists in several countries and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a group dedicated to the propagation of "Great Black Music."

The exploration of subversive currents in popular culture—comics, films, pulp fiction, radio, etc.—has been a fascinating surrealist sideline from the beginning, but in recent years has grown into one of the most luxuriant fields of surrealist research. History, a discipline in which only a few surrealists intervened effectively in the past—has also emerged as a significant focus. As reinterpreters of history, surrealists such as Alena Nádvorníková, Hilary Booth and Nancy Joyce Peters have been interested in the study of heresies, revolutionary struggles, utopias, Native American and African American culture and resistance, ecology and the relations between humankind and animals, "cranks" and other neglected figures, changes in language (especially slang), vandalism and workplace sabotage, the popular arts—and surrealism itself.

Surrealism could be considered the last of the great non-academic intellectual movements, for like Marxism, anarchism and psychoanalysis, it has thrived largely outside the universities. In the past couple of decades, however, notably in the Czech Republic, France, Brazil and the U.S., several individuals who make their living as teachers—Silvia Grenier, for example, and Alena Nádvorníková—have also been active in the surrealist movement. Surrealist investigations in such fields as anthropology, folklore, and psychoanalysis have greatly multiplied since the Sixties. A growing number of non-surrealist specialists have written sympathetically of earlier surrealist accomplishments in these areas, and to some extent, most notably in Prague, have shown their willingness to collaborate on surrealist publications. . . .

Even a quick summary of surrealism's manifestations in the plastic arts since the 1976 World Surrealist Exhibition would take up many pages. The subject is well worth a book in itself. However, it is rarely chronicled in the slick, commercial art magazines. Not incidentally, surrealists today tend to situate themselves not only outside the corporate-dominated billion-dollar industry known as the "art world," but in irreconcilable opposition to it.

Surrealism started in poetry, and poetry remains the core of its central nervous system. In the face of widespread retrograde trends (return to mysticism, rhyme, didacticism, the mundane, etc.), surrealists persist in celebrating poetry as the "highest language," a breath of fresh air, exaltation, the vanquishing of misery, marvelous freedom itself. All these poets—from Mary Low, who is now in her eighties, to Katerina Pinosová, who at twenty-three is the youngest writer represented in this volume—share a close community of interests rooted in subversive values and complete indifference to the usual forms of "success." These are not merely writers "influenced by" surrealism—those who borrow bits and pieces from the work of past surrealists to add glitter to their own otherwise dull verse. No, these are true poets who, through the magic *light of words*, embody the future of surrealism's revolution today. Carmen Bruna speaks for all of them when she points out, in an interview excerpted in this section, that poetry is "truly an incitement to insubordination and revolt," an expression of "total defiance."

Politically, too, surrealism has not stood still. It is important to keep in mind that the movement's current resurgence parallels the end of Stalinism's pseudo-communist bureaucracies, and the renewal of interest in anarchism and the humanistic currents of Marxism. Surrealism today is clearly polycentric, and its constituent groups are far from agreeing on the fine points of world politics. Various currents of anarchism and Marxism have individual supporters in organized surrealism today, but no existing surrealist group identifies itself with any one of these currents over all others.

In the absence of large-scale movements for complete social transformation in most countries, surrealists in recent years have tended to be active in more limited, often local struggles. They have taken to the streets to protest the Gulf War, the destruction of rainforests and redwoods, the extermination of wolves and whales. They have battled neo-Nazis, defended women's reproductive rights, demonstrated against apartheid, and supported sit-ins and other radical student initiatives. They have opposed nuclear power, the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the persecution of sexual minorities, the racist "war on drugs." They have helped organize and taken part in coalitions to defend striking coal-miners, welfare mothers, immigrants, and Native Americans against state violence. In each of these struggles, moreover, they have called attention to the fragmentation inherent in "single-issue" politics, and stressed the need for a larger political vision, and a larger radical movement to struggle for a new, non-repressive society.

Support for popular revolutionary uprisings, of course, remains a "given" of surrealist politics. Thus the Chicago group issued a detailed commentary on the Los Angeles Rebellion of April-May 1992, and the Surrealist Group in Madrid published its views on the 1997 General Strike in Korea. In their analyses of these mass revolts of the dispossessed, surrealists have focused on working class self-activity, the involvement of new sectors in struggle, the appearance of new forms of revolutionary expression, and the possibilities these revolts suggest for the development of a more effective international opposition. . . .

By reinventing the image of revolution—and thus revolutionizing itself—surrealism also maintains its continuity. Inevitably, the dialectic of the historic process brings forth new priorities. In politics as in other areas, what once seemed to be only minor *tendencies* in surrealism have since blossomed into major emphases. Its current ecological focus is a prime example. It is no accident that surrealists in at least three widely separated countries—Australia, Sweden and the U.S.—have taken part in Earth First!, the most radical, direct-action wing of the environmental movement. The notion of animal rights, long latent in surrealism, is also evident in movement publications today. Alice Rahon used to say that all her works were "against hunting." "If you have one of my paintings in your house," she told film-maker and huntsman John Huston, "you will miss all the time." In those days Rahon spoke as a minority, but many are the surrealists who would echo her sentiments today.

