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In my Mind's Eye: Remembering Rosemont

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Winter 2010–2011

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and clamps the mouth shut, next thrusting the surprised canine back behind the fence, where it remains in chastened posture.

It hardly took a second. Without a word Penelope nonchalantly marches ahead, followed by the thawed and relieved gathering.

“That was remarkable!” someone said on the instant. At once I agreed.

I still more than agree. All of it was, and is, remarkable.

— April 22-May 26, 2009

Fall in Spring

I only just noticed that the leaves on all the trees are full out green. So preoccupied have I been reliving a succession of past experiences while writing a long poem dedicated to Franklin Rosemont. But I’m not sure it’s even a poem, let alone a “good” poem; more an attempt to talk telepathically with someone who is officially not here, but who to all reasonable intents and purposes cannot not be here.

The relief I felt upon completing the poem was transformed into magical surprise when I received in the mail that evening a new book, *Armitage Avenue Transcendentalists*, published by Franklin’s company, Charles H. Kerr, and co-edited and co-authored by his wife Penelope and Janina Ciezadlo.

The book contains many wonderful and heartening things, but what sent me way up upon opening the package was the place name “Armitage Avenue” in the title.

Chicago’s Armitage Avenue was the first address I had for Rosemont, the first place I wrote to him answering his call for readers of *Radical America* magazine to join the Surrealist Revolution, the place where I first met the Rosemonts and Paul Garon in person, interviewing for a place in the tiny lineup of oddball aspirants still madly dedicated to the thoughts, dreams and actions of Andre Breton, Benjamin Peret and some legendary others.

Last but not least, Armitage Avenue was the address of the Solidarity Bookshop and *Rebel Worker* magazine where his labor radicalism and his pre-surrealism came together and attracted a following aptly dubbed “the left wing of the Beat Generation’.

Other addresses come to mind here because I only visited Franklin once on Armitage. Soon the scene shifted to Janssen Avenue. Entering there it was usual to find creatures of various kinds also inhabiting the house. Rare African frogs, maybe a couple of times; a giant Brazilian boa who had at one point usurped the parlor through which one entered the premises (in a large glass

aquarium of course); then, on Jarvis Avenue, an assortment of birds, mostly rescued, a rail, a mina and a big blue jay who adamantly refused to return to the wild after his experience at the surrealist spa. His name was Chandu.

Let's go back to Armitage, for there in the new book as I thumbed through it I found another sparkler to tantalize my imagination. Penelope Rosemont had inserted into the book a chapter about my poetry reading at Cafe Ennui in 2007, the last time I had seen her and Franklin in person.

This reading had been billed and advertised (in the Chicago Reader) as a "Tribute to His Royal Hipness Lord Buckley, Hippest of the HIP!!". The above-mentioned poem which I'd just finished that morning contained two big references to Lord Buckley. The first was the observation that within the hour that Franklin had died, on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009, the Bowery Poetry Club in New York was hosting a session of The Church of the Living Swing celebrating the 103rd birthday of His Hipness.

It happens that Lord Buckley died fifty years ago in a year also ending in nine. Whatever else we all make of it, these objective chances (as objective as life and death; as weird as time, poetry and humor) add a certain mysterious relevance to the fact that Franklin always liked to characterize me, more so than in any other role, as a devotee of the high-soaring humor of Richard Lord Buckley.

There's one other thing, which I won't belabor, for only the "knowers" will know what I'm talking about anyhow. Several years ago we had attempted, along with Thomas Magee in California and a few other surrealists, to assemble a cohort of hip-somatic partisans to be called the 'Knights and Ladies of Lord Buckley'. For the best of hard-to-describe reasons, the effort faltered early and was wound up by the nineties, but not without producing fingerprints in the form of a sparsely distributed "manifesto", a one-off tine (withdrawn) and a resounding trumpet call to the world in Arsenal, Surrealist Subversions, Number 4 (1989) in the form of a diatribe titled 'Swinging Stirrups'. Lately I have come to see that

More importantly, can it answer the question so prominent in the minds of those most devoted to the causes he espoused; will the movement he fostered for so long survive the shocking fact of his physical absence?

