

*Review of Wolfgang Paalen, Form and Sense
with an Introduction by Martica Sawin,
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In her informative introduction to the 2013 reprint of Wolfgang Paalen's 1945 essay compendium, *Form and Sense* (originally issued as No.1 in Wittenborn and Company's "Problems of Contemporary Art" series edited by Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell), critic and art historian Martica Sawin laments the continuing lack of any systematic assessment of the impact of Paalen's writings (and paintings) during and immediately after World War II. Her 1995 MIT Press monograph, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, as well as the Musées de Strasbourg 2000 exhibition catalogue of the same title, constitute essential springboards from which to initiate further discussion. The Viennese-born artist Wolfgang Paalen (1905-1959) had a somewhat complicated association with both the established European Surrealists—he had an especially fraught relationship with André Breton—as well as with a cohort of younger New York painters during the all-important forties decade. Although they do not always agree, Amy Winter and Andreas Neufert, head of the Paalen Archiv in Berlin, have also produced significant explications of Paalen's multi-faceted career.

A sampling of key essays from *Dyn*, Paalen's 1942-44 journal produced in Mexico and widely circulated in New York City, provided the texts collected in *Form and Sense*, which was originally produced as a sort of homage to a mentor on Motherwell's part, and Christian Kloyber's 2000 reprint of the complete run of *Dyn* is, as well, of critical significance in any attempt to assess Paalen's contributions. My own discussion of Paalen and Motherwell in *Mexico and American Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2013) was greatly informed by access to all of these sources.

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It was, however, necessary to mount an extensive search to purchase a copy of the 1945 edition of *Form and Sense*, of which only two thousand were printed and one thousand copies were bound, according to Sawin. My treatment of Paalen's importance for Motherwell's development addresses the lack Sawin recognizes, but in only one—albeit very key—particular case. *Mexico and American Modernism* was published more or less simultaneously with the new reprint volume; the Getty Research Institute's more general *Farewell to Surrealism: The Dyn Circle in Mexico* by Annette Leddy and Donna Conwell, with an introduction by Dawn Ades, just slightly before. Leddy's essay includes brief remarks regarding Paalen's impact on American painting, and the GRI exhibition (2 October 2012- 17 February 2013) did have some relevant comparative works on view.

Sawin's introduction to *Form and Sense* provides the reader with a short sketch of Paalen's multi-faceted career as a painter and theorist/writer/publisher, training a particular focus on his interest in ethnology (especially Native American), and describing his need to escape Hitler since Paalen's father was Jewish. This led to his reluctant 1939 resettlement in a Mexico City suburb under the auspices of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Paalen moved there along with his wife at that time, the French painter and printmaker Alice Rahon, and their friend, patron and fellow *Dyn* contributor, photographer Eva Sulzer. Sawin summarizes a number of the more significant conclusions presented by Paalen in essays reproduced in *Form and Sense*, including "The New Image," "Surprise and Inspiration" and "Art and Science," for example. "The New Image," and possibly "Surprise and Inspiration," were translated into English for *Dyn* by Motherwell who, during the second half of 1941, was living nearby in San Angel and was a frequent visitor to Los Cedros y Begonias, the Paalen home. During this period, as confirmed by Edward Renouf, Motherwell often worked in Paalen's studio. *Form and Sense*, despite its small press run, may well have been more accessible in the U.S. than copies of *Dyn*, and the essays included in it, as Sawin notes, provided the basis for a number of central ideas also demonstrated in Abstract Expressionist periodicals. This impact was particularly evident in Motherwell and critic Harold Rosenberg's one issue journal *Possibilities*, edited jointly by them and published in the winter of 1947-48. (*Dyn's* title had been based by Paalen on the Greek term describing "that which is possible.") Sawin lists a number of canonical New York based artists who owned copies of *Dyn*, including Jackson Pollock.

While still under-recognized, Wolfgang Paalen's importance was obviously critical for mid-century American painters on the road to abstraction; "it was Paalen," another artist, Fritz Bultman, reportedly proclaimed to Pollock's biographers, "who started it all."¹ "There is no true work of art," Paalen declared in the original introduction to *Form and Sense* (also included in the 2013 edition, xxiii), "without a deep meaningfulness—but meaningfulness need not mean straightforward intelligibility." Writing in 1945, in context with this remark and

with obvious resonance to his times, Paalen asked, “Why should works of art be easy to understand in a world in which nothing is easy to understand?” “Paintings no longer *represent*,” he continued, “it is no longer the task of art to answer naïve questions.” Coining a phrase more typically credited to Ad Reinhardt because of its re-use in “How to look at a Cubist Painting,” a 1946 *PM* newspaper cartoon, Paalen’s conclusion still seems prescient. “Today, it has become the role of the painting” he explained, “to look at the spectator and ask him: what do *you* represent?”

