

Terra Incognita: Surrealism and the Pacific Region

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In the Surrealist *Map of the World* published in 1929, France had virtually disappeared, the United States of America did not exist and the Pacific Ocean was at the centre of the world.¹ This imaginary geography reflected the surrealists' anti-colonial stance and their valorisation of art from countries beyond the territorial boundaries of Europe. In addition, surrealism in its heyday was received with surprising alacrity by artists, photographers and poets in countries as diverse as Japan, Mexico and Australia, and traces of surrealist influence are to be found in much contemporary work in these countries today. Scholarship, however, has largely neglected the role of the Pacific region in the development and dissemination of surrealism. This special issue of *Papers of Surrealism* seeks to redress that imbalance by exploring how the central concerns of the European surrealist movement, including the relationship between art, psychoanalysis and sexuality, were transformed through cultural interchange with the diverse cultures of the Pacific. The issue aims to shed light on the historical transmission of surrealist thought from Europe to the Pacific, and the ongoing dialogue with surrealist art and ideas in work being produced in the Pacific region. At the same time, the issue investigates a range of concerns that have remained relatively marginal within the study of international surrealism, including cross-cultural interaction, same-sex desire, and the relationship between creativity and mental health.

The issue had its origins in a 2006 symposium held at the University of Melbourne, 'Terra Incognita: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Sexuality in the Pacific Region,' which brought together scholars from several countries including Australia, New Zealand, USA, Japan, Indonesia and the United Kingdom. The symposium featured scholars of surrealist art such as Dawn Ades and David Lomas from the UK alongside several art historians, cinema historians, museum curators and critics working in the Pacific region. This publication is directly related to that symposium, in that all the essays had their origin in papers presented at that event. In what follows, I will introduce the essays presented in this issue by briefly setting out the historiography of the relationship between surrealism and the Pacific region. I will then discuss the content of the original symposium, which contained papers dealing with a broader range of cultures than appear in this issue of *Papers of Surrealism*. Lastly, I will tie together the strands of thought presented in the essays published here.

Surrealism and the Pacific

The Pacific region was both the inspiration for, and host to, ideas and practices that emerged from within European surrealism in the twentieth century. The Pacific region is defined for the purposes of this publication as including those countries bordering on the Pacific Ocean



(sometimes referred to as the Pacific Rim, and incorporating Japan and the Pacific coasts of the USA and Latin America) and those countries wholly within it (including Australia, New Guinea and New Zealand, and the islands of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia). Although the surrealists had a keen interest in art from all over the world, including African sculpture and artefacts from the Americas, the surrealist map shows that the Pacific region was of especial interest; New Guinea and the tiny Bismarck Archipelago, for example, are disproportionately large in surface area compared to Europe. Indeed, as Louise Tythacott documents in her book *Surrealism and the Exotic*, a recent account of the surrealists' engagement with non-western cultures, many of the writers and artists in the group collected masks, reliefs and figures from Oceanic and Pacific Rim cultures. André Breton, Louis Aragon, Wolfgang Paalen and Max Ernst owned examples of work from Papua New Guinea, The Solomon Islands, Easter Island and the Northwest Coast of the USA.² The profound significance of these objects to the Surrealist movement was made explicit by Breton when he commented that 'the development of Surrealism at the outset is inseparable from the power to seduce and fascinate that Oceanic art possessed in our eyes.'³ The surrealists organised exhibitions of these objects, such as the 1926 *Tableaux de Man Ray et Objets des Iles* held at the Galerie Surréaliste in Paris which juxtaposed a retrospective of Ray's work with a number of work by artists from Pacific region countries, including Hawaii, New Guinea and Easter Island.⁴ Max Ernst drew upon art collected from the region for inspiration in creating his own work, such as *The Beautiful Gardener* which includes a figure decorated with Marquesan-style tattoos.⁵

