

Toni del Renzio in extremis: Alter Ego and Doppelganger

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I first became aware that Toni del Renzio had been the *enfant terrible* of surrealism in Britain during a tempestuous 10-year-long endeavour to chronicle the life and works of Conroy Maddox. The latter's normally soft-hearted and gentlemanly temperament would, without fail, metamorphose into denunciatory invective at the very mention of del Renzio's name. Any draft pages that made the slightest reference to the émigré philosopher and artist would be angrily scored through in red by Maddox and accompanied with the diktat 'Out! Out!' Such was the aftershock of events that had taken place over half a century earlier.

Leading up to those events was a chequered early life coloured by aristocratic privilege and peril. Born in 1915 in the lavish Tsarskoe Selo imperial Russian palace, Toni Romanov del Renzio dei Rossi di Castellone e Venosa spent an idyllic first two years before being whisked to safety in Italy in 1917, as the Bolsheviks were terrorising the affluent classes and looked set to execute Nicholas II and his family. By his early twenties del Renzio found himself enmeshed in another tyranny, that of Fascism. Drafted into Mussolini's cavalry, he was sent to fight in Abyssinia, where, as he well knew, any Italian caught prisoner would be castrated. An ingenious desertion, involving disguising himself as a Bedouin Arab and crossing the desert with a camel caravan took him to Morocco and, eventually, across the Straits of Gibraltar, to Spain. There del Renzio found himself caught up in a civil war and was quick to take up arms for the Marxist (POUM) faction. Having come close to death a few too many times, he set off again, this time to Paris, where he became involved with the surrealists and Picasso. He worked as a designer and painter, mainly for theatres and ballet companies, and began painting watercolours inspired by dance and stage performance. This creative episode was cut short, however, by Hitler's advance and del Renzio fled across the English Channel.

Once in London del Renzio enlisted for 'reserved' work connected with the Allies, including de Gaulle's Free French fighters, for whom he designed and coordinated a travelling exhibition. At the same time he realized that, as everywhere else in Europe, the surrealist movement was in tatters. Indeed, by 1941, it had come to a complete standstill: Penrose had become a captain in the Home Guard and camouflage designer of dubious merit, S. W. Hayter, Gordon Onslow-Ford and Sam Haile had all left for the States, F. E. McWilliam had joined the Royal Air Force and Mesens had closed the London Gallery and stopped publishing *London Bulletin* to work for the BBC, broadcasting Allied propaganda. Unwilling to accept this state of affairs, del Renzio had decided to take the bull by the horns and revive the ailing movement. 'War or no war,' he later said, 'there was nothing being done about Surrealism. Hitler had to be defeated, yes, but Surrealism also had to carry on.' In March 1942 he published a single-issue magazine entitled *Arson* 'to provoke authentic collective Surrealist activity' and within months he organized a major surrealist exhibition at the



International Arts Centre in Bayswater. It did not take long for del Renzio to be seen as the movement's driving force and he was promptly approached by the editors of *New Road*, John Bayliss and Alex Comfort, to compile a surrealist anthology in 1943.¹ Once published, a further offer came from Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*, for which del Renzio was to have edited a whole number. But, all this was too much for Mesens, who was furious that his leadership had been usurped. Unable to contain his anger, Mesens scuppered the *Horizon* project and viciously attacked del Renzio in the press. By 1944, all the surrealists, other than Ithell Colquhoun, to whom he was, by then, married, had abandoned him. They even sabotaged a recitation of his poetry, at the International Arts Centre, by showering the stage with rotten eggs. Notwithstanding, it would be reasonable to suggest that, despite the hate conspiracy, surrealism would have stagnated during the War had it not been for del Renzio.