Without hesitation, regardless of the limited perspective of this sketchy account, I must answer yes. His imprint has been so broad, so deep and sustained that it can never really dissipate. Can anyone count the number of people who met and admired him either in person or through his writing or speaking? Or think only of Penelope Rosemont, Paul Garon, David Roediger, Paul Buhle, Ron Sakolsky, Joel Williams, Robin Kelley, Gale Ahrens; they will not fail to continue their own efforts.

The direction that Franklin, along with these and others, imparted to a vital portion of revolutionary thought; placing Worker struggles, Anarchism and Surrealism hand in hand, seems likely to grow in importance. We will see it for sure, perhaps soon. He may not get all the credit he deserves. Some may even try to minimize or falsify his contribution, as was sometimes tried when he was still here. There are always those who insist on wasting everybody's time with inane diversions from true paths. But the footprints that he left will remain, and canny trackers will always be able to find them.

One good way to end this theme, and this story, might be a long-remembered walk. A fairly large group of surrealists from Chicago, San Francisco, the Midwest and elsewhere are on their way back to the Rosemonts' place on Janssen Street, returning from an impromptu evening meal at a pizzeria. It must be after 9:00 PM because it is getting darker and it is summer. The group has broken up into pairs and trios; animated discussions abound. Suddenly a loud barking splits the air as we pass on the sidewalk before a fenced front yard. A large Doberman Pinscher leaps the fence and charges us. All are startled and frozen except Penelope Rosemont who moves in front of the creature, firmly grasps hold of its jaws

Back down on earth again... In another corner of my mind's eye I see Franklin standing in one of a hundred-plus different used book shops holding a volume up close under bespectacled eyes, flipping pages that are, in total point of fact, stirring up the past. My wife Cynthia and I are wandering about different sections of the store. Others, if along, are doing the same. Days at a time would be devoted to excursions on foot or by auto to a string of such places, with Rosemont leading the way, for he knew them all well and knew the proprietors too. They formed a fine eccentric brotherhood. It was the lure of City Lights Bookshop that first sent Franklin as a teenager to San Francisco to rendez-vous with the beat scene there. It was Solidarity Bookshop in Chicago that formed the first anchor of his radicalism as a youthful Beat-Surrealist-Wobbly original, a new "Chicago Idea" strain of poetic and social revolt.

Anyhow, these excursions made Cynthia and I into bibliophiles. Culturally speaking, they shaped our lives, which never fell ensnared to the electronic media trolls with all the confusion and guaranteed memory loss. But that process was afoot mainly in the '70s and '80s, before the online trade of later years winnowed the brick and mortar bookseller subculture. Fortunately, the last time I was in Chicago the Rosemonts took me to Bookman's Alley in Evanston, a friendly and spacious haven for those who relish such emporiums.

Enough said about that sort of thing...

I wonder if this cascade of personal notes, this literary delirium, can possibly add up to a worthwhile picture of Franklin Rosemont, a man whose sheer uniqueness is, in my opinion, categorically unrivaled. It occurs to me that the flow of this narrative has bypassed such signature interests of FR as jazz and black music, the campaign against the corrosive religion of "whiteness" led by the magazine *Race Traitor*, and his identification with old Chicago traditions of soapbox speaking and the local Bohemian subculture of places like the Dil Pickle Club and the College of Complexes.

aborted project as more of a successful than a resounding flop. We were, at the very least, "stirring the pot". Anything to do with Lord Buckley has got to be at least a mighty mite.