Very few of the surrealists actually travelled to the region, and their understandings of Pacific cultures were largely based on received ideas about 'primitive' cultures and poetic imagining inspired by the objects they collected. Breton, for example, praised Oceanic art for being at once 'celestial' and 'primordial.'⁶ Nevertheless, Paul Eluard did travel briefly to the region, as Robert McNab records in his recent book *Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle*.⁷ Eluard visited Tahiti before moving on to Vietnam and Cambodia in the company of his wife, Gala Eluard and Max Ernst. The other surrealist who visited the Pacific was Jacques Viot who travelled through Polynesia in the mid 1920s and regularly sent back artefacts to France.⁸ As Tythacott concludes, although the surrealists' understanding of Pacific cultures was limited, 'their actions at least inscribed the imagery of the Pacific archipelago for the very first time on to the terrain of twentieth-century Western art.'⁹ They were also vehemently opposed to the violent brutality of the colonial history which had left its mark on every country in the Pacific.¹⁰

This interest in the Pacific on the part of the surrealists has been reciprocated in several of the countries in the region, as this issue of *Papers of Surrealism* documents. In this, countries in the Pacific were no different to other world cultures. Surrealism, of all the avant-garde movements, had the most pronounced international reception of all the European historical avant-gardes. Its influence became truly global around the middle of the last century, due to the



attention paid by members of the surrealist group to art and literature in countries outside Europe, and the enormous impact of surrealism in cultural realms of broad circulation, such as design and advertising. In spite of this extraordinary dissemination, the majority of studies of surrealism being published today are still dedicated to well-known figures working in France and Belgium where the movement had its origins. Beyond this, there are a number of studies which examine the dissemination and development of surrealism in other countries, such as Ida Rodríguez-Prampolini's *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico de México* (1969), Petr Kral's *Le Surréalisme en Tchécoslovaquie* (1983), Dickran Tashjian's *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde, 1920-1950* (1995) or Michel Remy's *Surrealism in Britain* (1999). With some notable exceptions, there are very few studies devoted exclusively to the development of surrealism in countries in the Pacific.

And yet, the presence of surrealism has undeniably been strong in the region. For example, as John Clark has related, in Japan during the early 1930s there were a number of artists practicing in a surrealist manner, including Tôgô Seiji, and Okamoto Tarô, the latter of which exhibited his painting *Wounded Arm* in the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris in 1938.¹¹ In Australia during the 1940s, as has been documented in a number of studies, including an important essay by Christopher Chapman, several artists directly engaged with surrealist ideas, including Albert Tucker, Peter Purves-Smith and, most notably, James Gleeson, who delivered a lecture titled 'The Necessity for Surrealism' to the Contemporary Art Society in 1941.¹² In New Zealand, as in Japan and Australia, surrealism also had an impact; the 1940s work of Gordon Walters, for example, reveals affinities with the work of Yves Tanguy.¹³ In more recent times, as Rob Goodfellow has argued, the Indonesian artist Bramantyo can be described using surrealist techniques and devices.¹⁴ These are just a few of the many countries in the region which can be said to have felt the influence of surrealism within the domain of the visual arts.

The continuing legacy of the contact between European surrealism and the Pacific on countries in that region has been profound. A valorisation of the art of Pacific cultures on the part of the European surrealists, while mostly of art considered 'primitive' and not of artists working in a western manner, has led to an opening of global interest in the art of those cultures and a recognition of their aesthetic, if not always their cultural, worth. Increased contact with art and ideas emerging from Europe on the part of artists working in the Pacific region has led to a vibrant cultural exchange involving the nomadic movement of concepts, artists and objects between a large number of regions and countries. An enduring, identifiably surrealist language of the incongruous, the uncanny and the disjunctive has emerged in contemporary art produced in the region, exemplified by, to take just one example among countless others, the grotesque, psycho-sexual rebuses of the Chilean-born Australian artist Juan Davila.¹⁵



Terra Incognita in Melbourne

The symposium organized in Melbourne in 2006 set out to document, explore and analyse that legacy. To encompass the richness of the symposium from which the essays in this issue were drawn, I will briefly summarise below the papers delivered by those speakers whose work, for various reasons, does not appear in the issue, before moving on to discuss the publication itself.

