

Franklin Rosemont (1943-2009): Leading US surrealist and anthologist of André Breton dies

By Paul Bond
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The death of Franklin Rosemont deserves some notice. He played an important role in popularising the work of poet André Breton for English-speaking audiences, while the foundation of the Chicago Surrealist Group to some extent revived the movement after Breton's death. Rosemont was also a noted labour historian and publisher.

Franklin Rosemont was born in Chicago in 1943. His father, Henry, a printer, was a union activist. Sally, his mother, was a jazz musician. This family environment admixture of radicalism and artistry stayed with him throughout his life, and perhaps shaped his self-mythologising. He claimed to have joined the Industrial Workers of the World at the age of 7. In reality, the IWW ceased to exist as a serious organization in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the establishment of Communist Parties, which everywhere attracted the best elements in revolutionary syndicalism.

Rosemont claimed to remain loyal to the IWW's syndicalism throughout his life. In real terms, what does this mean? That he rejected Stalinism and reformism, but couldn't see his way clear, under complex political conditions, to genuine Marxism.

Rosemont was also heavily influenced at an early age by the Wobbly cartoonist, satirist, and songwriter, T-Bone Slim. He was later to edit an anthology of T-Bone Slim's writings, *Juice Is Stranger Than Friction*.

Rosemont's keen study of avant-garde literary and artistic movements seems to have started at an early age. At 15, influenced by Beat writers like Jack Kerouac, he hitchhiked to California. There he met the radical poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, owner of the City Lights bookshop. Rosemont dropped out of high school, having spent long hours in the library of the Art Institute of Chicago studying surrealism.

Despite these interruptions to his schooling, he enrolled at Roosevelt University in Chicago in 1962. Here he met Penelope, who would become his wife and his closest collaborator for the rest of his life. At Roosevelt, Rosemont

studied anthropology under St. Clair Drake, the African-American sociologist who also served as adviser to Ghana's first prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah. Rosemont was enormously impressed by Drake's work on urban life, race, and race relations. Drake's work continued to direct Rosemont's thinking throughout his life.

Rosemont, already radicalised by his family upbringing, was heavily influenced by a rising tide of political activity and thinking. He had already been reading about the Cuban Revolution and the civil rights movement, and at Roosevelt he threw himself into student politics. Throughout the 1960s he and the Chicago Surrealist Group continued to work closely with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a radical student group closely associated with the New Left. He took a leading role in an IWW-led strike of blueberry pickers in Michigan in 1964, and produced propaganda material for the SDS.

During this period he continued to investigate surrealism, and in 1965 he and Penelope travelled to Paris to meet the group around André Breton. The Paris group was impressed with the young Americans, and the Rosemonts were inspired. Franklin returned to the US, in Penelope's words, "boiling over with ideas and enthusiasm. He just thought surrealism was the greatest idea, and he wasn't going to abandon it for anything." Supported and influenced by the Paris group, the Rosemonts formed the Chicago Surrealist Group.

The Paris group remained the senior surrealist group internationally, and was still very much organised around Breton. In the period after the war, Breton's political positions had become less focused. Before the war, he had worked closely with Trotsky. In the wake of the post-war settlement, Breton moved away from the Fourth International. He remained deeply involved in the anti-colonial struggles, but during the last years of his life Breton moved closer to anarchism, which came to be the dominant political position of the surrealist movement. A

certain political disorientation in the Paris group was compounded by the very fact of Breton's authority in the movement. After his death in 1966 the Paris group struggled to deal with the new situation. Jean Schuster, Breton's executor, wound up the original group in 1969.

It is in this light that Franklin Rosemont's contribution to surrealism becomes so important. He worked closely with Elisa, André Breton's widow, to put together an anthology of Breton's writings in English. This would become the collection *What Is Surrealism?*, which remains invaluable. This volume alone would make Rosemont's passing worth recording.

A man of great enthusiasm and diverse interests, Rosemont was an ideal populariser and proselytiser. He would continue in this role throughout his life. He and Penelope became leading figures in the long-established radical publisher Charles H. Kerr Company. Here they published work on American radical and political figures like Carl Sandburg, Joe Hill, and Mother Jones. Rosemont worked with experts in the field. With David Roediger, professor of History at the University of Illinois, he co-edited the illustrated labour history *Haymarket Scrapbook*. He produced a collection of Wobbly songs, *The Big Red Songbook*, in collaboration with the eminent folklorist Archie Green, who died last month aged 91.

The Rosemonts also established Black Swan Editions, a surrealist imprint. Rosemont continued to work on popular anthologies, having latterly edited a collection of Benjamin Péret's work for Charles H. Kerr. He had also, in recent years, created and edited an important Surrealist Histories list for the University of Texas Press.

This work may to some extent have obscured his poetry and drawing. He published several volumes of poetry: he is a relatively minor poet, exceeded by the work of Penelope and other figures in the Chicago group, but Rosemont, laudably, never saw his writing about surrealism as being separable from his practice as a surrealist. He insisted, even as older groups were struggling, that surrealism remained a viable revolutionary mode of poetic life. Less well-known than the anthology of Breton's writings is its introduction, published separately in Britain as *André Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism*. In this he insisted that surrealism is not "a mere literary or artistic school," but "an unrelenting revolt against a civilisation that reduces all human aspirations to market values, religious impostures, universal boredom and misery."

The newly-formed Chicago Group combined their creativity with radical political activity, and staged a number of interesting events. The World Surrealist Exhibition at the Gallery Bugs Bunny in Chicago in 1968 established the group's authority, and underlined Rosemont's insistence

that this was a lively movement. Even bigger was the 1976 World Exhibition, which brought together some of the leading figures of a disparate international movement, alongside representatives of the Phases group which had developed from surrealism. In the introduction to the catalogue, Rosemont insisted that the organisation of a surrealist exhibition could only be undertaken by surrealists themselves.

The work done during this period by Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, alongside other leading figures of the Chicago Group like Paul and Elisabeth Garon, led to a resurgence of surrealism internationally. Several current surrealist groups owe their existence, directly or indirectly, to the Chicago Group. Much of the group's work was published in *Arsenal/Surrealist Subversions* and has been republished in collections.

Rosemont became friend and colleague to a diverse range of artists and radical historians, people like Ferlinghetti, Studs Terkel, Paul Buhle, and Leonora Carrington. He was a warm host, although perhaps somewhat parochial about Chicago. He continued not just to give lectures (on Joe Hill, for example), but also to issue statements on political developments. These are of varying quality, but he remained the same radical he had always been. Late last year he visited the Republic Windows and Doors factory occupation.

He was, essentially, an enthusiast: coupled with his perpetual student radicalism, this sometimes led him into regrettable mistakes. He was long a friend of the poet Philip Lamantia. Like him, Lamantia had moved from Beat writing to surrealism. In his later years Lamantia, moving away from surrealism, reconverted to Catholicism. Rosemont, perhaps because he could not understand it, adamantly insisted that it had not happened. The incident caused considerable confusion.

At their best, his human and intellectual qualities enabled him to make some significant contributions to artistic life. The present surrealist movement is small and disparate, but its vigour does owe something to the enthusiastic proselytising of Franklin Rosemont. All English-speaking people interested in Breton's writing will also feel some gratitude to him. His politics were not ours, but his contribution in this sphere was a serious one.

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