

*Surrealism and Ethnography*  
*Introduction*

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*You admire the delightful variety, the inexhaustible riches of nature. You do not demand that the rose should smell like the violet, but must the greatest riches of all, the spirit, exist in only one variety?*

Karl Marx

The editorial premise of the *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* is to construct and expand the critical terrain regarding the relations of art history and anthropology and their conflicts, and to move between and beyond disciplinary boundaries. It provides a forum for new voices on the core themes of the interaction of Europeans and Americans with indigenous peoples of the Americas, the development of Surrealism in the Americas, and the reactions of indigenous writers, artists and other practitioners to the movement. This second issue of the journal, devoted to Surrealism and ethnography, speaks directly to that premise and opens the way for debate.

As the first issue evidenced, there is a wealth of new scholarship in the most global sense and that is again proven in the collection of essays included here. In these essays, documentation and evidence garnered through careful investigative research live side by side with, broaden, and correct the important political and theoretical observations that have dominated the past generation of art history.

I believe that the keynote essay of this issue is to be found in “Totemic Landscapes and Vanishing Cultures Through the Eyes of Wolfgang Paalen and Kurt Seligmann,” graciously contributed by Marie Mauzé, senior researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Laboratoire d’anthropologie sociale, Paris. Written from the point of view of an ethnographer, it combines diligent observation and study with an appreciation of the artist. This holds as true for the art of the Surrealists—be it literary, visual, or theatrical—as for the art of the Northwest Coast

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Native American societies, which they admired. One of the most telling quotes in the essay comes from Bill Reid, a well-known contemporary Haida artist versed in the tradition of his culture:

One characteristic of Northwest Coast art is paradoxical: things were very functional, yet function was never permitted to interfere with aesthetics. [...] The sea produced the aesthetic because not only the canoe had to be functional, it had to be beautiful too [...] If it looks good, it's good.

As Mauzé explains:

For an object to be “right” is to be “well made” in the sense that the design or figure carved on it should be imbued with some kind of charge that gives life and power to the images which in turn exercise agency and affect the people who will be in contact with that object.

In Bill Reid's account, however, the aesthetic derives from nature rather than from the human order and is regarded as empowered. This empowerment, or aura, is the essence around which all human activity and symbolism—e.g. culture—are organized, or inversely, eroded.

As Walter Benjamin says, “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition,” and the loss of aura results in “the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.” In the natural world, he continues, “We define aura...as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be,” likening it to the haze perceived on a distant mountain range, or the shadow cast on you by a branch.<sup>1</sup> The Surrealists recognized aura in indigenous objects and craved the society that indigenous people shared, seeking to retrieve these for their own art and from the wreckage of modernity.

Many postmodern critics and, following suit, artists, agreed with Benjamin's assessment that with the advent of mechanical reproducibility (and photography and film), the original (or author) is worn down, eliminating the artist and leading to “decay” of aura. Benjamin considered the latter “the destructive, cathartic aspect” that is the necessary complement to the social significance of the aura's loss, wherein “the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, [and] the total function of art is reversed.” Instead of being based on ritual, he says, “... [art] begins to be based on another practice – politics... ,” freed from ritual and cult

(whether magical, religious, or secular)—“the location of its original use value.” But one must question whether “the resulting change in the function of art” of which he speaks is altogether desirable. The loss of aura has produced a simulacrum of art and discourse (or a “simulacral aura” as described by one writer<sup>2</sup>) that is the woe of modern culture—something the Surrealists themselves proscribed. And the “distraction” typically associated with mass consumption of new art forms (and which also concerned Adorno), seems to have careened off the progressive course that Benjamin envisioned, resulting in a parallel decay of culture, nature and aura. Native Americans, on whom we focus so intensely in this issue, remain the carriers and messengers of cultures and wisdom that the Surrealists intensely pursued, in which aura has not died because it is not in service of an anthropocentric worldview. Mauzé’s paper makes us aware of this wisdom, and of its indomitable resistance to repression through the ages.