The whole idea was conceived in the midst of the Reagan era and the "Moral Majority" swindle, all of which it was intended to subvert. Today Reaganism and that other farce are rather diminished and Lord Buckley is flying pretty high thanks to the efforts of Oliver Trager and his friends. I compare the situation to the furor caused by the occult Rosicrucian swingers of the seventeenth century who put out two controversial and heretical manifestoes that staggered the European intelligentsia and gave kings and bishops the creeps. But then they apparently disappeared back into the mother ship. Not so! Their insidious ideas survived underground, migrating even to America, it was rumored, with Johannes Kelpius and his followers on the banks of the Wissahickon creek near Philadelphia. Since this comparison is a new insight, never got a chance to tell it to Franklin Rosemont, so I put it, however awkwardly, in the poem — my trans-etheral telepathic gig. I'm sure he would have gotten my point. In his thinking about Surrealism, he placed great emphasis on the importance of its subversive and always devastating humor, which he linked to its affinity with rebellious currents of popular culture, including comics.

One of Rosemont's main contributions to Surrealist theory has been the central emphasis he has given to the fight against Miserabilism. In his great study of Andre Breton he coined a beautiful challenge to the world: "Surrealism or Miserabilism!" Lord Buckley would have understood and approved.

Books and Dreams

In writing the poem ('So Long Franklin') I managed to keep a two-way connection going in my mind by re-reading Franklin's book, *An Open Entrance to the Shut Palace of Wrong Numbers*.

It is the autobiography of his obsession with the phenomenon of wrong numbers, and a tour de force of analysis of the problem from a personal vantage point that by comparison makes the peculiar subject of “quantum tunneling” seem as fascinating as a tuna fish sandwich.

An encounter with this text is bound to produce, in anyone, curiosity, followed by confusion, followed by more curiosity and more confusion; all punctuated by Aha!s, But!s, What Next’s, and objections due to insufficient evidence. Nevertheless, for stout-hearted it is an excursion into a future consciousness in which all mental points reconnect with all others to send the Mayan Calendar into another of its fabulous boomerang flights. And it is a good straight autobiography if you want to take it that way. I’m not trying to write a book review here, but you get the impression that Rosemont struggled over whether to put these reflections to the test in this way.

Books about ideas meant a great deal to him.

I was oddly moved by an incident in the early 1970s when a group of us visited a new Radical Book Store in Chicago presided over by a Chinese student. It was our practice to browse for hours as if our lives depended on acquiring a rare find of Marxist philosophy or a bit of escaped European surrealism in translation. I found *Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schultz, a pretty good catch. Before we left the shop Franklin paused to examine a book by a thinker of the Frankfurt School of Social Research. It was Habermas or Adorno, someone of that stripe of mind. He seemed unwilling to leave until he’d made up his mind about the book. Finally we all left, but on the way home in the car he agonized over whether he should not go back and get the book. Then, at last, after reaching the house or almost there, back we went to get the book.

This almost bland, offhand, and lackluster incident does not, of course, sum up Franklin Rosemont. Far from it. It does however convey some of the depth of his seriousness about books. Which was not, by the way, ponderous at all but omnivorous and voracious

head for some place to meet or eat or view art or hand out leaflets, that’s one.

He walked briskly and liked to talk along the way, the rhythm of the stride energizing the verbal solos. In a relaxed mood I see him sitting at the big table in the middle room of their house, drawing or decorating envelopes, as the conversation rose or fell among the few or many there, with Franklin’s words always clear, distinct, with brisk and sometimes rapid emphasis. Or talking more reflectively while sitting in a comfortable chair lit by a lamp late into the night, books piled all around, until maybe three or four in the morning.

On many such nights we sat alone in the large book-lined room, surveying the crazy American cultural terrain and trying to hash out the prospects for expanding Surrealism. Grand and impossibly ambitious as they were, these prospects were not without their humor or humility.

Franklin could chuckle about the notion of an infinitesimal minority of mad men and women launching a revolution that would make previous ones look like kindergarten elections.

He told me once of his brief correspondence with Luis Bunuel, in which the director of so many surrealist film classics revealed his terminal bitterness and pessimism. Unlike Bunuel, however, Franklin cooked his surrealism with a hotter measure of magic, and abundant optimism.