After the dust of the clash with Mesens had settled, del Renzio was left deeply disheartened, knowing only too well that he had not only been marginalised, but also that he had been definitively forced out of organized surrealist activity. His attempts to reanimate surrealism had been successful, but short-lived and he lost all hope of being able to champion the movement. Yet, the embargo imposed by Mesens did not dampen del Renzio's determination to continue channelling his energy into art and creativity, even in his chosen method of earning a living. To this end he resumed free-lance design activities, as well taking up a teaching post at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts. He designed the magazine *Polemic* and a series of books for Pilot Press. He also created advertisement mock-ups, which appeared in *Graphis*, *Penrose Annual* and *Design in Britain*. In 1948 he was appointed art director of the National Trade Press and wrote a variety of publications on art and design. He also became involved with Victor Pasmore, Kenneth and Mary Martin and whole of the British Constructivist scene. It was at this time that the 1951 Festival of Britain committee approached him to draw on his 'graphic' talents and commissioned him to design a series of panels on the evolution of domestic kitchen machinery, a boom area at the time. But del Renzio yearned for more involvement in the finer arts and resigned from the National Trade Press to go to Italy to study the latest trends of the Modern Movement in Architecture. On his return, after publishing his research, he joined the Institute of Contemporary Arts, then in Dover Street, as director's assistant. He was in the perfect milieu for an artist: in 1952, together with artists Richard Hamilton, Nigel Henderson, John McHale, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull, and architects and critics Reyner Banham and Lawrence Alloway, he founded the experimental Independent Group, an 'art of discussion, design and display.' Its celebrated achievement was the *This Is Tomorrow* exhibition, which was opened in 1956 at the Whitechapel Gallery by a 12-foot tall Hollywood celebrity, Robbie the Robot, who was starring in the MGM's *Forbidden Planet*, on release at the time. The show emerged as a turning point of British art, with its fusion of popular culture and orthodox abstract art, 'high' and 'low' art, ideology and technology.

Then, an approach from Newnes and Pearson's Women's Magazine group swiftly took del Renzio into the world of fashion publishing, putting him in the role of art editor for a



string of magazines. He did, however, continue at the ICA in a voluntary capacity, serving on exhibition committees, organizing lectures and screening films. In 1957 del Renzio resigned from Newnes and Pearson to become special correspondent to *The Times* in France and Italy for about a year, until, in 1958, he joined *Harper's Bazaar* as art director. There he introduced cutting edge technology, such as photo-litho and Kodalith photographic metamorphosing, as well as New Style regular features. He was simultaneously design consultant to *Encounter* and several French, German and Italian magazines, as well as providing editorial input to *Lilliput* and *Flair*. In 1961 he was appointed designer at *Topic*, but within weeks was transferred to Paris as its correspondent. From there he also contributed to *Apollo* and undertook research at an experimental French television centre, where he worked on aesthetics and the theory of games. A new challenge, transforming the magazine *Novità* into *Vogue Italiana*, took del Renzio to Milan. There he also worked as a journalist for *Time-Life*, authoring many essays on Italian art, architecture, design and film, as well as carrying out extensive research for books on Leonardo da Vinci and Marcel Duchamp. Italy also provided a vent for his artistic vision and he quickly became involved with leading Italian artists, architects, designers, poets and critics in a series of socio-cultural ventures, akin to the former Independent Group.

Milan also provided a tenuous cessation of hostilities with his former adversary, Mesens, who happened to be visiting Italy on a regular basis at the time of del Renzio's stay.² The two met and, according to del Renzio, Mesens made 'various comments and allusions, more often than not, tearful,' that left del Renzio in no doubt that there had been more than a solely intellectual clash all those years before.³ A quarter of a century after the event, del Renzio began to realize that, in part at least, 'the reason for the rift between Mesens and me had been sexual.'⁴ It had been no secret that Mesens had had designs on Ithell Colquhoun, whom del Renzio had married. But, the quasi-confession in Milan brought it home to del Renzio that the truth, 'as I experienced it, was somewhat more complex and derived from the fact that Mesens was a monstrous sexual predator, utterly indifferent to the gender of his prey. Of course, he envied what he thought was my success with women. But, on top of this, he had a homosexual lust for me, which I had found embarrassing and was not disposed to accommodate, least of all his crude efforts at seduction.'⁵