Issued under Arcade Publishing’s rubric, “Meanings and Movements in Twentieth-Century Art,” supervised by consulting editor Deborah Rosenthal, professor of art in the School of Fine and Performing Arts at Rider University, the 2013 edition of *Form and Sense* clearly fits the series’ goal of presenting “books by and about art and artists, particularly of the modern period, that deserve to be in print again.” In my re-consideration, in *Mexico and American Modernism*, of the deeper links between internationalism and a concern with self, and how these were exhibited by some of the most prominent Abstract Expressionists, Paalen’s effect on the young Robert Motherwell quickly surfaced as fundamental. Given the impact of Motherwell’s own writings in early 1940s New York (especially “The Modern Painter’s World” which initially appeared in the first issue of *Dyn*), this would likely also have had an important ripple effect.

Throughout his long career as a painter, collagist and printmaker, Robert Motherwell always remained convinced that one of the overarching tasks of modernism is to find “a language that would be closer to the structure of the human mind.”²² This core belief exemplifies the continuing impact of his youthful “association” with the Surrealists, as Sidney Janis described their unusual relationship. One of his most frequently quoted early statements, “the function of the artist is to express reality as *felt*,”²³ for example, demonstrates the centrality of Chilean surrealist Matta in guiding the evolution of Motherwell’s ideas on creativity. (The two had traveled to Mexico together in June 1941, along with Matta’s wife and the painter Barbara Reis.)

As articulated in “The Modern Painter’s World,” this concept resonates equally with Wolfgang Paalen’s beliefs, and when his friends returned from Taxco to the U.S. in September that year, Motherwell stayed on with his future wife María Emilia Ferrera y Moyers to work alongside Paalen (Seligmann’s close friend) near Mexico City. Writing “The New Image” during this period, Paalen declared traditional notions of beauty and ugliness as “by no means necessary preconceptions for artistic creation” (2013 edition, 37). Because photography can accurately reflect reality, he dismissed as reactionary “those painters who today use exclusively this means of expression” (47), a negative reference both to totalitarian-sponsored Social Realism and the more veristically-inclined Surrealists. Not surprisingly, Paalen was especially critical of Dalí, denouncing as vulgar the Spaniard’s “cross-image puzzles” (50); in his own writings Motherwell would employ a similar critique.

Carefully reading “The New Image” in *Form and Sense* clearly establishes Paalen’s both similar and different ideas compared to the orthodox Surrealists. While lauding automatism’s ability “to sense unexpected images in aesthetically amorphous material” (a shared goal), Paalen distinguished works produced automatically from mere subjective interpretation, observing that to dream, in the widest sense of the word, is an automatist activity, but to relate one’s dreams in an academic style is decidedly not. Breton, who supposedly almost “excommunicated” Motherwell for translating “The New Image,” was likely especially irritated by Paalen’s key assertion in this essay: “The verbal flow of the poet and the kaleidoscopic flow of the painter, emancipated in automatism, are nothing but raw material—and it is the great merit of surrealism to have taught us that it is *this* (and not the exterior world) that is the true raw material of the poet and the painter” (42). Emphasizing that “*the possible does not have to be justified by the known*” (53), Paalen provided a bulwark for his belief (in contradistinction to Matta, Dalí and Breton) that automatism could—and should—be used to generate abstraction.

Anticipating the Abstract Expressionists, Paalen wrote that a lack of recognizable subject matter should not in any way presume exclusion of significant themes: images, he said, have “the capacity to *project* a new realization which does *not* have to be referred to an object already existing” (51). Maintaining that “the artist of our time can be authentic only when he creates new modes of seeing, only when he is original” (48), Paalen made an interesting corollary claim in “The New Image” when he wrote that “significant” artists of any period have been “more or less theoreticians.”