As Philip Lamantia once put it, "surrealism moves!" And its movers today, more than ever, are women. At no time in the movement's seven-plus decades have so many women in so many countries been so involved in each and every aspect of the permanent revolution that is surrealism. I find it curious and revealing that the least acknowledged period in its history—from 1947 to the present—is exactly the period in which the participation of women and Third World peoples has been largest. Even more amazing is the fact that today, when women's involvement in the movement is greater than ever (the Surrealist Group in Sao Paulo, Brazil, for example, includes four times as many women as men), some misled critics persist in attacking surrealism as if it were some sort of male chauvinist plot.

These antisurrealist feminists are like the feminists who call for police suppression of pornography, restrictions on free speech, and other repressive measures, thus allying themselves with neoconservatives, Christian fundamentalists, and even fascists. Perhaps unwittingly, they are examples of the sorry process by which a liberatory theory—in this case, of women's equality—can be manipulated and turned into its opposite. This is not the place for an analysis of this phenomenon, but I would like to suggest that this refusal to see things as they are conceals a genuine fear not only of surrealism, but also of women's liberation, on the part of those who have given up hope for worldwide radical social transformation and trimmed their feminism down to meet the needs of a small, privileged elite of white, upper-middle-class professionals. It would seem that the last thing such people want is for women to become interested in a movement which demands and embodies *freedom now*—intellectual, erotic, social, political, economic—and defends the most revolutionary means of realizing it.

Surrealists today, female and male, are part of the international radical minority which, in the aftermath of the "death of Communism," has refused to say yes to the triumph of exploitation, militarism, white supremacy, gender bigotry and other misery. They are fully aware that the further fruition of surrealism depends on the rise of new mass emancipatory movements seeking radical social change. In view of the prevailing unfreedom and hopelessness of these times, the fact that surrealism still exists at all is remarkable. But surrealism is never content merely to exist.

In this depressingly prolonged historical moment of global reaction, unrestrained imperialist expansion, rampant racism, homelessness, ecological disaster, fundamentalist revivalism, neo-Nazism, the "men's movement," hi-tech unionbusting, a burgeoning prison industry, "compassion fatigue," and rising illiteracy, surrealism—the living negation of all these horrors—not only has refused to evaporate, but is actually enjoying a promising renaissance.

A look at two recent collective declarations provides an excellent illustration of the situation of surrealism today—of its revolutionary perspectives, the role of women in the movement, and its relation to other present-day dissident currents. The 1992 international surrealist manifesto against the Columbus Quincentennial certainly marked something new in surrealism. For the first time ever, surrealist groups around the world prepared and published a joint statement; co-signed by 130 participants in surrealist groups in eight countries, plus individual signers from four other countries, it was widely reprinted and translated into many languages. It is significant that this historic document was initially proposed and then drafted by Silvia Grenier, a co-founder of the Buenos Aires group, and a major figure in world surrealism today.

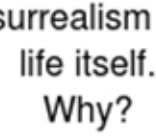
A year later the Chicago group published *Three Days That Shook the New World Order*, on the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion. Focused on the critique of "whiteness," the police state, the hypocrisy of the media, and the ecological implications of the revolt, this well-circulated and much-translated text also discussed the crucial role of women in instigating and adding momentum to this sensational upheaval; indeed, it was almost alone in the literature to recognize this dimension in the L.A. events. In a letter prefacing the French translation, Pierre Naville—a co-founder of surrealism and co-editor of *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1924—wrote: "I have been amazed by [this] beautiful text...I would go so far as to say that [it] represents a new and exceptionally important way of showing that the world is going to experience a surrealist explosion far greater than that which burst out in Paris in 1924...It is my vigorous hope that [the] surrealist movement will succeed in renewing what we have attempted so long ago."

It remains to be seen whether Naville's prediction will be realized. In any event, revolutionary poetic thought always seems to find ways to draw on resources that most people find "unimaginable." As Walter Benjamin pointed out in 1929, surrealism discovered a "radical conception of freedom," which, he added, Europe had lacked since Bakunin. Surrealism's sense of freedom—its undeviating, irreducible, *physical* insistence on freedom—continues to distinguish it from all the other political and intellectual currents of our time, and gives surrealist activity its special (and growing) importance in the contemporary world. Surrealism's sense of freedom is not at all abstract—it goes hand in hand with the concrete and revolutionary activity of the imagination.

Or as Jayne Cortez says: "Find your own voice and use it / use your own voice and find it!"

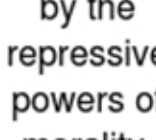
*"Poetry does not sell.**Perhaps that is because true poetry is, by definition, not for sale."*

-Carmen Bruna



"Always familiar, for me surrealism is life itself. Why? Because true life has nothing to do with what has insidiously been sanctioned by the repressive powers of morality, religion, and law. . . . Surrealism is the conscious attempt to restore humanity's true capacity to be and to desire without moral or physical constraint through the unlimited exercise of the imagination."

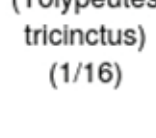
—Marianne van Hirtum



Raccoon (1/23)

"To all forms of exploitation, surrealism opposes its unflinching refusal. Surrealism ignores the stale wisdom of those who pretend to know how to live. . . . No bargain in the world can satisfy us."

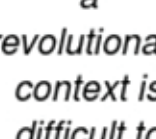
— Nora Mitrani



Armadillo (Toypeutes tricinctus) (1/16)

*"It is an age where footholds are few and far between, a revolutionary context is difficult to maintain, yet we continue to seek and hold tight to the free spirit."*

-Hilary Booth



Zebra (4 to 4 1/2 ft. high at the shoulder)