Benjamin also commented that all the splendor of civilization comes at the cost of barbarity. Keith Jordan’s essay “Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Legacy of Colonialism: The Good, the (Revalued) Bad, and the Ugly” tells us about some of the misconceptions and distortions that we, through the lens of the Surrealists, are made to look at squarely. As Jordan indicates, even while problematizing them, in their use of Mesoamerican images and ideas, the Surrealists perpetuated evolutionary, psychoanalytic, and primitivist stereotypes of Native American societies, which he traces as far back as discourses and images that originated in early colonialism. Regardless of their positioning such representations vacillated “between the demonic barbarian and the Noble Savage”: utopian in Artaud; essentialist and romanticizing in Breton; inverted in Bataille—savagery as positive, necessary for revolutionary change; or, as in the work of Wolfgang Paalen, “...a paradoxical combination of awareness of the pitfalls of primitivism combined with a tendency towards an idealizing vision of Native American cultures.” This latter existential paradox—or “predicament,” as James Clifford has described it—largely continues to be our own. Still, in the example of Kurt Seligmann, discussed by Mauzé, there is one exception. In contrast to the practice of all the other Surrealists, Seligmann acted as an ethnographer in his 1938 journey to the Pacific Northwest to acquire a totem pole for the Musée de l’Homme from the Gitksan community of Tsimshian Indians. While some shortsightedness about the “living” versus the “vanishing” status of these Native Americans marred his vision, his practice was “honest and reputable.”<sup>3</sup>

Neither does Jordan neglect the bloody political, cultural and hieratic realities and rituals of pre-Columbian societies—sometimes grim in their belief systems. Ex-

aming them in the contexts of use and idealization by various Surrealists, he compares them side-by-side with current ethnographic thinking. This further helps to dispel long-held misconceptions and stereotypes into which his essay makes inroads. But all this frankness should not deaden our sensitivity and morality, or deflect us from pursuit of a clearer vision. The Surrealists, in their particular contexts—of war, Stalinism, and the triumph of Fascism—had increasingly turned away from such a vision “...to[ward] myth and mysticism.” As Jordan notes, this trope was not “an adjunct to Marxism” but “an alternative.”

In 1942, Wolfgang Paalen appealed to Breton to change the tenets of Surrealism, saying that the error of Marxism was its embrace of a materialist metaphysics, and that the deficiency of art, for all its quality, was its embrace of an idealist metaphysics that refused to assimilate the value of the materialism of science and thereby achieve an “objective morality.”<sup>4</sup> Still, for all its flaws, perhaps the strength of Surrealism lies in its ability to see from “inside the bubble,” and to see “around and within [oneself].”<sup>5</sup>

This brings us to the work of Man Ray, whose imaginary journey, as described in Wendy Grossman’s informative essay “Lost and Found: Man Ray’s Photographs of Arts of the Americas in Context,” transformed the ethnographic object into the Surrealist “other.” As Grossman states, in doing so, Man Ray “introduced new ways of perceiving such objects and played a key role in their transformation from artifact to art in Western eyes.” Her examination of his photographs focuses on “the context in which they appear rather than any intrinsic aesthetic quality that frequently defines them.” Further investigation and consideration of the effect of these transformations of artifacts into art would help to evaluate the positive as well as negative value of the reception of “primitive” arts and cultures and the role played by Man Ray and other artists in this context.

In “Surrealism and Inuit Art: The Fascination of the Far North,” Florence Duchemin Pelletier takes us on another journey, to the territory and Western imaginary of the Far North of the Americas, the very edges of not just the continents but also the globe. As she says: “In their quest to renew appropriate sources to support their vision of the world, the movement...followed their fascination, from one end of the globe to the other, all the way to the Far North...” impressed not only by the “aesthetic and plastic inventiveness [of its inhabitants], but also by their poetry and black humor.” Like Jordan, her invaluable survey of the history and contexts in which indigenous peoples were received, perceived, and represented serves as a foundation for a further exploration: of the poetry and humor of the “Eskimo” themselves, which, Duchemin Pelletier submits, helped them to transcend their pre-

carious and harsh life and to overcome the fear of death. As she also reports, Breton planned a volume of this literature, but it was never realized.