Franklin knew that miracles could balance folly, with no priests in the picture. New confirmations of our hopes were never lacking, such as the adherence and friendship of the stellar photographer Clarence John Laughlin, or, from the side of science, the appearance of Christopher Starr, a leading expert on South American spiders. Besides, today we have famous, but far less informed, hawkers of revolutions in consciousness drawing secular millions to alchemical millenniums, with respectful side bows to surrealism too.

were from Kentucky or some other border state. A woman in the car explained that they were descendants of the officer who was killed by a bomb blast at the Haymarket riot many years earlier.

Surely we all felt something weird and timely about this chance meeting in this place during the memorial year. We talked briefly with the people, telling them who we were and why we were also interested in this place. For some reason I felt the same as if a painful tooth had been pulled, and I thought that Franklin's demeanor toward the people in the car was friendly and gentle. I might add that Franklin's father had asked to be cremated after his death so his ashes could be scattered near the Haymarket Monument. His family's last home was only a short distance from Waldheim.

Franklin's father, Henry Rosemont, had been a militant and influential member in Typographical Union No. 16. This local was the union shop of Albert Parson's, who was perhaps the most eloquent and popular of the Haymarket martyrs. I always felt intuitively related to Franklin's father and mother, as I think many others did. But in those '80s years I had a similar intuitive sensation that all the storied Haymarket personages were great aunts and uncles of mine, and of Franklin and the other surrealists who carried Wobbly red cards.

I felt it was a major historic tragedy that Albert Parsons had to be hanged, instead of leading the United States into the splendid age of a generous socialism as the Nineteenth Century ended, thus helping to obviate for the world the coming horrors of the Twentieth.

The future is in the past is in us

In my mind's eye, when I picture Franklin, I see him in one of several familiar postures or activities; striding along a neighborhood street as a group of seldom less than four or five (often more)

cious and totally open ended. He loved to read about things like soap bubbles, spinning tops, circus lore. In connection with his study of Bellamy's Nationalist Movement, he collected the forgotten works of Alfred Lawsoia, an early aviation pioneer and madcap scientist-utopian-inventor who had an unlikely career as a popular economic reformer in the 1930 s.

Once while we sat in a coffee shop discussing plans to join (or rejoin) the IWW, I passed Franklin a little volume dealing with Scottish clan tartans, complete with short histories and mottoes ("Learn to Suffer," "Touch not the cat, without a glove.") He smiled and paged through it enthusiastically, repeatedly averring, "This is a charmer!" Never before or since have I heard anyone else refer to a little book in terms usually reserved for a fascinating woman or an engaging child.

Finally I cannot escape relating how once, as we sat in the middle room on Jarvis Street, he pulled out of a shelf behind us the strangest, most baffling volume either of us had ever encountered. It was a prose work in English, by an author who was I think Anglo-Saxon, but there the realm of comprehension ends. He wanted me to page through the tome and tell him what I thought it could be about.

Delighted to try out what should have been, to my unsuspecting mind, a fairly modest puzzle, I flipped through it reading a sentence here, a paragraph there, before yielding to the need to go back to the title page for a possible hint. After several minutes, nothing, no idea, the pages may as well have been blank for all that they suggested in the way of content or subject matter. There were no demented equations here such as would at least suggest that here is a tome related in some way to mathematics. There were no charts, illustrations or pictures such as one would find in a book explicating some scientific or technical subject. There were no dates or proper names, no invocations of a Shakespeare, Lincoln or Jesus Christ. All one found were arcane groups of vaguely metaphoric words apparently directed toward something, although we could

not be sure even of that. Based on one or two phrases, we hypothesized the book may have been an “insiders manual” of beekeeping or some esoteric form of blacksmithing. Soon the shadow of a doubt erased these ludicrous theories. Not a hint of the alchemical vocabulary was present. That would have been nice, but alas... I might mention that from the design and age of the book (I cannot recall title and author) it certainly was printed during the latter half of the nineteenth century, America’s golden age of inventors and tinkerers.