Another outcome of the sojourn in Italy was that, by 1965, del Renzio had started to fulfil his lifelong passion for the silver screen, as he worked increasingly in film and television. Besides designing titles and credits and making advertisements, he wrote scripts and dialogue, directed films and documentaries and even acted, notably in Sergio Leone's 1966 classic western *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo* (poorly translated as 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly'). Then, in 1967 and 1968 del Renzio visited California to lecture on art and media at Berkeley and Santa Cruz and, whilst there, witnessed the San Francisco hippy explosion at first hand, an experience that he recounted in his 1969 book *The Flower Children*. On returning to the UK in 1969, del Renzio continued to lecture at art colleges, including the Chelsea School of Art, the Courtauld Institute and Bath Academy of Art at Corsham. From



1975 to 1980, he was head of the Art History department at Canterbury College of Art. Then, in 1981 he took the post of director of the British Studies Centre of the Institute for American Universities, his final administrative role. From then on, as well as fathering quads at the age of 70, he concentrated on his painting and collage, becoming increasingly innovative as the years passed, particularly with computer-assisted techniques.

At the same time, he returned to the philosophical rumination in which he had been immersed during the surrealist period. He enthusiastically accepted an invitation to speak at a colloquium on surrealism in 1995 and went on to contribute to the published proceedings. In his paper, 'Un Faucon et un vrai,' he not only authoritatively unravelled and evaluated the trajectories proposed by André Breton for the plastic arts, but he also assumed the role of sage and usher of surrealism.⁶ He also resumed his surrealist painting. Yet, these activities, forming a bridge to the events of the 1940s, also opened old wounds and del Renzio increasingly dwelt on the denigration he had suffered fifty years earlier. The Mesens-inspired diatribe, it would seem, had been too brutal to be forgotten. The would-be rescuer of surrealism had, after all, been mocked as 'Ranci del Conno (...) Vomi du Pinceau,'⁷ accused of 'editorial vulgarity,'⁸ described as 'a spam-brained intellectual (...) a buffoon'⁹ and had had his involvement in surrealism likened to the role of 'a tape-worm in a man's intestines.'¹⁰ Particular contempt had come from Maddox, who accused his erstwhile collaborator and friend of 'vomitus outpourings of a moral and aesthetic anxiety [...] dismal wreckage that wants clearing.'¹¹

The expulsion from surrealism had been as humiliating as it had been conclusive and yet del Renzio's conviction to the movement remained unmoved, anchored deep within his psyche. Not surprisingly what had also stayed with him for decades was a sense of deep indignation that silently smouldered below the surface. A volcano, created by calumny and the pain of unrecognized allegiance, was waiting to erupt. In an angry outpouring no more than a few months before his death, del Renzio finally exploded, determined to put the record straight in a last 'manifesto' that would attest to his legitimacy and orthodoxy as a surrealist. Struggling against intermittent memory and stubbornly insisting on a strange, quasi phallic, vertical format, del Renzio published 'Alter Ego and Doppelganger' in late 2006.¹² It was as he lay dying in hospital that I was able to present him with the first copies off the press. In his customary soft-spoken, patrician manner, he smiled with an all too evident satisfied self-fulfilment. He then grasped my hand in a strong handshake, the handshake of a man who had regained his dignity. With his last word, Toni del Renzio had had the last word.



¹ *New Road 1943*, edited by Alex Comfort and John Bayliss (The Grey Walls Press, Billericay, 1943).

² In 1963 del Renzio had moved to Milan from Paris, where he had been living for a year. During the sixties Mesens visited Milan in connection with dealings with galleries. Mesens knew the artists the Pomodoro brothers well, as did del Renzio.

³ Email to the author, 2004.

⁴ Email to the author, 2004.

⁵ Email to the author, 2004.