In another 1941 text included in *Form and Sense*, Wolfgang Paalen recorded supplementary ideas about the nature of creativity that likewise proved crucial for mid-century American modernism. Completed in December, much or all of “Surprise and Inspiration” (first appearing in the summer 1942 second issue of *Dyn*) could have been conceptualized while Robert Motherwell was still in Mexico. In it, Paalen advocates that “authentic artists must strive above all to *see*” (56-57), adding that they should not be concerned about appearing as “outcasts” from utilitarian values. He commences this essay by recalling the effects of a short-circuiting lamp that he experienced on a visit to Altamira’s prehistoric caves in 1933. Its flashing off and on reconstructed for him the sense of surprise he suspected that primitive man must have felt when, out of the gloom, suddenly he saw what he’d drawn on the walls, in brushstrokes “refulgent with genius.” Reflecting discussions with his young American acolyte, Paalen quoted a Motherwell favorite, pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, “To be set on fire by a thought or scene is to be inspired” (62), thus identifying the “surprise” of imagination as a central ingredient of true creativity.

According to Breton’s classic definition, Surrealism found its formal and ethical basis in the resolution of dream and reality, two seemingly antithetical states. Paalen’s underscored explanation that “*inspiration is the liberation of the torrent of*

imaginative association through the shock of surprise" (65) helped furnish a more nuanced psychological framework for the generative role of automatist technique. Discussing Freud's theorization of the mechanics of dreamwork, Paalen was particularly interested in the role assigned to condensation, a mind pursuit centered on bridge-building. Critical to understanding the function of "unconscious thought (the part of mental activity that takes place outside the focal points of consciousness)," he writes in "Surprise and Inspiration" (65), the metaphoric proclivities of condensation help to differentiate imagination from thinking.

Stimulated by primitive art's inherent abstraction, as well as new discoveries in quantum physics (described in "Art and Science"), Wolfgang Paalen had already begun to evolve a "post-surrealist" philosophy by the time Robert Motherwell arrived on his doorstep. Dynatic art, Paalen wrote in "Farewell to Surrealism" (an essay not included in *Form and Sense*), would exclude any kind of mysticism or metaphysics, aiming instead at "a plastic cosmogony, which means no longer a symbolization or interpretation but, through the specific means of art, a direct visualization of forces which move our body and mind."⁴ While previously in awe of the expatriate Surrealists, by the time he wrote "The Modern Painter's World"—and seemingly inspired by Paalen—Motherwell had become fairly eloquent in his own critique of overreliance on the individual unconscious, as well as capable of articulating a new desire among his American peers to nuance "pure" automatism with more deliberate formal advancements. Somewhat more in line with Paalen's dynatic thinking, and even more synchronous with ideas percolating among his younger artist friends, Motherwell would propose an alternate version of automatism, one he said that is "very little a question of the unconscious," and rather "a plastic weapon" for the invention of new form.

Paalen's example (he exhibited in New York in 1945 and '46 and spent a year there after the war) did not, however, lead directly or merely to new paths of formal innovation. Sawin remarks his tendencies to obfuscation and his suicide. Andreas Neufert has written of Paalen's "dilemma" as an assimilated (half-) Jewish intellectual "who had to rediscover identity as a permanent self-reflection, self-questioning and continuous invention." This, Neufert points out, "also contained the question of identification as such, as a necessary human means but also—in its possible distortions—as a moral problem."⁵ Anxious reflection, both on a personal and global level, is evident in the tenor of Paalen's '40s writings.

By reintroducing the ideas of a neglected but pivotal figure, *Form and Sense* shines a certain kind of penetrating light on some of the more complex roots of critical artistic transformations that took place during the Second World War and immediately after. Reading these essays with fresh eyes today, Sawin points out, we discover in Wolfgang Paalen "a highly informed intellect coming to grips with the complex question of what form art might take on the cusp of the atomic age" (xviii).

- 1 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1989), 534.
- 2 Robert Buck, "With Robert Motherwell," *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 25.
- 3 Robert Motherwell, "The Modern Painter's World," Stephanie Terenzio, ed., *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 32.
- 4 Wolfgang Paalen, "Farewell au Surréalisme," *Dyn* 1 (April 1942): 26.
- 5 Andreas Neufert, "Wolfgang Paalen's First Mexican Period (1939-1949): A Synthesis of Jewish Iconoclasm and Eschatology in the Gleam of the First Gaze," *Estudios de arte y estética*, no. 49 (1998): 400.