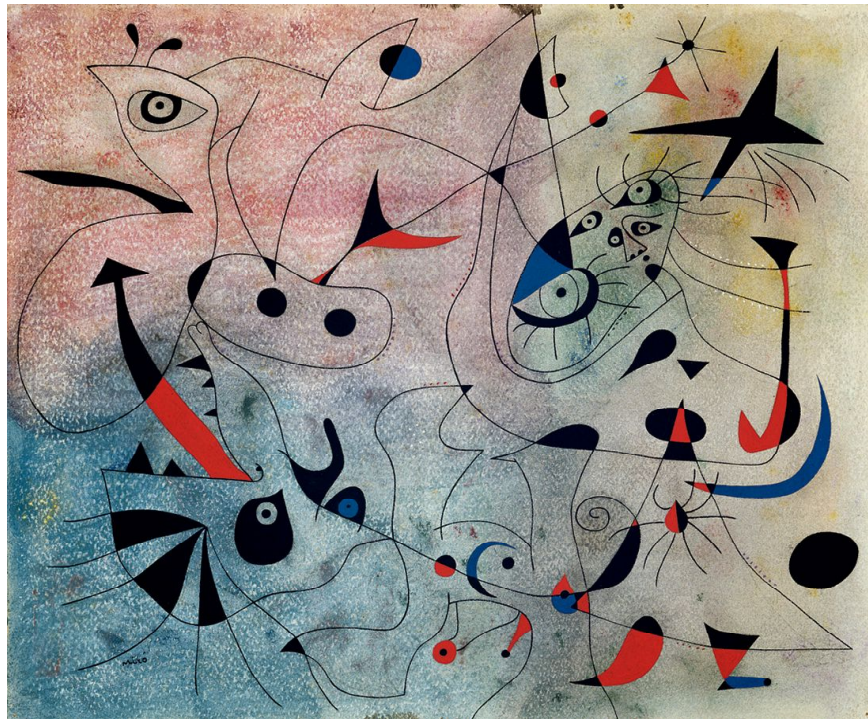


NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SURREALISM

CONSTELLATIONS

MAY 13th 2011, 10 – 5.30, Tate Modern



Joan Miró, *Morning Star*, 16 March 1940
Fundació Joan Miró © Successió Miró / ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2011
Photo: Jaume Blassi

‘The word “constellations” used by Miró is replete with a concept of passage and of transmission at any price which is equally valid in terms of nature and of mythology.’

André Breton, *Constellations*, 1958



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



10.00 - 10.10 Registration

10.10 - 10.20 Introductions

10.20 - 10.50

Jennifer Cohen (Chicago) 'A Cursive Script: Postwar American Criticism and the Writing of Joan Miró'

10.50 - 11.20

Caroline Barbier de Reulle (Paris) 'The Constellations of Joan Miró: Painting, Music, Dance and Poetry'

11.20 - 11.40 Discussion

11.40 - 12.00 Tea and Coffee

12.00 - 12.30

Kevin Kennedy (Berlin) 'The Other Freedom: Breton, Bataille, Blanchot and the Instant of Aesthetic Subversion'

12.30 - 13.00

Karen Westphal Eriksen (Copenhagen) 'On Natural Imagery and the Gestalt Psychology in Danish Surrealism'

13.00 - 13.20 Discussion

13.20 - 14.10 Lunch (provided for the speakers)

14.10 - 14.40

Catherine Spencer (York) 'Pop and Surrealism's "Anthropological Inspiration"'

14.40 - 15.10

Lori Cole (New York) "'Why do Americans Live in Europe?'" *transition* Magazine's Transatlantic Surrealism'

15.10 - 15.40

Michael Wellen (Austin) 'Keepin' It Surreal: When Hip-Hop, Dada, and Surrealism Mix'

15.40 - 16.10 Discussion

16.10 - 16.40 Tea and Coffee

16.40 - 17.30 Presentation of the exhibition and roundtable discussion

The event is free and open to all but seats are limited. To reserve a seat, please contact Silvia Loreti (silvia.loreti@manchester.ac.uk) by Thursday 12th May.