Professor Dawn Ades, who was present by video link, presented a tour of the themes and the artworks in *Underground Surrealism: Picasso, Miró, Masson and the Vision of Georges Bataille*, an exhibition she had recently curated at the Hayward Gallery in London. By discussing key works of the surrealist movement through the lens of the dissident surrealist writer Georges Bataille, Ades provided a survey of some of the ideas and visual techniques that would draw surrealism and the Pacific together.

Christine Dixon delivered a paper titled 'Max Ernst's collection in the National Gallery of Australia' documenting Ernst's collection of 'tribal' art held at that institution, where Dixon works as the Senior Curator for International Painting and Sculpture. The collection, which was bequeathed to Ernst's widow Dorothea Tanning, contains 96 works of African, American and Oceanic sculptures, and a few textiles. In her paper Dixon focused on the Oceanic works and examined them in the light of the artist's aesthetic tastes, the knowledge of the cultures that the artist had, and their influence on his artistic practice.

Kyoko Jimbo, Curator, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, spoke on the topic of 'Toshiko Okanoue: Surrealism in Japan and the World of Collage.' In her paper she traced the influence of surrealism in Japan from the latter half of the 1930s up to the outbreak of World War Two in the Pacific. Focusing on the medium of collage Jimbo discussed the work of Toshiko Okanoue, who was active for a period in the 1950s, and who drew her inspiration from the works of Max Ernst.

Martinus Dwi Marianto, Director of the Program Pascasarjana, ISI Yogyakarta, gave a paper titled 'Surrealism in Yogyakarta.' In it he discussed several artists in Indonesia whose work demonstrates connections to European surrealism. As he argued, a unique brand of surrealism has emerged and flourished in Yogyakarta, one of the main cities in Indonesia and a home for many artists coming from across that country. In his paper Marianto considered the relationship between individual artists' works and the power structures of modern day Indonesia, arguing that for some Indonesian artists surrealism is a refuge from an often unbearable socio-cultural context.

The Papers of Surrealism special issue

The essays collected here, which record the movement of people and ideas between Europe and the Pacific, demonstrate how ideas central to surrealism bore fruit in several countries in the region in ways that the original founders of the movement never envisaged. The contributions investigate several different media including painting, sculpture, drawing, film, photography,



installation and literature, and examine the work of several artists and writers living and working in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America from the 1930s to the present day. Some of the papers record physical movements of individuals between Europe and the Pacific; the New Zealand artist Len Lye visited London and also made an extended trip through the South Pacific Islands, the Czech-born artist Dusan Marek spent time in New Guinea and New Britain before settling in Sydney; the Australian artist James Gleeson visited England, Holland, France (where he met Breton), and Italy while developing his surrealist painting style. Other contributions to the issue deal with a more abstract idea of travel, such as the study of the major release film *King Kong* which takes its viewers on an imaginary journey to an unknown Pacific island, a place of dark imaginings produced in a Hollywood studio. Yet other essays focusing on the work of artists based in Australia deal with what can be described an inward journey, similar to that favoured by the French surrealists, whether in Pat Brassington's uncanny photographic excursions into the human psyche, Ivor Francis's painting *Schizophrenia*, or Graeme Doyle's demonic self-portraits.