⁶ Toni del Renzio, 'Un Faucon et un vrai' in Silvano Levy (Ed.) *Surrealism. Surrealist Visuality* (Keele University Press, 1996; New York University Press, 1997), 149-156.

⁷ ELT Mesens & Jacques Brunius, *Idolatry and Confusion* (March 1944).

⁸ Ivor Jacobs, 'Auden Aftermath,' *Horizon*, vol. 8, no. 46, October 1943, 286.

⁹ J.-B. Brunius, E.L.T. Mesens, Roland Penrose, 'Correspondence,' *Horizon*, vol. 8, no. 46, October 1943, 289, recto of back cover. Del Renzio had been shown the letter by Cyril Connolly, the editor, before its publication and had been offered the opportunity to veto its inclusion in *Horizon*. Del Renzio allowed the letter to be published, believing that it would provoke the intervention of Breton in support of the *Arson* and *New Road 1943* initiatives.

¹⁰ Ken Hawkes, 'Epitaph,' *Message from Nowhere* (November 1944), 17.

¹¹ *Message from Nowhere*, 22.

¹² Toni del Renzio, 'Alter Ego and Doppelganger,' *Surrealist Bulletin* (ed. Silvano Levy), no. 1 (Jeffrey Sherwin in association with Northern Artists Gallery, Leeds, October 2006), 16 pp. *Surrealist Bulletin*, No. 2, Desmond Morris 'Dark Inside My Head,' was published in December 2007.



ALTER EGO & DOPPELGÄNGER

Further exploration of the unconscious towards the marches of Dementia Praecox, and confrontation with the precariousness of individuality and the myths of individualism reflected in the fractured mirrors of the marvellous, the subversion of reality by the imagination, the surrealist permanent revolution unleashing the monsters of reason's sweet sleep. When innocence becomes incendiary, sidestepping the exacting censorship of the Super-Ego as it imposes its way upon even its closest and most differential allies in the progress of thought from poetics to the day-to-day banal that would strangle it. In this unconscious domain every element struggles and contributes to a final convulsive beauty.

But this is not a history, however, it is, indeed, on the contrary, the outcome of the passage of surrealism through the cusp of the Millennium into the twenty-first century where fresh tasks await unannounced and unforeseen as Dialectics yield a place to, though are not supplanted by, Analogy.



Toni del Renzio, *Collage 1*, digital composition, 2006



Some sixty years back, more in despair than in hope, I published *Incendiary Innocence*, a somewhat vain, not to say quixotic appeal to surrealists in Britain, then locked into a slide to the depths of an anglo-Belgian secession which most of them were too thick to recognise and for years continued to believe was 'true surrealism' rather than the massaging of Mesens's vanity and pretensions until, one by one, they dropped out and drifted whither, who knows or cares, such reputations as they might have gained, repulsively tarnished. Brunius, who had maintained relations with Breton and the Paris group from before the war, when he first translocated to London, was their only guarantor, a role he more and more found impossible to fulfil! With that pamphlet, I had set out to enunciate a clear statement of the position of surrealism as it had been elaborated by André Breton in New York, along with notions from Georges Henein in Cairo and Nicolas Callas, who had preceded Breton to New York and participated in the group of expatriate European surrealists in that city which had been, for years, so unresponsive to the surrealist message. It was, also, moreover, an attempt to theorise my own position. But what was most remarkable about the surrealist sojourn in New York, its utterly superficial influence, its ephemerality and failure to attract substantial support and the ease with which all signs of it disappeared along with the expatriates, or so it appeared. Indeed, some years on, the formation of a Chicago group seemed only to stress the incompatibility of American ideologies with any surrealist notions and having the appearance of a tenuous sycophancy, run through with mimicry that was only dispersed with the explosion of Penelope Rosemont's remarkably edited anthology of *Women Surrealists* which, in its editorial contributions amounted to as good an account of surrealism to be found and not just in the English language, and, I must confess, has made me regret not having been able to respond as positively as I now would have liked to a series of overtures from Chicago, among which I am most happy to cite Paul Garon and his penetrating skirmishes into the problem of negritude and Black American culture - I was particularly moved by his notion that surrealism constituted for whites something equivalent to negritude. This seems to me to indicate a way forward across the black/white divide that I trust we all will take and that, I firmly think, I have already confronted!

