



Get Surreal!

By Royce Carlson

Corporations are taking over the world and the U.S. is bombing Afghanistan. – It's time to get surreal.

In fact things are already surreal. When the president of the United States announces, "We are a peaceful people," and then drops cluster bombs on Afghan villages – that's surreal. In the tradition of modern art's response to wars of the last century, surrealism should rise again. Here's a little history:

Surrealism's precursor was Dada-ism. After World War I, the Dada movement began as a response to the horrors of the war. The idea was that the society that created war was so ugly that it didn't deserve art. The Dadaists decided to create "non-art" instead to parody and parallel the horrors they saw in the world. Marcel Duchamp created such "non-art" works as his "ready-mades", the first of which was a wheel mounted on the seat of a stool. Other artists associated with this movement, founded by Tristan Tzara, were Jean Arp, Marcel Janco and Emmy Hennings. Tzara's phrase, "Dada destroys everything," shows the nihilistic nature of the movement

The nihilism of Dada was countered by surrealism which took a more positive approach. Surrealists echoed the absurdity of war with absurdity in art. Salvador Dali stated that the purpose of surrealism is "To make the abnormal look normal and the normal look abnormal." This was a reaction against "rationalism" which was presumed guilty for creating the kind of political and social environment in which a world war could happen. They were inspired by Sigmund Freud's concept of the unconscious. They recreated the strange imagery of dreams to reflect the unconscious rather than the rational. Therefore, in poetry, prose, art and performance, they practiced the absurd. André Breton was the major spokesman of the surrealist movement. It included such other famous artists as Rene Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miro and Antonin Artaud.

Surrealism was not just a school of art. It was a philosophy. Antonin Artaud said, "Surrealism is above all a state of mind, it does not advocate formulas. The most important point is to put oneself in the right frame of mind." It belongs as equally to poets and philosophers as it does to visual artists. The surrealist movement was considered to be dead by 1941 by the mainstream art community but it did not die. It just went along relatively unnoticed for the rest of the century and flared up when times got ugly with war and corruption.

In the late sixties surrealism resurfaced both in Europe and in the U.S. In Europe French activists responded to the growing dominance of corporations and the market economy. In 1967 Guy Debord published a book, "The Society of the Spectacle" in Paris. The book was a collection of dadaism and anarchism and advocated subversion and activism. He said,

"The tactics of subversion have to be extended from schools, factories, universities, to confront the spectacle directly. Rapid transport systems, shopping centers, museums as well as the various new forms of culture and the media, must be considered as targets for scandalous activity."

Out of the Sorbonne, one of Paris' most prestigious universities, came a host of revolutionary thought. The walls of Paris were painted with surreal slogans like:

BE REALISTIC - DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE

THEY ARE BUYING YOUR HAPPINESS, STEAL IT

In the United States, surrealism came back during the Vietnam War. The [Artists Liberation Front](#) was founded in San Francisco and was instrumental in helping to create the famous 60's counter-culture. They staged impromptu surreal performances on the streets of San Francisco. Other groups like the Ant Farm, another artist collective in San Francisco, staged events like [crashing a Cadillac through a wall of flaming television sets](#). The Ant Farm also created the [Cadillac Ranch](#) in Texas - another surreal installation.

I believe that now is the time for another resurgence of the surrealist philosophy and activism. The conditions are right. Once again, the U.S. is at war. Corporations are still taking over the world. The media is being consolidated so that the information we receive reflects the same pro-corporate, money-driven philosophy. Artists must respond. The ugliness and absurdity of war must again be countered and paralleled with art. It's time to get surreal.

I propose a "Make America Surreal" campaign. This is a call for artists who are interested to organize within their local communities for the purpose of making the normal look abnormal by staging surreal guerrilla performances in the streets.

The idea is to find locations that look totally normal and then envision what simple element or elements can be added to the scenes that would transform the scenes into living surrealist paintings. An entire street can be made surreal by the addition of one well-chosen element. It's not enough to just stage the scenes for the benefit of whoever is around at the time. The performances must also be documented with photography and video.

Already, here in my local community, this has been started. On the streets of our town, for one evening last month, a tall, thin guy put on a pink tutu and a pig mask and rode around town on a bicycle. Unfortunately this did not get documented, but future events will. I would like to see this go on all over the country.

Art is as much about context as it is about subject. This campaign has the possibility of making people see their world differently by changing the context. Things that we take for granted can be highlighted by surrealism. Besides, it will be a lot of fun! Create a surreal situation in your town, photograph it, and then send Zenzibar a photo or two and we will post them in a "Make America Surreal" online gallery. Get surreal!

Here are some links:

<http://www.surrealist.com/new/> - A site about surrealism.

<http://www.surrealism-usa.org/> - This site claims to be the home of the ongoing surrealist movement in the USA.

[Surrealist Compliment Generator](#)

[The Artists Liberation Front](#)

[And the Formation of the Sixties Counterculture](#)