The theme of overcoming formidable obstacles and death is historically appropriate for the Surrealist *entre-guerres* generation and is well-examined by Susan Power in “Bound Objects and Boundaries: Surrealist Display and (Anti)Nationalism.” Unraveling Surrealism and its motives—from poetry (whether visual, object-based or textual) to politics, science, ethnology, philosophy and esotericism—is rather like untangling Duchamp’s *16 Miles of String*, discussed in Power’s essay. Power emphasizes the labyrinthine interlacing of identities in culture, history, and context that collided in the 1942 “First Papers of Surrealism” exhibition, held in New York at the moment of the Surrealist exile to America during the Second World War. In doing so, she reveals the complexity of Surrealist display as an “ideological battlefield” that served to interrogate and loosen fixed categories of “identity, place and nation,” in order to “...examine the web of ideological, institutional and individual interests in which Native American objects were caught.” She furthermore posits international Surrealist exhibitions as “contact zones,” defined as “in-between space[s] of ‘dwelling in travel’ [...] borderless spatial construct[s] enacting the complexity and dynamism of the Surrealist project.”

As with other recent critiques of Surrealist colonialism, Mauzé and Jordan’s critiques of “ethnographic surrealism” are necessary correctives to the blindness, if not folly, of the Surrealist project and its times. Some Surrealist aims grew out of wishful projections of desire and a lingering Romanticism, or resulted from nascent archaeological findings and technologies; some were due to circumstance and chance. Fanciful as it may have been, the Surrealist interest in the ritual function and power of masks, about which Power speaks, problematizes strictly material interpretations of the Surrealist mission. This can also be said about their transhistorical and transnational project that would expel or leap over boundaries of race, class and (least of all) gender. Such readings deconstruct its shortcomings and assimilate it to other Western appropriation—agendas or bourgeois, status quo projections. As Power notes, Amanda Stansell has argued that the apparent contradictions of Surrealist politics and collecting practices, at once opposing and unconsciously perpetuating the colonialist discourse of their day, nonetheless had far-reaching implications for destabilizing and exposing racial constructs.<sup>6</sup> And, as Stansell also indicates, “the Surrealists recognized and acknowledged their own compromised Western position regarding primitivism in texts such as ‘Murderous Humanitarianism.’”<sup>7</sup> It is a reflection of the convolutions of modernity and its legacy—a severely compromised state of humanity and nature—that Surrealism both internalized and mirrored its times.

This may help us to appreciate the contradictions, complexities, and insights of the movement examined in this issue's collection of essays.

Together these papers argue for a complement of the qualities of artist, poet, and the keen method of the scientist. This mixture of qualities had already been suggested by Paalen, who went well beyond C.P. Snow's landmark postwar essay, "The Two Cultures." Snow maintained that the isolation of the "two cultures" of modern society—the sciences and the humanities—was a major hindrance to solving the world's problems.<sup>8</sup> In the face of dire realities, the Surrealist pursuit of science finally fell short of its own promise, turning away from the value and poetics of the natural world, and toward metaphysics. Perhaps that path can again be profitably pursued, as in this journal's current itinerary—one that follows Surrealism in the Americas.

1 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1936)," in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 217-52.

2 Charlie Bertsch, "The Aura and its Simulacral Double: Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art," *Critical Sense: A Journal of Political and Cultural Theory*, 4:2 (Fall 1996): <http://criticalsense.berkeley.edu/archive/fall1996/bertsch.pdf>.

3 Marie Mauzé, "Totemic Landscapes and Vanishing Cultures," in this issue.

4 See my discussion of Paalen's philosophy in *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde* (London and Westport: Praeger, 2002).

5 André Breton, "Un homme à la croisée des grands chemins," in *Wolfgang Paalen*, Galerie Pierre (Paris: 1951).

6 Amanda Stansell, "Surrealist Racial Politics at the Borders of 'Reason': Whiteness, Primitivism and Négritude," in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, eds. Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003), 111-126.

7 Power paraphrasing Stansell, "Surrealist Racial Politics at the Borders of 'Reason,'" 119-120.

8 C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1998, with an introduction by Stefan Collini), first delivered as a Rede Lecture at Cambridge University in 1959. On Wolfgang Paalen's ideas see Paalen's essay "Art and Science," *DYN* 3 (Fall 1942): 4-9; and Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist*, particularly "Romanticism and Science," "Complementarity and Dualism," 9-17; and "Art and Science," 143-51. See also Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science, Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).