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Surrealism is (Still) Elsewhere

Like anarchy, surrealism boldly demands the
impossible

Ron Sakolsky

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It seems that the more art school training one receives at the academy, the more one is likely to be confused about surrealism or overtly hostile to it. Much of the malaise around surrealism in art circles stems from the insularity of the art world itself.

While surrealist ideas and practices can be expressed artistically, surrealism cannot be reduced to a style or school of art, even one aimed at inspiring radical political action. Nevertheless, surrealism is typically portrayed by academics as merely one historical moment in the grand cavalcade of failed avant-garde art movements of the 20th century.

Likewise, for many art critics, surrealism can be summed up as a passe, cliched, and easily imitated style of art. So it goes for the art taste-makers. In the words of an incendiary 1985 Chicago Surrealist Group broadside pointedly aimed at unmasking the deceptive nature of the art market racket: "Surrealism is elsewhere!"

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Though surrealists are not anti-art in the Dadaist sense of calling for the destruction of art, the core concerns of surrealism cannot be encompassed within the artistic realm. This is not to say that surrealism's emphasis on ending the artificial dichotomy between dream and reality cannot be elegantly and/or disturbingly rendered in a creative context.

However, in the case of poetry, the surrealist poem is all too often conflated with surrealism's ultimate championing of the Cause of Poetry. The latter not being concerned with a singular poem, but with the realization of poetry in everyday life.

Accordingly, this quest involves the creation of a world in which people can live more poetic lives. While surrealism does not limit itself to the visual arts, since a painting can embody one of the most emblematic forms of surrealist activity, it is often confused with the essence of surrealism that inhabits it.

Even the "surrealist object" is not, in and of itself, the object of surrealist research. The power of such an object lies in its ability to act like a beacon that illuminates the As Is shipwreck of consensus reality in which we are trapped or to reveal the beckoning shores of the What If?

Surrealism has always refused to be enclosed in the airtight boxes that art historians have constructed for it. Outside of the museum-mausoleum, surrealism cannot simply be equated with dated tropes or stylized forms of artistic expression. Nor can surrealism be reduced to replicating the mechanics of its experimental practices.

For example, the surrealist process of automatism, best known in relation to the unconscious processes of automatic writing, drawing and musicality, is not an end in itself. Automatism is highly valued by surrealists because it can conceivably create fertile conditions for the chance emergence of a spontaneous opening into the dazzling realm of the Marvelous.

It is in this sense that what André Breton referred to as "pure psychic automatism" exhibits a "will to deepen the real" by

seeking to find more “exalted” versions of reality than those conventionally available to us by the use of instrumental reason. In this context, automatism might ideally provide the opportunity for a transformative unfettering from socially constructed, imposed and reinforced notions of reality.

As Penelope Rosemont has speculated, “If we can imagine a world of marvelous freedom, we can make it be.”

Surrealism seeks a rupture with the impoverished version of what passes for reality by actively questioning, critiquing and attacking what is deemed “realistically” possible. It is at the flashpoint of poetic action that surrealism and anarchy can inspire each other.

Like anarchy, surrealism boldly demands the impossible. It is not about creating a more permissive version of authoritarianism. It is not content to merely construct a bigger cage for our confinement. Instead it asks us to take our desires for reality. Because it is concerned with inciting individual revolt and fomenting social rebellion, surrealism seeks to unleash the poetic power and subversive laughter of the radical imagination.

Surrealism is not merely an art movement despite the many evocative artistic manifestations inspired by what surrealists call the Marvelous. Surrealist art swims in a sea of surrealism, but it is only a creature of that sea and not the sea itself.

Surrealist works of art might best be viewed as vehicles for plunging wildly into the foggy depths of the uncanny and for freely playing in the sublime wonderlands beyond reality rather than being exclusively perceived as discrete products.

Surrealists have not been afraid to engage with art and literature, but that interaction has often been antagonistic. They offer not only an explicit challenge to, or even an assault upon, previous modes of artistic expression, but intuitively undermine the institutional foundations of art and literature themselves.

In the expansive spirit of the 19th century, Uruguayan-born proto-surrealist Comte de Lautréamont’s proclamation that

“poetry must be made by all,” surrealists contend that shimmering traces of the Marvelous can be found everywhere, not just in works of art.

Though surrealist artworks might brilliantly reveal what surrealist poet Phillip Lamantia once called “touches of the Marvelous,” they themselves are not the Marvelous. That these glimpses of the Marvelous cannot only be viewed in a surrealist looking glass is most obviously evidenced by referencing their appearances in visionary shamanic cultures the world over.

However, if one is attuned to the insights offered by a surrealist sensibility, the doors to the Marvelous can swing open unexpectedly at any given moment. What fascinates me most about surrealism are the myriad ways that it intersects with anarchy, and the exciting interplay between the two as anti-authoritarian uprisings against voluntary servitude and societal alienation.

Surrealism is both destructive and creative in the anarchist spirit of Bakunin’s statement: “The urge to destroy is a creative urge.” It rejects the reformist politics of mitigation, and instead resonates with Fourier’s utopian call for “absolute divergence.”

It *refuses* to accept the cramped and uninspiring reduction of political action into the utilitarian “art of the possible.” Like Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*, surrealism emphatically exclaims to the bosses of the world, “I would prefer not to!”

In engaging in such willful disobedience, it eschews the debilitating relations of mutual acquiescence by which we convince each other that our shared misery is the only possible reality, and reminds us that mutual aid can be an exhilarating collective adventure.

Surrealism, like anarchy, is a theoretical touchstone and a way of being that is always immanent by nature. It is not a static thing or a fixed entity to be pinned down and mounted by art historians like a butterfly specimen that remains a captive creature no matter how enticingly it is displayed.

Riding on the exhilarating winds of change, it incites us to embrace the subversive power of fluidity. In the words of gender-bending surrealist photographer, Claude Cahoun, “Open up—and someone will knock.”

In spite of the many art world obituaries that have been written for it over the years, surrealism lives!