

Surrealism in the Arab World

Various Authors

1976

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Introduction

The current resurgence of surrealism in the Arab world is a revolutionary development of the greatest significance, demonstrating once more that the strategy of the unfettered imagination is always and necessarily global.

We publish here in English translation a manifesto in which our Arab comrades express their unequivocal interventionist orientation, sharply defined against their specific political and cultural background.

The Arab Surrealist Movement was reconstituted in the early 1970s, but its origins extend back to the mid-30s, when the Egyptian poet and theorist Georges Henein (who adhered to the movement in 1934 as a student in Paris) and the Egyptian painter Ramses Younan introduced surrealism to Cairo. With several others they maintained an intensive collective activity that endured into the late 1940s, as exemplified in many books and pamphlets and in the reviews *Art et liberte*, *El Tattwor*, *La Seance continue* and *Le Part du Sable*.

The Egyptian surrealists, who were also a section of the Fourth International, organized the Art & Liberty Group in response to the Breton / Trotsky Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art, which announced the formation of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Artists, commonly called the FIARI. This Cairo group produced a journal and pamphlets, and organized several exhibitions. It was the most active and longest-lived segment of the FIARI, lasting several years after the demise of the parent organization.

Georges Henein (1914–1973), one of the movement's greatest figures, collaborated extensively on international surrealist publications throughout the 1940s. His "Message from Cairo to Poets in America" appeared in the surrealist number of *View* in 1940. For reasons that are not wholly clear, he retired from collective activity around 1950, preferring to pursue his researches in solitude. He was in no sense a renegade, however; his later work was in full accord with surrealist aspirations.

Henein's sensitiveness to the many and wide-ranging problems of human expression in the postwar period, and his profound revolutionary integrity, give his entire work a special significance today to the surrealists of all countries, and most especially, of course, to A.K. El Janaby and his comrades, who are in the truest sense the continuators of the effort begun by Georges Henein and Ramses Younan.

The Arab surrealists have produced many tracts and pamphlets, including an important critique of modern architecture by Maroin Dib. In 1973 they took the lead in preparing a tract, *Against Nationalist Illusions*, For the Internationalist Alternative, opposing all forms of nationalist chauvinism and calling for the overthrow of all established regimes in the Middle East. It urged the unification of the proletariat of all the Arab countries, as well as of Israel, on the basis of socialist revolution, "founded on the power of the workers' and peasants' councils." This tract was signed by the Israeli Socialist Organization (Matzpen), the Arab Group "le pouvoir des conseils," and the Algerian Group for the Propagation of Marxism.

The Arab surrealists' journal, *Le Desir libertaire*, which they describe as "the Arabic equivalent of *Arsenal*," has provoked great controversies in the Arabic press. Because of its vehemently revolutionary character, anti-nationalist and anti-religious, it is banned from the mails and from bookstores in all Arab countries (being produced in Paris by exiles).

In a recent letter A. K. El Janaby notes his intention to issue an Arabic version of the manifesto *Lighthouse of the Future*, which prefaced the surrealist section of the City Lights Anthology.

Manifesto of the Arab Surrealist Movement, 1975

With disgust we shove aside the dregs of survival and the impoverished rational ideas which stuff the ash-can-heads of intellectuals.

1. We incite individuals and the masses to unleash their instincts against all forms of repression — including the repressive “reason” of the bourgeois order.
2. The great values of the ruling class (the fatherland, family, religion, school, barracks, churches, mosques and other rottenness) make us laugh. Joyously we piss on their tombs.
3. We spit on the fatherland to drown in it the fumes of death. We combat and ridicule the very idea of the fatherland. To affirm one’s fatherland is to insult the totality of man.
4. We practice subversion 24 hours a day. We excite sadistic urges against all that is established, not only because we are the enemies of this new stone age that is imposed on us, but above all because it is through our subversive activity that we discover new dimensions.
5. We poison the intellectual atmosphere with the elixir of the imagination, so that the poet will realize himself in realizing the historical transformation of poetry:
 - a. from form into matter;
 - b. from simple words hanging on coat racks of paper into the desirable flesh of the imagination that we shall absorb until everything separating dream from reality is dissolved.

Surrealism is nothing but the actualization of this surreality.

6. We explode the mosques and the streets with the scandal of sex returning to its body, bursting into flames at each encounter — secret until then.
7. We liberate language from the prisons and stock markets of capitalist confusion.

It is plain that today’s language, instead of being an agitational force in the process of social transformation and a vocabulary of revolutionary attack, is only a docile vocabulary of defense cluttered in the store of the human brain with one aim: to help the individual prove his complete subordination to the laws of existing society — to help him as a lawyer in the courts of everyday reality (that is, of repression). Surrealism intrudes violently on this abject spectacle, annihilating all obstacles to “the real functioning of thought” (Andre Breton).

When we write, our memory belches this language from the old world. It is a game in which our tongues become capable of recreating language in the very depths of the revolution.

Our surrealism signifies the destruction of what they call “the Arab fatherland.” In this world of masochistic survival, surrealism is an aggressive and poetic way of life. It is the forbidden flame of the proletariat embracing the insurrectional dawn — enabling us to rediscover at last the revolutionary moment: the radiance of the workers’ councils as a life profoundly adored by those we love.

Our surrealism, in art as in life: permanent revolution against the world of esthetics and other atrophied categories; the destruction and supersession of all retrograde forces and inhibitions.

Subversion resides in surrealism the same way history resides in events.

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