Jennifer Cohen (Chicago)

'A Cursive Script: Postwar American Criticism and the Writing of Joan Miró'

"... the thing to do is look at the picture: not write about it."
- Ernest Hemingway, "The Farm"¹

The first public appearance of the work of Joan Miró in the United States, a black-and-white reproduction of *The Tilled Field* (1923-4) printed in the pages of *The Little Review*, was accompanied by a poetic inventory of its contents written by Michel Leiris. Placed on the facing page, the list, "a finger, an eyelash, a sexual organ shaped like a spider, a sinuous line or the echo of a glance ...,"² was presented as a parallel construction to the painting, itself a kind of writing in its all-over composition of isolated and simplified pictographs. As Miró's work was increasingly shown in American galleries and museums, the notion that the paintings were there to be read, the meaning of their signs to be hunted down, was a given for American reviewers, whether they found the meaning legible or frustratingly opaque. Long after Greenberg used the hunting metaphor to describe the increasing retrenchment of the arts into self-referentiality -- "the arts ... have been hunted back to their mediums"³ -- this cartographic strain of reception reached its apex in the catalogue for Miró's 1973 MOMA exhibition, for which the artist had assisted curator William Rubin in the plotting of iconographical maps of the "*Mirómonde*,"⁴ resulting in what Harold Rosenberg called "a jewel box of elucidated signs."

Still, in contrast to the seeming over-readability of Miró, many of the most important moments within the history of American criticism have been characterized by readings that, in one way or another, remain oddly resistant to the written language that appears in his work: the painted text. Beginning with Greenberg's 1948 monograph, extending with and against his influence through Rosalind Krauss' 1972 Guggenheim exhibition catalogue essay, and again in her revisitation of the subject in 1994, Miró's words have been endowed with an opacity that might be interpreted as at odds with the sheer volume of writing that has been done on the painter, and with the centrality that text itself has held for these respective arguments.⁵ Text is made illegible through a series of operations beginning with Greenberg's reading of the cursive script present in *The Hunter*. Without reference to its linguistic meaning, the text becomes significant of the "calligraphic" quality of the painting as a whole. I argue that this ambivalence toward Miró's painted text reflects modernist theory's anxieties about language and lack of consensus regarding the value of semiotics for art historical analysis. Meanwhile, Leiris' surrealist impulse to take Miró's work as the starting point for a poetic endeavor, which nevertheless possesses a kind of equivalence to the original, constitutes a model of surrealist art criticism that not only has the ability to read the poetic in the visual, but itself constitutes poetry.

Jennifer Cohen is a third year graduate student in Art History at the University of Chicago. She holds an M.A. from Cornell University in Textiles and Apparel Design, and has taught costume history and textiles at West Virginia University. Her current research interests include avant-garde and postwar Western European art and design, histories of modernist criticism and critical theory, historiography, object studies, materiality, and theories of commodity exchange.

¹ E. Hemingway, "The Farm," *Cahiers d'art* 9, no. 1-4 (1934), as cited in Clement Greenberg, *Joan Miró* (New York: The Quadrangle Press, 1948), 5.

² M. Leiris, "Joan Miró," *The Little Review*, Spring/Summer 1926: 7.

³ C. Greenberg, *Towards a Newer Laocoon*, in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays*, Vol. 1, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 32.

⁴ W. Rubin, *Miró in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973). 20.

⁵ C. Greenberg, *Joan Miró*; Rosalind Krauss, ed., *Joan Miró: Magnetic Fields* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1972); Rosalind Krauss, "Michel, Bataille et moi," *October* 68 (Spring 1994): 3-20.

Caroline Barbier de Reulle (Paris-Sorbonne, IV)

'The Constellations of Joan Miró: painting, music, dance and poetry'

In his series *Constellations*, Joan Miró places crucial importance on music. Quavers and clefs are present throughout his work, with the artist consistently employing musical notation. From an iconographic point of view, stars blend into notes offering a very original interpretation of "the music of the spheres". Music and dance are combined in *Acrobatic Dancers* and movement is a structuring element of *Constellations*. The presence of music, however, is very subtle: composition is rhythmic, containing many nuances of colour and form. In counterpoint to *Constellations*, André Breton's poems underline the musicality of these paintings by hinting at the musical art. Because of their intrinsic musicality, Miró's *Constellations* inspired musicians. Bobby Previte, for example, composed a series of 23 pieces entitled *Constellations*. The artist wished to translate musically each of Miró's gouaches. This paper intends to study the importance of music and dance in Miró's *Constellations* as well as the relationship between sound and image in this work and in the poetry of André Breton. This research will continue with the analysis of Bobby Previte's music in order to understand the way the composer set to music the concept of Miró's *Constellations*.

