

I write this out of quarantine, having contracted the COVID-19 coronavirus that's currently permeating the globe. The sickness illustrates clearly a perspective that people tend to downplay: sure, humanity has a pretty sweet greatest hits album featuring The Pyramids and The Great Wall, Peanut M&Ms and the Voyager spacecraft, etc. etc. From the perspective of an enterprising virus, though, the combined mass of humanity is a kind of monkey-bars of meat. Contagion jungle gym. Taint ball pit.

At moments during isolation, I've experienced a kind of expansive, hallucinatory sense of sick-connect. It begins with a visual image of the planet's overwhelming system of nearly 8 billion humans, with a pinkish tint coursing through it—in this mind-movie, I guess I'm floating in outer space, viewing the blue marble of the planet from a distance, as a lightly pulsating color-burst of infection spreads across the continents. Along with the visual element of this experience, there's an accompanying pressure in my body, a kind of outward flex that I feel in my quadriceps muscles, oddly, as if I might weakly blossom up from the waist into some ill flower with nauseous stamen-arms flailing out to connect, transmit.

“Surreal” has become a regular word, used in just about any context. That dress is surreal. These crepes are surreal. That tiger dude's hair is, like... surreal, seriously. The word was invented just about a hundred years ago—it means, literally, *above* or *beyond* the real—by a bunch of artists in France who were sick of watching all cultural ingenuity ultimately employed in the production of war. Tristan Tzara, the mouthpiece of Surrealism's freaky cousin, Dada, put it best: “if I say ‘ideal, ideal, ideal,’ and ‘knowledge, knowledge, knowledge,’ and then ‘boomboom, boomboom, boomboom,’ I've provided a pretty faithful version of progress, law, morality, and all the other fine qualities that various highly intelligent men have discussed in books.”

What philosophers had been calling “The Enlightenment,” basically, was the systematic process of inventing atomic bombs.

The goal of surrealist art was to shake that system, those structures, break on through to another side where some life might exist beyond the complicity of mainstream technological production, something “as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table” (André Breton). Whoa, right? Encounters with the strange, chance occurrences, bizarre imagery—these could refresh the human imagination and enable new ways of thinking, which might carry us beyond the mere replication of violent “civilization.” (Obviously, though, the sewing machine is there to affix a tiny explosive device in the point of the umbrella, and then sew the umbrella shut so Doctor Strangelove can launch it in a sneak attack against the Podiatry department across the lobby from General Surgery. Boomboom.)

The Surrealist movement took place in the late 1920s / early 1930s, so... before the micro-chip, and fiber optics, satellites, wi-fi, cellular, drones. Ninety years later, we can bomb people remotely from halfway around the world. What's more technologically horrifying than the view from a camera mounted on a missile as it descends on a city block? Hand-in-hand with those military applications came really cool drone cameras for shooting high-end wedding videos. And advanced phones on which, just this morning, I took a virtual tour of an upside-down house in South Africa—yes, the toilets were empty—read about Colombian hippos that were jammed full of cocaine for smuggling, watched a dog named Gus tear up the trick route at a hoity-toity English dog show—ejected from the contest, his tail never stopped wagging—and heard five Canadians perform their national anthem at the bottom of a mineshaft, becoming the lowest altitude musical group in known human history. Meanwhile, in Italy, overwhelmed hospitals gave up trying to treat COVID-

19 victims over age 60, even if they were suffering severe respiratory symptoms. 400 people died overnight.

What's the art of a world like this? Once surrealism is clearly manifest as the *reality* of the world, how does art push forward? It's always the urgent question for artists in all times, in all situations: *what's next?*

I wish I had an answer—a positive contribution to the forward progression of culture. Honestly, though, I haven't been feeling like writing much. I'm among the lucky patients whose symptoms of the virus are mild, but one of the more pronounced ones is *anomie*—a kind of despair at the efficacy of any action. I can't quite find the existential conviction it takes to meet a global pandemic with a scribbled image, or an articulated perception, much as I ordinarily value those elements of my art form. I try to remind myself of the great writers and artists who produced signature works during hard times. There's the famous quote from Bertolt Brecht, who escaped into exile from the Third Reich: "In the dark times will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times." Frida Kahlo's first burst of mature paintings came during an extended period of bed-ridden convalescence after a bus accident. After decades of wild living, Ingmar Bergman chose to isolate himself on a small island, where he worked every day with intense discipline on his art.

But my favorite story is that of the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who coined the phrase *heteroglossia* to describe the way that literature—any human utterance, really—is comprised of many voices, personal, historical, and cultural. The Bakhtin story that I love goes like this: first, the young, ambitious Russian scholar wrote an exhaustive book-length study of the literary Bildungsroman, a text that would, he hoped, secure his place among the prominent literary theorists of his time. Then, after completing the manuscript, he used the pages of its only copy for rolling papers so that he could smoke during the World War II depression in Leningrad. For me, that's the story that really captures the optimism and fatalism of being human. Part of you wants to say something to honor the genius of the species. But then another part knows that you might as well smoke it. It's gonna burn eventually anyway.