It really does seem to me that, provoked by the experiences of Czech surrealism, along with its fairly frequent texts and proposals, at times, against all the odds, in particular, at the odious hands of Stalinist philistinism and wilful ignorance, amazingly still unrecognised by the sad individuals who, after so many opportunities to change their tunes with their change of instruments to which they have been unquestioningly accustomed and for which, even now, they lack the courage and foresight. And this is even truer in Russia, though there they have to face the all too palpable reality of an American-contrived state denying not just any semblance of democracy but all semblance, of any kind of freedom whatsoever, a situation that inevitably gives rise to notions that things were much better under Stalin, and, of course, in the tinsel wrappings of the USA which neither can nor wants to offer anything conceivably



better while Tony Blair's frivolous interventions can only serve to strengthen such attitudes as they complete the bleak perspective of Western-Style capitalism. Of course, in such a vacuum of political culture many, many scatter-brained, superannuated pseudo-radical ideas feed a native ideology that, strangely, survived the excesses of Stalinism and the curious aftermath that fed on the Cold War. It is, then, not at all to be wondered that a historically purged and, in all other respects, denatured Nihilism should have surfaced and that this infiltrates a fiercely local version of surrealism. It is an urgent task remaining for international surrealism to rescue these Russian Brothers but that demands decisive action against American State power and its unthinking docile pawns. Above all, however, such action must originate within those groups, pathetically few, in the USA that have declared themselves surrealist and, up till now, have yet to perpetrate any really damaging action against the instruments and policies of American State power, to cripple it damningly, say, in its reckless adventurism in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, the whole Middle and Near East, and, indeed wherever a dollar or two can be made at only the cost of a few lives, preferably non-American, or, failing that, Black and Hispanic from the poorest quarters in America where the people are too cowed and illiterate to raise their voices in protest. American surrealists this is your task!



Toni del Renzio, *Collage 5*, digital composition, 2006

It is not, however, the aim of this tract to call for such militancy as to plead for recognition of the profound gap that separates the profession of surrealism from the actions that are necessary to live up to the demands that irrefutably and inevitably proceed from just



such a profession. To call oneself and to be called 'surrealist' can, in no way, supply any excuse or subterfuge to refrain from militant acts of a social and political nature, but on the contrary requires such acts in order to be compatible with the broad tenets of surrealism, no matter how ostensibly a surrealist nature be manifested in them. Any surrealist act must be, at the same time, a fully committed and effective militant one, no more and no less. This is not at all a questionable characteristic, achieved nonchalantly, but a sine qua non of any action whatsoever its context and aimed at whatsoever ends, and not, at all, to be reduced to the level of a duality, that permits the rehabilitation of all or any of the antinomies it is a task of surrealism to expunge. This is, perhaps, the most far-reaching response the *Prague Platform* and all the Czechs' subsequent documents have sought.