Music teacher (aggregation), PhD student at the Paris--Sorbonne University (Paris IV) teaching music theory and analysis. Member of the research group *Musique et Arts plastiques* (Paris IV) and student of Art History and Archaeology (University Lille 3 Charles de Gaulle). Particularly interested in the relationship between Surrealism and music. Subject of thesis: Salvador Dalí and music. (Supervised by Professor Michèle Barbe in the Music and Musicology department.)

Kevin Kennedy (Berlin)

'The Other Freedom: Breton, Bataille, Blanchot and the Instant of Aesthetic Subversion'

André Breton's interpretation of Joan Miró's *Constellations* partly focuses on the political events (Hitler's occupation of France) during which they were produced and to which they, in his mind, constitute a singular response. For Breton this response to the occupation is on par with the French Resistance "in necessity or in nobility" and "rejoins the other kind (of resistance) in the superiority of its motives". The assertion that the production of a handful of *gouaches* is as important and necessary as the actual liberation from a repressive, murderous regime strikes one as somewhat disproportionate or even as plainly deluded. What are the superior motives Breton discerns in Miró's canvasses? How can a work of art have the same significance as an act of real political opposition? The tension between the necessity for political action on the one hand and the relative inefficacy of art, literature and poetry in the social realm on the other, is, as most would agree, at the heart of the surrealist project. In my paper I want to address this tension and demonstrate how the apparently insurmountable chasm between art and action actually opens the possibility for a new theoretical constellation revolving around two different conceptions of freedom. Using Georges Bataille's and Maurice Blanchot's post-war writings on surrealism as reference point, I will analyze what I think is a more or less implicit and seemingly contradictory dualism within the surrealist conception of freedom and which, I believe, will shed some light on (and maybe even justify) Breton's de facto equation of political resistance with the freedom of artistic expression. This double conception of freedom revolves around two modes of temporality: teleological and immediate. The first mode, most commonly associated with communism, projects the possibility of freedom into a future resolution of the contradictions inherent in capitalism, where the overcoming of political repression, exploitation and class structures would guarantee the free development of each member of society. The realization of this anticipated state requires subordination to the rational exigencies (political activism etc.) of such an undertaking and thus stands in direct opposition to the second conception of freedom, which Bataille calls "the morality of the instant", best exemplified by the practice of automatic writing. This notion is connected to an immediate experience of freedom, where one no longer subordinates oneself to anything but the experience itself, beyond rational considerations or future concerns. In my paper I will attempt to demonstrate how, for Breton, Bataille and Blanchot, this latter conception in fact constitutes the only possibility towards a 'genuine' freedom, which, however, is still related and dependent on its teleological, rational counterpart. In relation to this I will also show how this for these writers this experience is intimately linked, in the contemporary world at least, to poetry, art and literature. An analysis of automatic writing, as paradigmatic for this idea of aesthetic freedom, will provide a concrete example for these theoretical reflections.

I was educated at the University of Westminster, London, where I completed my BA in English Literature with First Class Honours in 2005. My dissertation, entitled 'The Philosophers of the Future: Nietzsche's influence on 20th century thought' analysed Nietzsche's impact on the intellectual landscape of the last century, with a particular emphasis on Heidegger and Derrida. In 2006 I received an MA with Distinction in Comparative Literature from Goldsmiths College, University of London where my focus had been on the relationship between literature and philosophy, modernism, postmodernism and theories of the avant-garde. Here I wrote a dissertation entitled 'The Irresolvable Exigency', exploring the interconnectedness of literature, philosophy and community in the works of Bataille, Levinas and Blanchot. I am currently completing a PhD at the Freie Universität, Berlin, on Georges Bataille's aesthetic theory, working title 'The Impossible Instant: Subjectivity and Transgression in Georges Bataille's Theory of Art and Literature'. Here I am concerned with analysing in detail Bataille's multi-faceted approach to art and literature. I attempt to show how his unique approach resonates far beyond the realm of traditional aesthetics, in particular concerning the relation between art, politics and religion. I secured a three-year scholarship for my research from the *Berliner Graduiertenförderung*.