Anyhow, what it boils down to is: we had a good laugh over the inability of two head-stretching surrealists to decipher in any way the most generic category or genre of a strange book randomly collected by one of the world’s most creatively eclectic bibliophiles, Franklin Rosemont.

Brawls...and Dreams

If books were Franklin’s heritage, by way of his family’s involvement in the printers’ trade and the printers’ union, a penchant for radical activism came by the same route.

His favorite quotation came from the old Wobbly humorist T-Bone Slim: “Wherever you find injustice, the proper form of politeness is attack.”

From the early sixties on, there were few significant demonstrations, strikes or street actions in Chicago that did not see the presence of Franklin and Penelope Rosemont arm in arm with assorted other surrealists. It could be anti-racist demonstrations, anti-Vietnam-War marches, picket lines, opportunities to employ the favorite tactic of cultural scandal, “the Surrealists” would be there.

When the Democratic Convention came to Chicago in August 1968 the Surrealists and their allies were naturally out in force among the demonstrators. At the time Penelope was very active with the national office of the SDS. That October the Surrealists

of writings on the Haymarket affair, titled Haymarket Scrapbook. Naturally I wanted to visit in Spring or Summer of that year to mark the centenary. It was then that I first saw Rosemont with a huge black beard, which I surmised was grown in honor of the Haymarket anarchists who met imprisonment and death at the hands of vengeful authorities so long ago. It was currently the age of Reagan the Mean, but our memories and spirits were saturated with the glories of early Chicago Anarchism and the best times of the IWW which, in the early twentieth century, had re-launched so much of what it all meant.

Here’s what I’m getting to with the above lines. Soon after my arrival that year a few of us made a sojourn over to Waldheim Cemetery to visit the graves of the Haymarket martyrs, those who were executed by the system as an example to militant strikers. The spiritual apex of these burial plots was the Haymarket Monument, featuring a larger than life statue of a woman placing a laurel wreath on the head of a fallen worker. It gives classic expression to the ideal of justice to come, and ultimately Freedom. Fresh flowers were in the arms of the statue when we arrived to muse and take pictures.

Along besides Franklin, Penelope and myself were Carlos Cortez, Wobbly artist and poet, and Frances Wright from London’s Freedom Press, which was founded closer to Haymarket days by the famed anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin. We were there maybe forty-five minutes or an hour, maybe longer.

There were a great many important figures from the labor and political left interred there, including Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons, as well as the heroes directly involved in the momentous events of 1886. One could muse and dream for hours amidst their monuments and markers. We walked back down from that area along a narrow asphalt path and encountered a car coming up filled with people. It stopped and they spoke to us. It was a commonplace car, a big old sedan, maroon I think. They wanted to know if they were at the right place. Ordinary looking people, not young, they

Franklin and Penelope and the complex life of an expanding imagination that swirled around them, coming from all corners of the world.

There are so many people who could be mentioned, that should be, to do them all justice. For example, Australian-born revolutionary Mary Low, a special friend and favorite poet of Franklin's. She died in 2007. Without Franklin, I'm sure I would never have read her poems which exhibit the best and staunchest heart of that past bleeding century, the Twentieth. She tells what it was like to live within a worldwide wave swell for change and then watch it all disappear as if in a card game gone bad.

Here's to her Century, and that of all the others like her. Here's to Carlos Cortez, Ted Joans, Philip Lamantia, who also saw the start of a struggling new millennium and suddenly left it to the rest of us.

Haymarket Forever!

The year 1986 was very important to Franklin Rosemont. It was the centenary of the Haymarket affair, a most notable event in the history of U.S. labor struggles, which baptized in blood the movement for the eight-hour workday and gave birth to the international working class traditions of May Day.

In the clashes between striking workers and police in May, 1886, a policeman was killed by a bomb thrown in Haymarket Square in Chicago during a rally. Many workers were shot to death in that and other incidents.