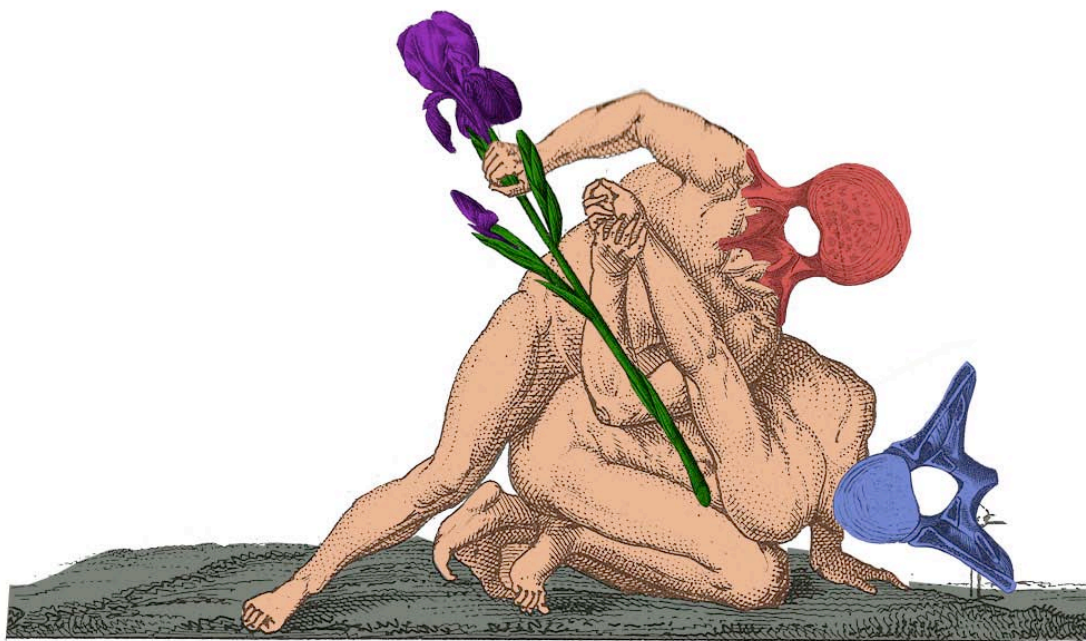
Toni del Renzio, *Collage 3*, digital composition, 2006



Though many of the surrealists abroad and in exile during the Nazi domination of Europe, along with the rump of the many and various European groups, tortured and persecuted, but, in the main, heroically unbowed, professed serious doubts as to the wisdom of a return to Paris of Breton and the core of the movement, they nearly all acquiesced in the *fait accompli* and vigorously challenged the pretensions of Sartre, Camus and the other professed existentialists to the leadership of the Paris intelligentsia in a dishevelled milieu in which it was only the devious machinations of the PCF that could, in any way at all, gain any sort of success, notably engineering the antagonisms, almost all apparent from the first dim post-war years, into a schism of no advantage to anyone beyond earning Sartre, at a critical point, De Gaulle's 'accolade' of 'Voltaire,' the supreme Judas Kiss of twentieth century Paris. The true meaning of this was only to emerge later on though no one, least of all the surrealists, tried to exploit the fact, nor it should be added saw the monumental tactical advantage its use could furnish. Sartre was able to conclude his career, and, for him, the same thing, his life, unaware he carried such a stigma that bled his reputation of respect and credulity, while, more secretly in intent than achievement he had looked to draw support from a less contaminated source, but true to the mixture of vanity and opportunism which hallmarked the frivolities of French intellectuals who, as they flirted with Stalinism, expected it no less from the contaminated cadres of the PCF; but the moment was not opportune since this party was only seriously concerned to sweep away the squalid duplicities of its wartime and immediate post-war record which had repeatedly wrong footed it in its careful plot to position itself as master of the Resistance and architect of the new France that was to rise from the ashes, a tattered phoenix that nobody recognised. For once, the preternatural skills of rewriting history and provoking the mutations of significant failures into glorious victories did not work; but, nevertheless, Breton and his brave band chose not to take that particular bull by the horns, and in a series of international exhibitions, aimed to clarify the surrealist position, redefining, piecemeal, show by show, the long and painful process from pure dialectics towards the epic admission of analogy, in a more rigorous version than hitherto while accommodating it to more social and political tasks. Not for the first, and certainly not for the last time, Breton found himself constrained to invent the formulary appropriate to preserving the unity of the movement while the Paris group faced the threats of schism after schism and seemingly unavoidable splits as the group became more and more infractious, all at a time when the Prague group called them to confront a new definition of the primal aims of surrealism and, as much in response to Prague as to his own inner necessity Breton sought to withdraw from the day-to-day demands of the Paris group whose actions hugely exacerbated the already intolerable situation, with Jean Schuster as designated leader and even put the future of international surrealism in jeopardy. The Czech group more and more assumed the role of animator and producer of innovative agenda despite its own clash on all points with the Stalinists, either home-grown locals or invading Russians who both held the