Karen Westphal Eriksen (Copenhagen)

‘On Natural Imagery and Gestalt psychology in Danish Surrealism’

“We went into the woods and out onto the beach where
the objects themselves called out to us”

The quote above is by the Danish surrealist painter Richard Mortensen, who in *Julefluen*, 1935, wrote about his intoxicating encounter with the Danish seaside of Bornholm where he and fellow artists Sonja Ferlov and Ejler Bille spend the summer of 1935. They gathered twigs and other natural objects and assembled them into objet trouvés or used them as departures for biomorphic imagery in painting and sculpture. In my paper I will focus on the Danish contemporary context in the form of Gestalt psychologist Edgar Rubin's thesis *Synsoplevede figurer* from 1915 (German: *Visuell wahrgenommene Figuren. Studien in psychologischer Analyse*, Copenhagen 1921) which heavily influenced Richard Mortensen in the 1930s and which presented the artist with ways of thinking about psychology of perception, figuration and meaning. I will discuss Rubin in relation to natural objects and imagery.

Drawing on art historians Dario Gamboni's *Potential Images* and Georges Didi-Huberman's *Dissemblance and Figuration* I will expand my discussion to include the so called figurative surrealism of Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, Elsa Thoresen and Rita Kernn-Larsen, who all in different ways engages with optical illusion and potential imagery in natural forms.

Historiographically Danish Surrealism is the periphery to the centre of urban Paris, which is why the theme of natural imagery has gone uncharted. Acknowledging the importance of surrealist journals such as *Minotaure* on Danish artists, it is perhaps important to expand the internationalism brought about by the surrealist journals to include a look along the periphery to English Seaside Surrealism to further pursue the notion of natural imagery. I will indicate a few points of contact, but for this paper will focus my discussion on natural imagery in Danish Surrealism.

Karen Westphal Eriksen (b. 1974) is PhD Fellow at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen in a Mads Øvlisen-Fellowship from the Novo Nordic Foundation. Her dissertation is titled *Against the Grain. Abstraction, Figuration, and Politics in Denmark after the Second World War*. In regards to perception, print culture, as well as certain artists it is related to her MA thesis *Form and Formlessness. The Figurative Surrealism of Wilhelm Freddie in the light of Minotaure and Documents*, University of Copenhagen 2007. Karen Westphal Eriksen has published articles on Danish artists Hans Scherfig, Per Ulrich and Wilhelm Freddie, most recently “Freddie and Photography” in *Wilhelm Freddie. Stick the Fork in your Eye!* Exhibition catalogue by The National Gallery of Art, Copenhagen 2009, ed. Dorthe Aagesen & M.H. Rung. Karen Westphal Eriksen has also curated exhibitions on Robert Capa, Per Ulrich, and geometric abstraction in Danish art. She has studied at University of Copenhagen, Sussex University and University of Toronto. Her work centres on Modernism, Surrealism, Danish art, Print culture, Painting, Photography, Figurative art, Abstraction – not to mention how these areas and topics interrelate.

Catherine Spencer (York)

'Pop and Surrealism's "Anthropological Inspiration"'

The critic Lawrence Alloway, reflecting on the emergence of pop in 1968, suggested that it operated in a way 'analogous to anthropology.' Recently, other critics such as Dick Hebdige have reiterated this idea, arguing that pop 'posed questions about the relation of culture in its classical sense ... and culture in its anthropological sense: culture as the distinctive patterns, rituals and expressive forms which constitute the "whole way of life" of a community or social group.' Alloway and Hebdige link this anthropological attitude to work by artists who have come to be associated under the rubric of the Independent Group, notably Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton, as well as the photographer Nigel Henderson, and the architects Alison and Peter Smithson. Yet these practitioners were also working through the legacy of surrealism's engagement with anthropology, described by Walter Benjamin as the search for 'a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration.'