Franklin had, a few years before the centenary, assumed the position of editor at the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, which had actually originated in Chicago at the time of the historic events which had inspired its founder. In collaboration with David Roediger, one of our best labor historians and a longtime member of the Chicago Surrealists, he had published a voluminous collection

conducted something of a counterattack against the Chicago establishment when they opened Gallery Bugs Bunny, which waged "Cultural Guerrilla Warfare" to provoke countless onlookers and a raft of uncomprehending critics. All this is described in Penelope's wonderful memoir of the sixties, *Dreams and Everyday Life*. As chance would have it, I was present only on the occasion of a few mild-mannered leafletings, but fellow surrealists spoke in impressive tones of the sight of Franklin "in action". I still relive from time to time the joyful experience of receiving a postcard detailing the brawl at a coffeehouse where the surrealists had thrust a pie in the face of Robert Bly, bringing on the police after a tussle with the guru of manliness's puny defenders.

In the seventies, the Chicago area strain of the American Nazi virus oozed out, in places like Skokie, Illinois, in response to the media's hyping of a "white backlash". They were met by the voices and, on one or two occasions, the fists of the Workers Defense group, comprised by the Chicago surrealists and others. In all accounts that I saw, the Nazis' attempted rallies were broken up and their cronies bested in a manner recalling the street-fighting French surrealists of the 1930s who struggled with the fascists of that era.

Of course, Franklin also led protests against the tawdry misrepresentation of Surrealism by museums, as well as their cynical celebration of advertising men such as Warhol. Mayor Daley once imported a monstrous public sculpture thrown together by subcontractors of a certain Picasso. The attempt at taxpayer subsidized culture was roundly criticized, in person, by the Surrealists, whose daring leaflet passed out at the event was titled "This Too Will Burn!".

Relentless, the next mayor then went for what was supposed to be a many-story high sculpture of a baseball bat by one Claes Oldenberg, which turned out looking like an ominous idol in the form of a police billy club.

Franklin and the surrealists put in their two cents at the dedication ceremony, again inspiring warm greetings from the always

omnipresent PD. Arrests at that time spared Franklin, who opined his picket sign, "Silly, Isn't It?" was too light-hearted for the cop-pers to digest.

Many of these early skirmishes made the Chicago papers of course, as well as national media, but it seemed to me extremely unusual to find a reference to the "bat-column" incident in a World Book Encyclopedia volume I picked up only months afterwards. Surrealism brings quick immortality. I would cite the volume here, but I'm afraid the one in question is lost in some heap of clutter or buried-away cardboard box somewhere. I guess I'm more a militantly lazy bookopath than a street-fighter.

Right here I'm not sure if I'm actually writing about Franklin or myself. I'm not sure if I can tell the difference. The truth is, not a single day has gone by since I met him that I did not think about him, or refer some question or odd 'find' to his imagined scrutiny or opinion. But never did I dog and harass him with letters and phone calls, being to all intents and purposes a semi-recluse in the hinterlands of Pennsylvania.

Often months went by between contacts. Then a phone conversation could go on for two hours. Here's something else: I believe Franklin had an uncanny way of supporting and intensifying interests of mine even though they involved things that he himself would not be inclined toward.

In a sense we traded obsessions. It was possible because he had an instinctive affinity toward things that could further the revolt of the creative imagination. Thus I always felt on safe ground sharing with him the most obscure results of my fanatical researches into religious heresies. When his own views came out, they were always confident, forthright and powerful; in character much like the tall, abundant youth I remember first encountering upon climbing the stairs and entering the apartment on Armitage Avenue. But strong as his ideas were, about Surrealism, about political and labor questions, about comics, and his own great icon, Bugs Bunny, I do not remember ever being harangued or preached to about anything,

constructions, highlighted by Gerome Kamrowski's "Menagerie of Revolt", which was a kind of playground Jungle Jim from which dangled several sunspot-encrusted animals and fish. Just rediscovered by Franklin, in the 1940s, Gerome had belonged to an important New York City circle in which visiting continental Surrealists mingled with the budding originators of Abstract Expressionism. One of the most fascinating paintings on display was a collective surrealist abstraction by William Baziotés, Kamrowski, and Jackson Pollock.

