

Review

# A Magical Moment - Penelope Rosemont and the spirit of the '60s

Monday 2 February 2009, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 30 January 2009).

## *Dreams & Everyday Life*

**André Breton, Surrealism, Rebel Worker, SDS & the Seven Cities of Cibola, in Chicago, Paris & London. A 1960's Notebook.**

**by Penelope Rosemont**

**Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2008, 248 pages,  
\$17 paperback.**

PENELOPE ROSEMONT, POET, artist and essayist, is the well known author of *Surrealist Women. An International Anthology*. Her new book is a lively and fascinating document, based on her personal notes from the 1960s, a time when a window to the impossible seemed to open. The story begins in Chicago, and takes us to Paris, London, and back to the United States; the author did not make it to the Seven Cities of Cibola, because they exist only in an Uncle Scrooge comic strip...

Chicago, September 1964: Penelope meets a young student, Franklin Rosemont, at the Roosevelt University. Their first exchange: Penelope: "What do you do when you are not studying, are you working?" Franklin: "I'm working on the revolution."

She will soon join him and a small group of friends, around the Solidarity Bookshop, an Anarcho/Marxist, Surrealist/IWW circle which published *Rebel Worker*. Their influence was limited, but one of their buttons did make a splash: "Make love, not war." Their favorite one was a bit sharper: "I'm an enemy of the State."

Unlike other revolutionary groups, who enjoyed interminable discussions on the nature of the Soviet Union — "degenerated workers' state" or "state-capitalist"? — the Bookshop gang was also interested in poetry, art, culture and above all Surrealism, which they interpreted, in the spirit of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation*, as a synthesis of anthropology, Freud and Marxism.

But there is a better definition, proposed by Penelope after her encounter with André Breton and his friends: Surrealism is the search for the point in history in which the Enlightenment of the Mind and the Romantic magic of the Imagination have ceased to be perceived as contradictions. I think this is one of the best descriptions ever of the Surrealist "philosophy"!

In December 1965, Penelope and Franklin, now a legally married couple — "to make my mother happy" — took a plane to London, where they planned to stay for a few months, with an occasional visit of one week in Paris. Objective chance — le hasard objectif, a favorite Surrealist concept — in the guise of the Heathrow airport police, decided otherwise: suspecting Franklin of trying to avoid the draft in the United States, the British authorities, as usual warm supporters of U.S. imperial wars, refused to admit him.

Since the couple lacked a return ticket to the United States, they were expelled to...Paris. Both were received with open arms by the Surrealist group in Paris, which met daily (!) at the Café La Promenade de Venus; by chance they had arrived just at the moment of a fabulous International Surrealist Exhibit, "Absolute Divergence" — L'Ecart Absolu, a term invented by utopian socialist Charles Fourier — which included such masterpieces as André Breton's "Objet à fonctionnement symbolique," Jean Benoit's "Necrophile" mask, the antipatriotic "Arc of Defeat," by Mimi Parent, and a collective monster-machine called "The Consumer!"

There was much interest among the Surrealists for the two young fellows from far-away Chicago, and they soon became friends with Robert Benayoun, Jean-Claude Silberman, Joyce Mansour, Vincent and Micheline Bounoure, and Elisa Breton; André Breton, already ill, came only a few times to the Café, but he admired Penelope's Anarchist button, and was pleased to hear about their plans to set up a Surrealist group in Chicago.

They were, writes Penelope, "a magical circle that transformed modern concepts of beauty and freedom for ever;" but communication was difficult, since the Americans' French was weak, to say the least. By the way, most French words in Penelope's book are deliciously misspelled...

Penelope's descriptions of Parisian streets, bookshops, boulangeries, flea-markets, cafés and people, as seen by the astonished eyes of a young Mid-West American, are as pleasant and revealing as those of Montesquieu's Persian observer a few centuries earlier.

The Rosemonts met numerous interesting people, among them Guy Debord, founder of the Situationist International, "a mind alive with ideas;" they agreed with his brilliant Marxist critique of the spectacular commodity economy, but disagreed with his assessment of Surrealism as passé.

At the request of their French Surrealist friends, Penelope and Franklin wrote down a piece on "The situation of Surrealism in the U.S.," which starts with a homage to "the splendid Watts insurrection of 1965," and celebrates Surrealism as "a potent weapon of offensive and a means of research, invention and discovery," at the service of Revolution.

In Easter 1966 they decided to try London again, via Dover, and this time were — reluctantly — admitted for a stay of two weeks. They were the guests of Charles Radcliffe, Anarchist, pacifist and blues admirer, with whom they had already corresponded. The two Americans soon discovered, to their surprise, that they had language problems in the UK too: When the tube [for American readers, that's the subway — ed.] driver told them to go down at Earl's Court, they searched in vain for a station called "Allscott"...But with the help of their friends, they printed a London issue of Rebel Worker, sold out with great success at the May First demonstration.

## **Bringing Surrealism Home**

Back in Chicago, Penelope and Franklin, with the help of Paul Garon, a blues lover and fellow Surrealist, issued the first U.S. Surrealist Manifesto, "The Forecast is Hot" (1966). After Breton's death in August 1966, Franklin published, with the help of Elisa Breton, the first translation of his writings in English, *What is Surrealism? Selected writings of André Breton*, still in print.

In April 1967 they went to New York City, to participate in the largest antiwar demonstration held to that point in the United States; Penelope tried to defend an elderly Black man being clubbed by the police, and received "a hard crack on the head."

Looking for a printer for their wallposter Surrealist Insurrection, the Chicago Surrealists found friendly support at Liberation Press, the SDS print shop, and brought out in 1968 three issues of their richly illustrated revolutionary/poetic poster, in thousands of copies. Soon Penelope was

coopted for the national office of SDS (Chicago) and became even more involved in “the movement.” We were optimistic, she writes, we wanted to change the world and thought we had a chance to do it — particularly after the May ’68 events in Paris, when the most sober assessment was that one has to prepare for the long haul: the revolution might take five years or so!

Penelope was among the organizers of the SDS “urban guerrilla” against the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968. It was, in her view, a victory for SDS, since some 25,000 cops, national guardsmen and regular army troops could not control 4,000 young people.

After the event, SDS grew to a mass movement, with 500 chapters and some 100,000 members. Some factions, like the Worker-Student Alliance (associated with the Progressive Labor Party), were advocating Work-In, i.e. students getting industrial and office jobs, at least during the summer. Representatives of the business interests panicked at the idea that SDSers disguised as human beings might be attempting to enter the work force — a sort of invasion of body snatchers...

General Electric alerted its 180 plants and sent each a copy of the Work-In pamphlet. Unfortunately, soon after, internal faction fighting destroyed and split SDS, in the disastrous convention of Chicago (June 1969). There remained *Radical America*, the theoretical SDS journal, edited by Paul and Mary Jo Buhle, Dale Tomich and Russell Jacoby, which published a special issue in 1970, prepared by the Chicago surrealists, “Surrealism at the Service of Revolution.”

Few books like this one give us the feeling of the elusive thing called “the spirit of the ‘60s.” Penelope and Franklin are still active, still Surrealists and IWW activists. And they still believe in what Leonora Carrington, the famous Surrealist painter and writer, told them once: “Never doubt that dreams can change the world, in fact, they are the only thing that can.”

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## **P.S.**

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