

*Introduction to the Issue and  
Special Section on Native American Surrealisms*

Claudia Mesch  
Arizona State University

W. Jackson Rushing III  
University of Oklahoma

European and American Surrealists had a primitivist desire for Native American art that has been carefully considered in the literature. In a “Kublerian” sense, surrealist fantasizing about and fetishizing of indigenous American art remains an “open sequence,” as witnessed by a recent Parisian exhibition, “Esprit Kachina” (Galerie Flak, 2003). In *The Shape of Time* (1962) George Kubler theorized that “the problem disclosed by any sequence of artifacts [e.g., Native-inspired surrealist primitivism] may be regarded as its mental form, and the linked solutions as its class of being.” In a friendly amendment we propose that curation and art criticism are also constituent elements of the “class of being,” and that surrealist primitivism and the indigenous interrogation of it is an open sequence. The poetic and Freudian romanticism of some of the texts in the catalogue of “Esprit Kachina” could be categorized as anachronistic, were it not for the hegemonic hubris made manifest when seventy Katsina masks were auctioned in Paris this year by Neret-Minet Tessler and Sarrou, in spite of vigorous protests by Hopi leaders. The concern here, however, is with an anti-colonial intervention: the claiming of Surrealism by modern and contemporary Native American artists. Thus, paraphrasing Kubler, surrealist (anti-)primitivism is an open sequence “because its possibilities are still being expanded by living artists.”<sup>1</sup>

In a strategic reversal of what James Clifford has called “ethnographic Surrealism,” Native artists have both adopted and investigated Surrealist styles and concepts. The earliest documented example of this curious and complicated process

W. Jackson Rushing III: [jackson\\_rushing@ou.edu](mailto:jackson_rushing@ou.edu); Claudia Mesch: [claudia.mesch@asu.edu](mailto:claudia.mesch@asu.edu)

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is found in the work of George Morrison (Chippewa, 1919–2000), who utilized *écriture automatique* in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In addition to his exposure to surrealist creative principles in New York and Paris, beginning circa 1954 Morrison underwent three years of psychoanalysis after the dissolution of his first marriage. Morrison understood and appreciated the link between automatism and Freudian associative thinking, as he made clear in his memoir. In the 1980s and 1990s Morrison returned again to surrealist techniques in numerous small drawings of shore/water/sky at Lake Superior on the Grand Portage Indian Reservation.

Morrison, then, established the terrain this issue sets out to illuminate; that is, the nature of the relationship between modernism in the Americas and Surrealism, as it has been pursued by Native American artists into the present, and also by the Peruvian artist César Moro in the '30s and '40s. How have Native and specific Latin American artists understood their relation to Surrealism? What patterns of transculturation can be tracked when Native artists, now as subjects of art history, take up the tools of Surrealism? How have art history and key museum institutions construed this complex relationship? How do the “Other” Surrealisms of Native and Latin American artists in the Americas recast our understanding of an earlier European movement, but more importantly, how might we construct “Other Surrealisms” as autonomous in their own right?

Morrison was not alone among Native artists of the time who embraced or experimented with aspects of (European) Surrealism. The artists Chief Terry Saul (Choctaw), Richard “Dick” West (Cheyenne), and Oscar Howe (Dakota) all studied at the University of Oklahoma in the late 1940s; they, too, began to explore new modes by which they went beyond what was at the time accepted as appropriate to Native painting. Mark A. White’s essay considers the 1940s works of these artists, while also pointing to the importance of the collections of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art during their studies at Oklahoma, where the work of William Baziotis, Byron Browne, Charles Howard, and Adolph Gottlieb in the museum collections likely influenced their turn to experiment with modernist form.

As Robert Silberman argues in his essay in this issue, however, it is erroneous to think that Surrealism’s stylistic influence flowed in only one direction, from European artists to Native or South American artists; this greatly oversimplifies the complex patterns of transculturation that characterize modernism generally and Surrealism specifically. Already in the early years of the 1920s the surrealist circle in France came to the forms that dominated their art by way of the visual culture of Native Americans. Native and Latin American artists—not the exhibitions, artworks, and collections of European Surrealists—have realized the postcolonial resonance of Surrealism. The wave of the reappropriation of Surrealism continues, as it can

also be seen in the work of other contemporary Woodland artists, including Frank Big Bear (Anishinaabe), his son Star Wallowing Bull, Andrea Carlson (Anishinaabe), Jim Denomie (Ojibwe), and Julie Buffalohead (Ponca). Silberman also notes how these artists have incorporated mass culture references and a post-Pop style in their work. Thus in spite of their common awareness of Morrison's spirit-vision, their styles are autonomous, and all have strong exhibition histories.

From Peru, the poet and artist César Moro traveled to Paris in the 1920s to study and be part of the avant-garde; he met Breton and others in the surrealist circle before returning to Lima. In her contribution to this issue, Michele Greet suggests that Moro was a key interpreter of both modernism and Surrealism in that he brought both to Peru, where Indigenism was a current ideology in the 1930s. *Indigenismo* made public acceptance of modernist tendencies from Europe difficult there. Greet examines Moro's artworks, as well as his key surrealist exhibitions: the first surrealist exhibition to take place in Latin America, at the Academia Alcedo in Lima in 1935; and the other, the "Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo" in Mexico City. Both made him a key agent in the globalizing of Surrealism in the first part of the twentieth century.

The beautiful title of Mary Modeen's essay on Jimmie Durham points to Durham's childhood refashioning of language such that opposites—the most extreme version of difference in language—are used to render language as a system of meaning "fluid," pry it away from established codes, and propel it into a new one that is "strange" in a sense that parallels the Surrealists' ambition to reconfigure language and dominant sign systems. Durham, of Cherokee ancestry, deals explicitly with the object, the medium which Breton, Dalí, and others theorized through the critical lens that the "primitive" or ethnographic object provided for them. Durham recalibrates the found object, and possibly also the readymade, in his art. Like the Surrealists, he is a powerful theorist. Durham's description of his process of questioning the "authenticity" of the Native object—the "search for virginity"—references aspects of desire, or even an erotics of the object. Surely the Surrealists would have been enthusiastic about such a venture.

Finally Charlotte Townsend-Gault considers the Vancouver Art Gallery's exploration of the "persistence of the surreal" that surrounds Northwest Coast Native art in the recent exhibition "The Colour of My Dreams: the Surrealist Revolution in Art." She points to the considerable legacies of the historical involvement of Surrealism with the Northwest Coast. Artworks by Sonny Assu (We Wai Kai First Nation) and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (Coast Salish) contain reappropriations that serve to contest these legacies of Surrealism. Townsend-Gault also illuminates the Surrealists' involvement in and influence upon the discursive

economy around Northwest Coast indigenous art: not only the objects, but even these discourses, were “surrealized.” But, as she states, the Surrealists’ passion for Northwest Coast objects placed the plight and the actual life of Native Americans there firmly in a blind spot, one from which we are still extricating ourselves.

The ambitious and complex essays in this issue of the *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, which constitute the first scholarly probing of Native American Surrealisms, have opened wider a previously narrow discursive space. Despite the differences in the terrain, artistic strategies, and stylistic periods the authors consider, they share a methodological unity characterized by a series of key concepts and practices: recovery and documentation; colonization and autonomy; internationalism and indigeneity; and intervention/reversal. And in a logical and unrehearsed refusal of essentialism, the claims of the essays are heterogeneous and perhaps even contradictory, as befits the subject matter.

1 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 33, 35.