In those days, long walks in the neighborhood of Janssen Avenue were punctuated by visits to Roma's Restaurant for all kinds of meals and meetings of the surrealist group. Lamantia loved this place particularly because it was decorated on all the walls and ceiling with old musical instruments, and served his favorite pasta, mostaccioli.

Roma's had been discovered and appropriated a couple years earlier by the Rosemonts and Jablonskis, but only later was it learned that it had been the habitual eating place of Henry Darger, the then-obscure outsider artist who is now so revered and famous. Franklin, or someone in the group, prevailed upon the owners to designate a back room the Darger Room by hanging a wooden plaque, made by surrealist sculptor Robert Green, in his honor. Roma's did not serve liquor and I recall the scandal at one Surrealist meeting when Franklin, soon followed by other attendees, ordered an ice cream sundae. This reminded me of how my first meeting with Franklin and Penelope was capped off with milk shakes. Chicago surrealism was and is European in many ways; and Chicagoan in every other way, blasted to a clarity by the power of the local blues. Not Pernod or absinthe or Mandarin Curacao, more like low-price beer and huge ears of buttered sweet corn from the fields of nearby Indiana bought at the Maxwell Street market on a hot July morning.

I guess I've spun from Franklin to Philip Lamantia to Roma's to Maxwell Street. What matters is that everything I think and remember about the Chicago surrealist experience brings me back to

scope of this event, featuring the work of scores of active surrealists from dozens of countries and every continent, testifies to Franklin's prodigious network of contacts and the enormous energy of the worldwide movement at that time. It represented the meeting of two generations of minds who were inspired by the example of the legendary Andre Breton and his equally legendary Paris comrades. It was the post World War II generation, in solidarity with the Vietnam War era generation, maintaining the message of Marvelous Freedom at a time when the receding of the revolutionary tide of the sixties and early seventies was causing discouragement and dismay in many others.

Every participant knew that, despite overt appearances, the parallel structures of Stalinism and Western imperialism were being decisively undermined, even as their remaining recuperative powers were knitting back together some of their fractured bones, Spanish painter Eugenio Granell, a favorite friend of Franklin's who was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War attended personally. So did Portuguese poet and artist Mario Cesariny, who asked us if revolution was coming soon to America.

From San Francisco, the quintessential surrealist poet and researcher of the marvelous Philip Lamantia arrived to visit with the Rosemonts and their other guests and to experience the exhibition. With him was his companion Nancy Joyce Peters who worked for City Lights Press, a poet and conversationalist of great charm. Franklin and Philip talked endlessly of Surrealism and Italian Marxism, as well as many other arcane subjects related to the far out adventures of the mind. They also exchanged details regarding the common San Francisco heritage of their families. There is a small street in that city named Rosemont.

Many visits were made to the cavernous exhibition site which was entered by way of a long concrete ramp. Then we strolled beneath an overhead surrealist airplane and a Viking ship protruding from the high upper wall (courtesy of the building skills of Robert Green), past the dazzling array of paintings, objects, sculptures and

whether in person, on the phone or in correspondence. I think this is because the leading edge of his mind, when not engaged in a detailed activity or personal exchange, was likely to be focused on the ubiquitous borderline where Chance opens up new avenues to the surrealist adventure, seeking an opening rather than a pushing point.

That may be a rash thing to say, because it is so impossible to actually prove. But on the other hand I would challenge anyone to name a person more single-mindedly fixated on the poetic imperative, which was in Franklin's case always the surrealist imperative. Upholding and defending Surrealism and the liberating wonders that it represents was more an automatic instinct with him than a mere mission. Knowing him gave me a good idea of the inner force that must have moved Martin Luther when he made his famous statement, "Here I stand; I can do no other." I may as well add another superlative, one that makes up about seventy-five percent of my total impression of Franklin Rosemont. Uncompromising. It is a common but necessary word. He had no compromises to offer anyone on the issues that he cared about.

