

Introduction to the Special Issue on Max Ernst

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As we celebrate over ten years of the *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, it seems appropriate to dedicate an issue to Max Ernst. Not only was he one of the most prominent members of the surrealist movement to seek exile in America during the second World War, but unlike many of his European colleagues, he decided to stay. He lived and worked for over a decade in the U.S., married the American artist Dorothea Tanning, eventually achieved U.S. citizenship, and engaged in significant ways with indigenous, avant-garde and popular American art and cultures. We, the editors of the *JSA*, could add that his presence in Arizona catalyzed this whole endeavor. In March of 2004, Claudia Mesch invited me to present my research on Ernst in Arizona at a symposium titled, “Sites of Surrealism: Reconsidering the Ernst/Tanning House in Sedona,” at the Arizona State University Art Museum. Our conversation and subsequent collaboration resulted in a larger conference at Arizona State University on Surrealism and the American West in 2006 and the first issue of the *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* in 2007.

Throughout the existence of the journal, we have been honored to welcome guest editors who have shared their expertise and enthusiasm on a wide range of special topics—from surrealist photography to surrealist women; from Latin American Surrealism to ethnography and film. However, we have yet to devote an entire issue to a single artist. To some extent this editorial decision reflects contemporary trends in scholarship as it moves away from the cult of personalities, as well as our desire to encourage new directions in research. Yet one must admit that, for all the emphasis on group identification and collaborative activity, Surrealism attracted and produced some remarkably rich artistic personalities.

Admittedly, in terms of surrealist characters, Salvador Dalí first comes to mind, and he certainly rivals Ernst for prominence in the U.S. I am confident that

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a Dalí issue exists in the journal's future. However, by singling out Ernst, we follow historical precedent. Ernst was the first Surrealist to merit a special issue of the American magazine *View* in April 1942. That special issue orchestrated Ernst's introduction to the American public as an artistic shaman/magician, gifted with the ability to transcend geographical and cultural difference. This special issue of the *JSA* problematizes that coherent narrative. If the *View* issue collated fragments of the artist's life and art into a thematic whole, this issue of the *JSA* divides this narrative into discrete sections and then approaches these fragments from surprising perspectives. To use a Freudian analogy, one could say these scholars approach the dreamwork by isolating elements and exploring the background thoughts of each, which according to Freud, constitutes the proper method of dream analysis. Apropos Ernst, this strategy resonates not only due to his own engagement with Freudian theory, but also in relation to the mythic overtones of his American experience.

Despite their divergent paths, the essays in this issue, by necessity, crisscross over shared ground and rely on a core set of sources. Central to any discussion of this history are Ernst's various revised and embroidered autobiographical accounts, as well as those of Tanning, his son Jimmy, and Peggy Guggenheim. Despite the authors' different agendas, these texts reinforce each other and agree on salient aspects of the story. Many photographs, artworks and creative representations of Ernst produced by his friends and colleagues also play a significant role in both historical documentation and creative fabrication; for example, the *View* magazine issue and the provocative photographs taken by Lee Miller in Sedona. Supplementing the canonical works on Surrealism in America by Martica Sawin and Dickran Tashjian are several groundbreaking articles on the Surrealists' and Ernst's engagement with Native American art by Elizabeth Cowling and Sigrid Metken, respectively. My own work on Ernst in Arizona relied heavily on that of Evan Maurer and Charlotte Stokes, particularly her articles, "The Thirteenth Chair: Max Ernst's *Capricorn*," and "Magus in New York: Max Ernst 1942."¹ As this body of biographical, autobiographical, scholarly, critical and creative work attests, whether perceived ironically or romantically, Ernst's American saga includes a self-identification as a shaman or magician, the enthusiastic collecting of Native American art, an experience of "objective chance" which establishes a psychological connection to the magnificent Arizona landscape, and the desire to find a place of inspiration and refuge after an intensely anxious period of multiple incarcerations and escapes in France as an "enemy alien." At least one, or more, of these known elements weave in and out of each of the essays presented here. Yet, in terms of "background" thoughts, these essays offer a variety of new directions and interpretive contexts.