This is particularly the case with Paolozzi and Henderson, who travelled to Paris shortly after the war to meet artists such as Tristan Tzara, and where they visited ethnographic collections including the *Musée de l'Homme*. Henderson had links with the surrealists through his mother's friendship with Peggy Guggenheim, and Hamilton has stressed the importance of Henderson in terms of the Independent Group's development, as well as his own practice. Paolozzi's scrapbooks from the late 1940s, such as his *Psychological Atlas* (1947-8) and collages like *I Was A Rich Man's Plaything* (1947) can be seen to employ the ethnographic study of ephemera employed by the surrealists in the magazines *Document* and *Minotaur*. Henderson's photographs, meanwhile, extend surrealist attitudes to the image derived from the *objet trouvé* in an anthropological fieldwork study of his local Bethnal Green neighbourhood.

This paper proposes to explore how the pop experiments of the Independent Group, including Paolozzi and Hamilton's collages, and Henderson's photographs, as well as exhibitions such as *Parallel of Life and Art* (1952) extend the surrealist relationship with anthropology. It will investigate what a reassessment of James Clifford's concept of 'ethnographic surrealism' – which has been celebrated and censured in equal measure – might have to offer an exploration of what Alloway described as pop's anthropological 'affinity'. In light of Hal Foster's seminal essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer', the adoption of an anthropological attitude by surrealist and pop artist will be questioned in relation to Kobena Mercer's suggestion that popular culture acts as modernism's other. Ultimately, however, this paper will argue that rather than being founded on a primitivist alterity, pop's anthropological inspiration is based on a desire to merge art and life – just as surrealism was initially conceived as a way of life. Drawing on Benjamin's description of surrealism's 'materialistic, anthropological inspiration' as a dialogical process that involves both violent rupture and collective unity, it will suggest that these dual impulses structure the anthropological approach of pop and surrealism alike.

I am a first year AHRC funded PhD student at the University of York, supervised by Dr Jo Applin. My PhD Thesis, provisionally titled 'The "Lesson of Anthropology" for British and American Art, 1970-70' aims to explore the relationship between post-war artistic practice and criticism, and anthropology. I have previously presented a conference paper at the Courtauld Institute of Art's *New Approaches to British Art 1939-69* conference in June 2010, entitled the 'Independent Group's "Anthropology of Ourselves"' and will present at the *Lawrence Alloway Reconsidered* symposium at Tate Britain in March 2011.

Lori Cole (New York)

“Why do Americans Live in Europe?” *transition* Magazine’s Transatlantic Surrealism’

An English-language magazine based in Paris founded to showcase experimental writing in English alongside its European counterparts, *transition* explored its national and aesthetic identity through two companion questionnaires issued by its editor Eugene Jolas in 1928. “Why Do Americans Live in Europe?” prompted writers such as Gertrude Stein and Robert McAlmon to celebrate the effect of dislocation on their literary sensibilities, while its companion survey, “Inquiry Among European Writers into the Spirit of America,” provoked incendiary responses about America’s burgeoning influence by European Surrealists. Contributors like Tristan Tzara, Philippe Soupault, and Theo van Doesburg, among others, were so incensed that Jolas remarked “the violence of the answers received makes any commentary on my part, for the moment, superfluous.”⁶ Best known for publishing and defending James Joyce’s “Work in Progress,” which became *Finnegans Wake*, *transition* also printed Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, and work by Samuel Beckett, Rainer Maria Rilke, Williams Carlos Williams, Ernest Hemingway, Tristan Tzara, Alberto Giacometti, Kurt Schwitters and Joan Miró. In my paper I will examine how the questionnaire responses work to both interpellate the magazine’s dispersed community in relation to European Surrealism and to underscore the importance of its dis/location, and by extension, its artistic purpose.