The physicists inform us that if the universe were composed of equal amounts of matter and anti-matter the two would mutually annihilate and nothing would exist. I maintain that if Franklin Rosemont had offset ninety-five percent of his total dedication with just five percent of compromise the surrealist movement in Chicago would have, to all intents and purposes, never have happened. That reality is, by itself, a clear demonstration of the force of spirit that was needed to create, in the pragmatically corrupt atmosphere of American culture, a politically viable surrealist movement capable of existing and growing for forty-plus years. No one had ever thought anything remotely like this possible — before it happened in Chicago in the 1960s. Thus he got to be caricatured in some quarters as an intellectual hard-nose and the leader of a leftist sect. His words of thanks to such temporizing critics were:

I refuse

I am against
I am for being against
and I know why.

What he was against he summed up many times in the contemptuous phrase “capitalist, Christian civilization” or, in the incisive word coined by Andre’ Breton, miserabilism.

His positive devotion to the wonders that lie beyond all that is what his critics never appreciated. All this is seldom said better than in the words of the excellent aphorist Antonio Porchia: “They will say that you are on the wrong road, if it is your own.”

Art as art was meant to be, or not

Rounding out the impression of Franklin I’ve given thus far requires a look at his art.

This is not a minor point, even though he has not been known mainly as a visual artist. For me he was one of the major creative artists of our era, specializing in the invention of personal styles and genres.

His approach was, of course, surrealist in essence, following the unambiguous dictum: you just do it. There is no such thing as an exclusive ‘knowing how’ or being ‘taught’. Everybody knows how. Nobody teaches anyone else, everybody teaches themselves by doing. This was the artistic atmosphere of the surrealist group, exemplified by Franklin and Penelope Rosemont.

His images, presented in magnificently bold lines, shapes and colors, testify to a lifelong immersion in the aggressive visual humor of printed comics and the great classic film cartoons. I can find no hint whatever of any attempt to follow or imitate any of the better or lesser known surrealist artists, past or present. He went from automatic drawing to collage and object making to painting, finding a plateau of achievement in works of a wild innocence and imagination, a joyous freedom on the loose, whatever the medium.

The highlight of any visit with the Rosemonts arrived when they brought out never before seen examples of their art, and Penelope’s own development proceeded in a parallel course of freedom and inventiveness, different but fully complementary. I particularly remember my surprise, laced a glimmer of awe, when Franklin showed me a group of collage-like pieces in which cuttings were made, not with the usual straight scissors or blades, but with pink-ing shears. In these, the typical hard-edged effect of fine surrealist collage was augmented with unexpected life and motion. The double whammy then came when Penelope showed me some collages in which eviscerated landscapes were intertwined transparently with other nature imagery, suggesting a world in the throes of fluid transformation. She called these, landscapades.

“Exquisite Corpse” drawings, in which each participant contributes a section to a drawing the previous part(s) of which have been covered or folded back, were a feature of every surrealist gathering large or small. Suddenly on one visit I was introduced to the Exquisite Corpse Collage; the same idea, only using magazine cuttings in place of drawing. Piles of magazines everywhere, scissors of every size and type, some sharp, some dull, feverish cutting, pasting, uncovering — revelations, hilarious, absurd, profound. The exquisite corpse collage wave led to an exhibition of these convulsively beautiful pictures at Heartland Cafe in Rogers Park, not far from where Franklin and Penelope lived. This show, titled “Totems Without Taboos”, which I think I saw only on the last day it was still hanging, remains (next to the World Surrealist Exhibition of 1976) my sentimental favorite, because of its zaniness and because it represented the casual and spontaneous collaboration of so many dozens of surrealists from so many places.

But I should certainly touch on the World Surrealist Exhibition, held in Chicago at the Gallery Black Swan in the Summer of 1976. Written of in many other places, a good way to get an idea of it is to have a look at its catalogue, which is also a pretty good encyclopedia of world surrealism in the 1960s and ’70s. The colossal