The issue opens with two essays which document the work of artists who travelled through and studied the cultures of the Pacific. Tyler Cann's 'Surreal Sight Seer: Len Lye and Surrealism,' discusses the New Zealand-born artist Len Lye's ambivalent relationship to surrealism in England in the years around the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition. As Cann relates, Lye went on an extended trip to the South Pacific Islands, lived in Samoa, and closely studied Polynesian, Maori, Papuan, African and Australian indigenous art. This experience, combined with Lye's particular (mis)reading of the notion of animism outlined in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, informed his understanding of art as the externalisation of a body image. Cann concludes that a break in Lye's practice in 1935, with his development of direct film techniques, marks Lye's transition from a morphological or thematic surrealism to another, distinct mode of practice reliant on gesture and movement. Stephen Mould's essay 'Dusan Marek, a Land-locked Czech Surrealist in the Antipodes,' examines the Czech-born artist Dusan Marek, looking at his flight from his homeland and his journey to Australia and subsequently to the heart of the surrealist world, New Britain. Mould discusses both Marek's background in Czechoslovakia and his work in Australia and the Pacific region. He argues that Marek achieved a fusion between the style he had developed as a student in Prague, and the visual richness and variety of the Australian landscape, informed and refined by his own philosophical and metaphysical preoccupations. Mould also presents Marek's little known work as a film-maker.

The subsequent essay, Barbara Creed's 'The *Unheimlich* Pacific of Popular Film: Surreal Geography and the Darwinian Sublime,' discusses representations of the Pacific region in Hollywood film. Creed examines *The Island of Lost Souls* (1933) and *King Kong* (1933), films which offered a fantastic range of monstrous beasts – human and animal alike. She argues that since the publication of Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) and *On the Origin of Species*



(1859), the popular view of the Pacific, already seen as a place of inversions and marvellous monstrosities, had come to incorporate an *unheimlich* dimension based on fears of nature, atavism and degeneration. Novelists such as H.G. Wells and Jules Verne portrayed the Pacific as a surreal place of uncharted islands, subterranean worlds, ruined temples and *unheimlich* creatures. As Creed maintains, the Pacific became an imaginary place – Europe's *unheimlich* other – where the forces of devolution, fate and randomness held sway, and cinema and literature depicted the Pacific as an *unheimlich* and surreal space.

The following two essays in the issue are monographic studies of the work of Australian artists who were deeply concerned with issues of sexuality and psychoanalytic theory. In 'James Gleeson's Desiring Production' David Lomas discusses the work of the Australian surrealist artist James Gleeson. In contrast to the majority of studies of Gleeson which overlook the artist's sexuality, Lomas' paper argues that the visual image of the dream landscape pioneered by the European surrealists enabled the artist to give voice to same-sex desires under generally prevailing conditions of homophobia in Australia. Lomas first analyses Gleeson's work of the 1940s and 1950s, arguing that a surrealist idiom drawn from close readings of Freud allowed the artist to simultaneously give vent to and censor same-sex desire. In the second part of the essay, Lomas moves to discuss the apocalyptic/sublime tenor of much of Gleeson's painting in the 1980s which he connects with the moral panic which accompanied the unfolding of the AIDS epidemic in that decade. In 'A Surrealist Impulse in Contemporary Australian Photography,' Anne Marsh considers the ways in which the work of the Australian artist Pat Brassington engages with a surrealist legacy. Analysing how the artist explores the body and sexuality in a range of works, Marsh looks at the ways in which Brassington's photographs, which explore a surreal lexicon of imagery that is in turn abject, hauntingly strange, hideous, and banal, can be analysed from a psychoanalytic perspective, drawing on the writings of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek.

