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PAGES

SEARCHING FOR THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

A recent article in The New York Times described this year's Armory Show centennial celebration, including a number of museums that have gathered works that were in the landmark event. Matisse's "Blue Nude" and Duchamp's "Nude a Staircase" were Descending among those breakthrough pieces. The public response to the Armory Show was something like the riot at the Paris debut of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. Could there ever be a break from tradition like this again? Could anything in 2013 cause this kind of social convulsion? In the post-World War II rejection of high Modernism, associated (rightly or wrongly) with the totalitarian monsters that had threatened to destroy the world, the answer would have been no. But I am not convinced. The surrealist project outlined by Breton in his manifestos has barely been explored. thinking about also centennial that will come next year: the publication of Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons. That was another dramatic shift, making a lot of people rethink the possibilities of the written word.

Will Alexander and Carlos Lara have taken up those early 20th century challenges by collaborating on a project to reintegrate the intuitive and the rational through trance improvisation. André Breton and Philippe Soupault in The Magnetic Fields were their inspiration. (An excerpt from The Audiographic as Data will appear in issue #11 of Calibanonline.) But the question remains, is it still possible for us to something new, SO see



unanticipated, that we would have a hard time coming to terms with it? Provoking a reaction like the reaction to the Armory Show? More recent attempts by writers and artists to provoke shock through the gratuitously grotesque and brutal have only proven that, except for people with the genteel sensibilities of Jesse Helms, nothing shocks us anymore.

Some years ago David Byrne and his crew of R.I.S.D.I. avant-gardists put out an album entitled Stop Making Sense. Byrne also made a spectacular little movie, True Stories, that explored similar territory: the existence of the Marvelous in the everyday. I understand his feelings about the rationalist rejection of imagination, the mystical projection of possibility. That same impulse is what made William Blake write his brain-searing ecstatic poetry. It is also what made Latin American magic realists and their American protégés (the successors to Surrealism) so popular for decades.

There is another voice, however, that makes me afraid of the rejection of science and the rational world. In 2012 the Texas Republican Party wanted to ban the teaching of critical thinking in public schools, because that had "the purpose of challenging the student's fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority." The worship of the irrational, especially in the area of religion, can be as scary as the tyranny of science. It leads us back to the totalitarian monsters of the 20th century. Sartre said he never felt freer than when he lived in Paris under the domination of the Nazis during World War II. That is an interesting hypothesis, that freedom needs to be framed by the absolute, but it's one I would prefer not to test personally.

It has been exciting to see the number of contemporaries who have pushed beyond their comfort zones and into unknown territory. A lot of that work has appeared in Caliban and Calibanonline. But these explorations are not without danger. When the surrealists pursued automatic writing, trances, and other psychic experiments, they scared the hell out of themselves. Even though his reading of Freud set Breton on the path to Surrealism, his goal was the opposite of Freud's: Breton wanted to erase the line between ego and id. The surrealist goal of finding the Supreme Point and thereby merging the dream world and the waking world, the unconscious and the rational mind, is a shorthand definition of schizophrenia. Any artist or writer who walks through that door wants to make very sure

that it's not a one-way trip.

The surrealists loved alchemy, because it represented the power of transformation to them. Think of Melquiades in the opening chapter of Gabriel Garcia Marquez' One Hundred Years of Solitude: "A heavy gypsy with an untamed beard and sparrow hands, who introduced himself as Melquiades, put on a bold demonstration of what he himself called the eighth wonder of the learned alchemists of Macedonia. He went from house to house

dragging two metal ingots and everybody was amazed to see pots, pans, tongs, and braziers tumble down from their places and beams creak from the desperation of nails and screws trying to emerge, and even objects that had been lost for a long time appeared from where they had been searched for most and went dragging along in turbulent confusion behind Melquíades' magical irons. 'Things have a life of their own,' the gypsy proclaimed with a harsh accent. 'It's simply a

matter of waking up their souls.""

The philosopher's stone to many alchemists (and the surrealists and magic realists as well) was not an object that could turn dross into gold; it was a metaphor for the revelation of the Marvelous, the achievement of a state of conscious ness that reintegrated the powers that had been lost in civilized societies. The search for the philosopher's stone goes on.



Janet Kauffman at the Global Warming March, Washington, DC, February 17, 2013

RICARDO AVILA WINS MAJOR PRIZE

Congratulations to Ricardo Avila! He has been awarded Costa Rica's National Painting Prize for 2012. The prize was based on his highly successful show entitled "Ciudades." Some pieces from that show were featured in Calibanonline #9. The show can be viewed in full at the following link: http://issuu.com/luquiva/docs/avila_ciudades_2012