Along with the photographs and texts that support it, Ernst's own compelling narrative of exile and discovery tends to eclipse the actual art that he

produced in America between 1941 and 1953. While I attempted to redress this oversight in my 2010 article by offering an analysis of *Europe After the Rain II*, 1940-42, as well as an extended discussion of Ernst's Arizona landscapes, admittedly, the first half of my article focused more on Ernst's mimetic performance of "playing Indian." Werner Spies wrote extensively on Ernst's *Vox Angelica*, 1943, and Stokes on his sculpture *Capricorn*, 1948; but aside from these examples, Ernst's art often takes a backseat to the colorful persona he constructed, his various love affairs, and the autobiographical accounts of his and Tanning's life in New York and Sedona.² For this reason, I am especially delighted that two of the articles presented here spotlight some of these relatively neglected works.

In "Napoleon in the Wilderness, the Transmogrification of a Picture by Max Ernst," Martin Schieder hones in on the first of several canvases, begun in Europe, that the artist completed after arriving in the states. The structure of Schieder's essay mirrors the painting itself as a work of condensation: superimposing the figures of Napoleon, Victor Hugo and Ernst through the common denominator of exile. This layering of figures positions Ernst as an heir to the Romantic tradition represented by Hugo, in which immersion in nature overcomes individual feelings of isolation and alienation. Schieder's analysis links this painting more closely with *Europe After the Rain II*, especially in its expression of ambiguity towards both Europe and America. Using archives from the U.S. Holocaust Museum, Schieder grounds the work in the real context of exile; he writes, "against the backdrop of this existential turning point it becomes clear how *Napoleon in the Wilderness*—at once Ernst's last European and first American work—reflects the most recent experience of escape and exile as well as the unhappy relationship with Leonora Carrington. The two-fold loss—that of the homeland and of the lover—resounds in the painting." He concludes by citing various voices speaking at the time on the cultural effects of emigration, a discussion which continues to occupy the pages of this journal.

In "Seeing Through an (American) Temperament: Max Ernst's Microbes, 1946-1953," Danielle Johnson considers a large group of very tiny images that Ernst produced while living in Sedona. Her essay includes discussion of their production, publication and exhibition history, the contemporary critical response, and a review of the scholarship. In Freudian terms, if *Napoleon in the Wilderness* can be understood as a work of "condensation," then surely Ernst's Microbes engage in "representation by the opposite," or by "something small." Johnson explores Ernst's pure contrariness, producing tiny works while living in such an expansive environment and during a time when American artists turned to large-scale abstract painting. She writes, "the sheer strangeness of the scale and the challenge of encapsulating entire worlds into such a tiny format would have appealed to his inventive nature." Johnson cites archival materials, documenting, among other things, a surprisingly positive critical response. Her essay convinces that these works deserve a more prominent place in Ernst's oeuvre than they have received.

The other three essays included in this issue each represent a unique response to the mythic narrative surrounding Ernst's life in Arizona. Carolyn Butler Palmer's "Max Ernst and the Aesthetic of Commercial Tourism: *Max Among Some of His Favorite Dolls*," situates Ernst's collecting within the expanded historical context of the commercial production of Native American artifacts for the tourist trade. Citing the famous image of Ernst and his kachina collection taken by James Thrall Soby and reproduced in *View*, she argues, "the collecting practices of Surrealists, and those in particular of Ernst as displayed in the features of *Max Among Some of His Favorite Dolls*, are largely informed by the development of the commercial tourist industry of the Southwest region of the United States." Butler Palmer's essay offers a needed corrective and reminder on several scores. For one, despite his familiarity with contemporary ethnography, Ernst still played a role closer to that of enthusiastic tourist and souvenir shopper. On their renowned cross-country trip "the Ernst-Guggenheim family members behaved like many other tourists motoring through the Southwest." Butler Palmer also reminds us that the reproduction of these photographs continues to appropriate Native American art within a Eurocentric context.

If Ernst's embrace of Native American art as timeless and mythic elides its historicity, it seems apropos that contemporary artist Maxime Rossi likewise appropriates Ernst's art and life in Arizona as part of a larger mythology. In "Arizona Dream: Maxime Rossi meets Max Ernst," Julia Drost discusses the French video artist's *Real Estate Astrology*, produced in 2015, in terms of a series of geographic and temporal displacements. Rossi's attempt to follow Ernst's path is not only distanced by time and space, but also mediated by a series of documentary representations such as a film by Peter Schamoni and photographs by Lee Miller. Rossi's work appears as a fitting homage to Ernst in its evident "joy in deception and false trails." Drost concludes that "the disconcerting and unsettling of the viewer with incoherence, the anaglyph combination of images that are otherwise not seen together—all are stylistic means borrowed from Surrealism, and through technology, are imported into the twenty-first century."