country in thrall and imposed a pan-Slavist deviation from proletarian ideology that sought to smother and exterminate any sign of cultural dissent. The Czech group survived brutal treatment over yet one more decade. It had already refused to succumb to an earlier decade of Nazi Occupation and persecution despite the horrors which failed to extinguish its spirit, though not without the infliction of quite major damage, the isolation of some of its members from the group's collectivity, victims alike of egocentrism such as had characterised Paul Eluard's retreat, on the eve of the war, to the companionship of Aragon and other renegades though the Czech crises do not appear to have generated quite the same level of traumatic response, but what did come about was a reorientation of surrealism which served to spread the Czech considerations throughout international surrealist circles in which figured even the split and squabbling French group, by now bereft of Breton's hitherto stabilising influence and direction.



Toni del Renzio, *Collage 4*, digital composition, 2006

The confused and confusing set of circumstances that now conspired to test international surrealism achieved a positive effect in provoking the Czech group to produce the *Prague Platform* with the active participation of the Paris group, already sparring over the differences that heralded its fatal fragmentation and submission to events it was powerless to define let alone do anything about or, it seems, did not want to: the imminent Russian invasion and the intellectual clamp-down that was designed to defend the shreds of dissolute Stalinism only worsened the situation. However, the *Prague Platform* did not sink without trace but, rather, as a stone tossed into a pool leaves a surface disturbance of concentric circular waves flowing outwards to splash upon unreceptive shores long after the stone broke



through the surface, and with much the same effect over some twenty years, formulations owing, if not everything, then very much, to that document, appeared, as far as circumstances permitted both in Prague and in Paris, but also in a remarkable set of declarations and manifestoes issued in Havana, at the OLAS conference, and far beyond all this, in some epic statements of Karel Teige and the penetrating comments of Vratislav Effenberger all of which await translation and publication in English which cannot but fail to gain them wider currency along with a virulent denunciation of Stalinism, already an integral part of international surrealist formulations of principles.



Toni del Renzio, *Collage 2*, digital composition, 2006



But it has not been all a production of theoretical principles and necessary critiques, the elaboration of platforms for action. It has been also a time of the production of poetry and works in every medium that have all led to the investigation, in a creative process revealing the structures of the unconscious in which the mind is not just the residence of a simple ego, a unique persona, but, rather, the stomping ground of a number of such entities, perpetually locked in antagonistic co-operation, a collaboration of ever varying complexity and, on most levels, not at all to be reduced to the Freudian triad of the mind's components but equally conversant with them and, with the promptings of automatism, seeking long and short-term phases, to monopolise the mind's expressive means not always without rivalry, antagonism and interference, occasionally the one taking over from the other boisterously with neither entity ready for the change of shift which results in those strange and startling juxtapositions that are sometimes presented to us in dreams and in works simulating dream effects and which are ever absent from the work: of Dalí other than in his most vulgar manner, but supply *Les Chants de Maldoror*, no less, with its astounding structure and gives its marvellous similes their breath-stopping immediacy. This is how beauty is convulsive!

Toni del Renzio

For Lautréamont some months late to celebrate his birthday

August 22nd, 2005

I take this opportunity to express my solidarity with the Prague surrealists, who have, since the Nazis first invaded their country and through the successive waves of Stalinist persecution stared down their oppressors, cost what it may to their persons and ability to pursue the surrealist dream. They never despaired nor submitted, and I hope I would match them, if called upon to stand firm in the face of the enemies of surrealism wheresoever they think they are powerful enough so to do what they will.

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Toni del Renzio