The final two essays, also dealing with the work of Australian artists, investigate the experience of mental illness through a surrealist lens. Ken Wach's essay 'Ivor Francis's *Schizophrenia* of 1943' looks at a single work, *Schizophrenia*, painted by the Australian artist Ivor Francis in 1943. In the first essay to extensively analyse this important surrealist work, Wach argues that Francis's painting is Australia's first major painting with a defined mental illness as its thematic subject, and is an example of a 'transposed' surrealism, a surrealism expressed with Australian inflections and intonations. As Wach shows, various surrealist attributes resonate in Francis's important painting, which was influenced by Reg Ellery's psychological texts, and the work well illustrates the pervasive influence of surrealist aesthetic principles in Australia. In the last contribution to the issue, titled 'Graeme Doyle, The Cunningham Dax Collection and Surrealist Discourse,' Anthony White focuses on the work of Graeme Doyle, an artist, poet and performer living and working in Melbourne whose work appears in the Cunningham Dax



Collection: Art, Creativity and Education in Mental Health in that city. The essay examines the conceptual frameworks provided for the interpretation of artworks by people with experience of mental illness by the discipline of psychiatry and the work of the French surrealists. As White argues, Doyle's work suggests the needs for a new set of interpretive strategies and insights that relativise both the psychiatric and surrealist discourse about art and mental health.

The issue in its entirety is a testament to the significant presence of surrealist ideas and practices in the countries of the Pacific region, and explores how the European origins of the movement were substantially transformed in contact with environments very far both geographically, culturally and intellectually from that where the movement had its foundation. One of the most significant themes to emerge in the selection of essays presented here is the part-acceptance, and part-rejection, of elements of the surrealist legacy among artists working in the region. The individuals studied in these essays were not passive receptors for, but active readers of, the ideas of the group which formed around André Breton in the 1920s in Paris. It is to be hoped that this publication is the first of many further studies that continue to deepen our understanding of the considerable role played by Pacific region artists, writers and filmmakers in disseminating and transforming the global culture of surrealism.

This publication, and the 2006 symposium where the essays had their first public airing, would not have been possible without the support and assistance of several individuals and organisations. The Melbourne symposium formed part of a broader project titled 'Terra Incognita: Surrealism and the Pacific Region' undertaken jointly by the University of Melbourne and the AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies. The project had its origins in discussion that took place in 2005 when David Lomas visited the University of Melbourne courtesy of a Faculty of Arts Visiting Scholar Award. The project was generously funded by a Collaborative Research Grant, a Community and Cultural Relations Committee Grant, both awarded by the University of Melbourne, and was also supported by that University's School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology. The University of Manchester also generously gave assistance to the project. The symposium was supported by the AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies and by the Cunningham Dax Collection: Art, Creativity and Education in Mental Health. The symposium was ably guided by the diligent and inspired efforts of Jarrod Rawlins in Melbourne and Samantha Lackey in Manchester, and by the design expertise of Kevin March.

¹ *Variétés: revue mensuelle illustrée de l'esprit contemporain*, June 1929, Special issue, 'Le Surréalisme en 1929.'

² Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, 135.



³ Quoted in Elizabeth Cowling, 'An Other Culture,' in Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, exh. cat., Hayward Gallery, London 1978, 463-64.

⁴ Kim Grant, *Surrealism and the Visual Arts: Theory and Reception*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, 160-161.

⁵ Robert McNab, *Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004, 54-55.

⁶ Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, 139.

⁷ McNab, *Ghost Ships*.

⁸ Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, 146.

⁹ Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, 147.

¹⁰ Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, 62, 96.

¹¹ See John Clark, 'Surrealism in Japan,' in Dawn Ades and Michael Lloyd (eds), *Surrealism: Revolution by Night*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 1993, 209.

¹² See Christopher Chapman, *Surrealism in Australia*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1993.

¹³ Richard Dunn, 'The Enigma of Gordon Walters' Art,' *Art New Zealand*, 9, 1978. <http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues1to40/walters.htm> Viewed 11/18/2007 6:27pm.

¹⁴ Rob Goodfellow, 'History Imitating Art, Imitating Life: The Art of Bramantyo,' *Art AsiaPacific*, no. 22, 1999, 64-7. See also Astri Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain: Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur and New York, 1994.

¹⁵ Guy Brett and Roger Benjamin, *Juan Davila*, The Miegunyah Press and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and Melbourne, 2006.