Finally, Catriona McAra shifts focus from Ernst to Dorothea Tanning in "Glowing Like Phosphorus: Dorothea Tanning and the Sedona Western." Her reading of the subliminal presence of American Westerns infiltrating Tanning's Gothic aesthetic expands our understanding of the historical and cultural context in which Ernst and Tanning lived and worked. Their sojourn in Arizona overlapped with the production of iconic Hollywood westerns, often shot on location and in close proximity to their home. Within Tanning's work McAra notes: "Here the Western is not merely a touchstone, rather an active intertext that Tanning performs and lives, interrogating the genre through the textures and luminous topographies of her work." Her discussion reveals how the cinematic fantasy of the American western aligns more closely to Surrealism than one might imagine. Reading

McAra's paper, I could not help thinking about the HBO series *Westworld* and the susceptibility of the mythos of the American West to the invasion of surrealist elements such as the expression of transgressive desires, the uncanny, the outmoded, the fetishistic, and the marvelous.

Over ten years ago, when I first approached the topic of "Max Ernst in Arizona" I framed it in terms of surrealist juxtaposition: incongruous and rather humorous. I read the mythic elements of the narrative first presented in *View* magazine and extended through multiple images and texts, as part of a strategy, devised by Ernst and his colleagues, to conceal difference in a manner analogous to Ernst's practice of masking the seams in his collages to create an illusionary whole. While I found it poignant and rather sad that his enthusiastic attempt to carve out a new American existence failed, I viewed that failure as the logical outcome of an absurd juxtaposition. However, I have become fairly convinced that Ernst did not view the mythic ability of the American West and of Native American art to collapse cultural difference as a mirage. His sense of humor and awareness of irony qualifies, but does not discount, his belief in an authentic connection to a place and his emotional embrace of Native American cultures. Ernst identified with the Freudian hysteric after the first World War for her paradoxical ability to authentically simulate. He adopted the persona of a Native American shaman during the second World War for similar reasons. In the introduction to his 1993 study, *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig considers the paradox of the authentic copy within both anthropological and postmodern contexts. To paraphrase, he suggests that even as we accept the constructed nature of our world, we still live it as real. Like the guests in *Westworld*, Ernst constructed his own Western fantasy, and projected his own desires on the landscape, collapsing the differences between desire and reality, facsimile and authenticity.

In 1965, long after returning to Europe, Ernst produced a collage titled *The Ascension of Mickey* in which Disney's mouse rises over an earthbound kachina doll. It offers an apparently negative assessment of a U.S. culture in which kitsch supersedes authentic and spiritual expression. Ernst's gesture seems even more audacious than contemporary American Pop Art in its blatant appropriation of the work of other artists. By equating the kachina with Mickey, does Ernst signal awareness that the kachina was manufactured for commercial sale as well? And that he understands both as contemporary American artifacts? Or, did he truly view the kachina as the embodiment of a "universal primitive" echoed in his own atavistic unconscious? And how might this differ from Ernst's lifelong artistic practice of appropriation? After all, in his collage novels constructed from nineteenth century engravings, Ernst purposely concealed the signatures of the original artists. In any case, even while exposing some of these seams, this special issue of the *JSA* attests to the richness and significance of the artistic work, mythic representations, and cultural dialogue Ernst engaged in during his years in New York and Arizona. Maybe Ernst's presence

in the U.S. should not be described as a juxtaposition of dissimilar elements. It might be more accurately understood as a reciprocal intervention between an artistic chameleon and a multifaceted environment.

1 Evan M. Maurer, "In Quest of the Myth: An Investigation of the Relationships between Surrealism and Primitivism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1974). Charlotte Stokes, "The Thirteenth Chair: Max Ernst's *Capricorn*," *Arts Magazine* 62 (October 1987): 88-93 and "Magus in New York: Max Ernst 1942," *Odyssey* 5 (December 1982): 36-44.

2 Werner Spies, "Max Ernst in America: 'Vox Angelica,'" in *Max Ernst, a Retrospective*, ed. Spies and Sabine Rewald, (New York and New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2005), 67-79.