In the same issue as the questionnaire, Jolas outlines his own aesthetic position, writing that *transition* has “never believed in a rigid application of a priori ideas, but have always conceived our effort as primarily a research into the modern spirit.”⁷ This kind of “research into the modern spirit” echoes the *Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes*’ 1925 “Declaration.” Like the Surrealists, Jolas is trying to create a community while maintaining a place for the freedom of individual expression. A year after this survey, *transition* published its 1929 “Revolution of the Word” proclamation signed by Kay Boyle, Hart Crane, and Harry Crosby, among others, many of whom had responded to the 1928 survey. The ideas proclaimed in the manifesto echo Jolas’ attempt to balance his universalism with an expansion the American canon and the English language. The signatories announce, “The revolution of the English language is an accomplished fact.”⁸ Read through the lens of linguistic and cultural translation, *transition*’s questionnaire responses dislodge the publication from its site in Paris to imagine the contours of this “modern spirit.” At once playful and bureaucratic, the questionnaire form seeks to enact a provisional community based on shared aesthetic and political concerns. *transition* hopes to enact a “revolution” of language both within and alongside European Surrealism. By reading the questionnaire responses in the context of similar Surrealist documents, I will map out the magazine’s proposed transatlantic Surrealism and the linguistic and cultural imaginaries it suggests.

Lori Cole is a PhD candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at New York University. Her research focuses on the construction of transatlantic avant-garde communities in print. She is also an art critic and translator and has published work in *PMLA*, *Artforum*, and *Journal of the Surrealism and the Americas*, among other publications.

⁶ Eugene Jolas, (*transition*, Summer 1928). Fales Archive, New York University Library.

⁷ Jolas, “Notes” (1928) from *transition* 14 (fall, 1928) P.1007 of Rainey, Lawrence, ed. *Modernism: An Anthology*. London: Blackwell, 2005.

⁸ Jolas et al, “Revolution of the Word” (1929), *Manifesto: Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws, 530.

Michael Wellen (Texas)

'Keepin' It Surreal: When Hip-Hop, Dada, and Surrealism Mix'

Ball. Biggie. Duchamp. Ernst. Fifty. Freeway. Tzara. In David McGee's print series, *Ready Made Africans* (2006), the innovators of the Dada and Surrealism movements are replaced by icons of American rap music. The series presents five full-length portraits, each of a prominent rapper; the name of a well-known artist from the early twentieth century appears below each singer. For instance, rapper Notorious B.I.G. (a.k.a. "Biggie Smalls"), dressed in a white suit and hat, comfortably assumes the moniker "Hugo Ball." Together image and name offer a compelling juxtaposition, in which the historic avant-garde seems co-opted and rebranded to fit contemporary hip-hop culture.

This paper examines the recent installation (November 2010 to January 2011) of *Ready Made Africans* in the Surrealism wing of the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas to consider the different roles juxtapositions play in hip-hop culture and in surrealist exhibition practices. I explore how McGee's series carries tones of the artist's protest and praise. On the one hand, the works point to the racism embedded in early Dada and Surrealist practices, and the tendency for European artists associated with those movements to treat African culture as primitive, exotic, and illogical by its very nature. On the other hand, each portrait is a delicately hand-made homage to the musicians/artists it mentions.

I argue that McGee's combination of image and text are appealing for their similarity to the hip-hop *remix*, which simultaneously spurs listeners towards the past and the future. By combining a taste of the familiar with an introduction of something different or unfamiliar, remixes encourage listeners to retrace what they know and to discover and appreciate something new. In the Menil's installation, McGee's lithographs were surrounded by works of those artists named in the series: Hugo Ball, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters and Tristan Tzara. I believe that in this context McGee challenges us to remix or reformulate how we enjoy these works and our expectations about who made them. By examining the Menil's installation, I describe how *Ready Made Africans* transforms the exhibition space, troubling the distinctions between fans of hip hop and fans of the surreal.

Michael Wellen is a doctoral candidate in art history at The University of Texas at Austin, where he specializes in modern and contemporary art. He is writing a dissertation on the formation of "Latin American art" as a field of art historical study in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Since 2007 he has been a recipient of a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, awarded by the U.S. Department of Education for graduate students whose research or artistic projects show promise for their respective fields. He has interned at El Museo del Barrio in New York, Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, and the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art. He also has written for national and local arts publications, including *Art Nexus*, *Art Papers*, and most recently, *The Journal for Surrealism and the Americas*.