This section is dedicated to American surrealism, in particular to the work of the Surrealist Group in Chicago.

What it is not about is some mummified "modern art movement" you've been told is surrealism, a comfortably past chapter in the dog-eared "history of Western Art," a supplier of images for bookcovers and advertisements. Rather, and very much to the contrary, the continuing, hydra-headed activity of the Chicago Surrealists, of surrealist groups throughout the world (and of the free imagination everywhere) is testimony to the fact — however indigestible to academic taxidermists — that the authentic revolutionary surrealism project of "transforming...all the conditions of thought, art, poetry and life itself" is still on the agenda of humankind's urgent and practical tasks. It is this surrealism which poses again and again the pressing necessity of liberating the repressed and mutilated — although undefeatable — subjectivity of humanity struggling under and against conditions of domination. Surrealism is not, and never has been, about creating "art" works to be imprisoned in museums or "literature" as fodder for professional critics. So, if we present you with the following authoritative bibliography of the work of the Chicago Surrealists (prepared by group member Paul Garon), it is not merely as a collector's checklist but as a map of the terrain of the subversive imagination, an inventory of acts of implacable revolt, a star-chart of constellations of irreducibly subversive ideas, a register of illuminated moments of a permanent revolution.

In the early 1960s, those who would form the Surrealist Group in Chicago were called "the Left Wing of the Beat Generation." They were active in civil rights and antiwar struggles as well as the Industrial Workers of the World. In 1965 two of them, Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, were welcomed into the Surrealist Movement by André Breton in Paris, and took part in the Paris group's activities for several months. When they returned to Chicago in the summer of 1966, they organized the first indigenous Surrealist Group in the United States.

In the worldwide surrealist resurgence of the later Sixties and Seventies, the Chicago group became a real force. Its first group show in 1968 at the Gallery Bugs Bunny featured six artists. Eight years later, in 1976, they organized a World Surrealist Exhibition with more than 600 works by nearly 150 artists from thirty-one countries. J. Karl Bogartte's photomorphs, Robert Green's sculptures and Penelope Rosemont's alchemograms, landascapes and prehensilhouettes are among the most innovative contributions of the U.S. surrealists to the plastic arts.

Many isolated surrealists in the U.S. — including Leonora Carrington, E. F. Granell, Gerome Kamrowski, Philip Lamantia, Clarence John Laughlin and Mary Low, whose activity in the movement began in the 1930s or '40s — rallied to the support of their young Chicago comrades. The group's periodical anthology, ARSENAL/SURREALIST SUBVERSION, has included contributions by all of these as well as by most of the important new-comers to the movement, with particular attention to surrealists in the Third World.

U.S. surrealists have been vigilant in matters of theory and polemic no less than in "the practice of poetry." Paul Garon's fundamental reinterpretations of Blues; Joseph Jablonski's explorations of millennial and utopian currents; Philip Lamantia's thoroughgoing critique of the so-called "New American Poetics"; Nancy Joyce Peters' discussions of "Women and Surrealism"; Franklin Rosemont's studies of comics, jazz and U.S. radical history; and the group's manifesto on the social and ecological implications of the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion are among their most original theoretical elaborations of surrealism's revolutionary project.

Chicago surrealism has also had a notable activist dimension. In 1977 the group tossed a pie at Robert Bly ("a typical representative of all that is detestable in American poetry today"). Their disruption of the unveiling of Claes Oldenburg's "Batcolumn" monument (resulting in three arrests) was featured on nationwide TV, in People magazine and The New Yorker. They have contributed significantly to Earth First!, strike-support, anti-Nazi agitation and radical causes galore.
To illustrate something of the character of recent surrealist concerns, following the bibliography we present a document à propos the case of Tyree Guyton, exemplifying the surrealist movement's defense of unfettered expression in the face of everything that conspires to crush human creativity and spontaneity. We also include "As long as tourists replace seers" a surrealist tract on the occasion of the Columbus Quincentennial.

Progressive librarians should find many affinities with living surrealism, with its attention to all that is exceptional, all that goes against the grain, all that provokes the censor, as well as with its excavations and reclaims of hidden heritages of resistance. We urge you to get hold of the materials in the bibliography. Beyond that — be surrealist: make sure your libraries are well-stocked arsenals of the imagination.

It should be noted that this bibliography focuses on the publications of a group, and includes publications by individuals only insofar as they appeared under the group's auspices. Thus it does not include the many books by individual surrealists issued by other publishers; or translations of books by individuals; or even reprints of collective texts in anthologies originating outside the surrealist movement.

Mark Rosenzweig

For further information on surrealism in the U.S., and particularly on the Chicago group, see:


Helpful bibliographies include Georges Sebbag's definitive study of Les Editions Surréalistes (Paris: l'Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine, 1993), and Ralph T. Cook's City Lights Books: A Descriptive Bibliography (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1992), the index of which lists dozens of participants in the Surrealist Movement in the U.S.

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