Breton’s Compass and Marek’s Map
Seeing Surrealism from the South

Of the 255 objects that comprise André Breton’s wall at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, there is one that repeatedly draws a blank in the nearby digital catalogue. This work of art is an Aboriginal bark painting that depicts two cavorting spirit beings, one male and one female (fig. 1). The painting’s maker, title, date of creation or material description cannot be found in the museum’s digital didactic display. Nearby objects are identified, dated, named and made whole, albeit reconstituted by the company they keep, but the Aboriginal bark painting remains silenced—a Surrealist synecdoche.

Breton’s wall of wonder is a re-creation of his fourth-floor atelier at 42 rue Fontaine in Paris, gifted in lieu of death duties by Aube Elléouët-Breton, daughter of Breton and Jacqueline Lamba. Oceanic artefacts abound, jostling with African art, the work of Breton’s Surrealist contemporaries and a panoply of objets trouvés. As Breton asked, somewhat rhetorically, “isn’t the real significance of a work, not the meaning we think we give it, but the meaning it is likely to take in relation to what surrounds it?”1 In the immediate vicinity of the unattributed bark painting is a photograph of Alfred Jarry
fencing, a Pueblo-style dance shield, a woodcut portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire made by Giorgio De Chirico and an anthropomorphic mandrake root collected by Breton and later photographed by Man Ray. What meaning does the unattributed work accrete in the company of so many enigmatic objects? Following the sale and fragmentation of Breton’s collection in 2003, a website dedicated to the collection was developed, funded by the Association Atelier André Breton. Dazzling in its didacticism and encyclopaedic reach, the site includes a photograph of Breton’s atelier, taken before its doors were closed in Autumn 1966, which shows the painting in situ. While many of Breton’s collectibles are fully catalogued, the bark painting has a scant entry—listed as an Aboriginal bark painting by an unidentified artist from the Northern Territory in Australia.

With objects amassed from 1922 until his death in 1966, Breton’s atelier gathers the world in one small space and is, in many ways, a materialisation of the Surrealist Map of the World (fig. 2), first published in 1929. Like the Surrealist Map, geographic boundaries are blurred, countries are absent, the equatorial zone meanders and Oceania looms large at the centre of the atlas. Both Breton’s wall and the Surrealist Map offer a veritable Wunderkammer of juxtapositions and in doing so invite us to see ourselves and the “other” differently, to question and subvert the dialectical terms that are defined in complementarity, opposition and inversion. For this curator and art historian, from an Australian art museum that actively contests and reframes northern art histories, such an invitation is irresistible.

Just four kilometres along the Seine from the Centre Pompidou is the Musée du Quai Branly. Located here are the “sister” barks of the silenced bark in the Surrealist display. Like Breton’s bark, they too are held behind glass and amassed with other works of art. They are, however, named, dated and localized. One bark painting bears a clear resemblance to that of Breton. Called Maam man seducing a Maam woman, it is attributed to artist Paddy Compass Namatbara, from Minjilang on Croker Island in Australia’s Northern Territory, and dated to 1963. Breton’s bark, its sister at Musée du Quai Branly and various other bark paintings held in antipodean collections, including a Maam spirit from about 1963 in the National Gallery of Australia’s collection, all share an origin. All can be traced to Karel Kupka, a Czech-born, Paris-based

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Fig. 2. Surrealist Map of the World, 1927, published in Variétés (Bruxelles), June 1929, pp. 26–27. © Droits réservés.
artist and voracious collector of Australian Aboriginal art. In addition to undertaking ethnographic expeditions, Kupka was a frequent visitor to the studio of the Surrealist he admired the most—André Breton.

Kupka, like Breton, possessed an atavistic urge and would regularly visit the Musée de l’Homme, previously the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro. Born in Prague at the end of the First World War, Kupka felt the lure of Paris early during visits to the city with his father. The upheaval of the Second World War facilitated his relocation to Paris and from there his travels to its antipodes—the Pacific. With the support of Professor Alfred Buhler, director of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel, Switzerland, Kupka travelled to Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and, during several visits made from the 1950s into the early 1970s, he amassed a collection of hundreds of objects. As Nicholas Rothwell states,

Kupka’s fieldwork came at a time when Europe’s place as the emblem of beauty was newly overthrown: the continent was shattered; its cities had been bombed and broken; his own homeland was ruled by a collective of bleak dictators. What could be more natural than to turn from this spectacle and put one’s trust in an art free from the chains of history and besetting influences: an art that blew straight from the realm of myth to the viewing eye?3

Hence Kupka’s journeys into Aboriginal Australia represented a direct conduit to a so-called authentically “primitive” world for the Surrealists. Implicitly, such atavism served to weaken European notions of empire and to open the speculative possibility of a cultural centrality belonging to the Pacific (as the Surrealist Map suggested) —of a world turned upside down and inside out.

It was during Kupka’s 1963 visit to Australia, and specifically to Croker Island’s Methodist mission, that he met Iwaidja artist Paddy Compass Namatbara.4 Kupka, a “missionary” of Surrealism, was captivated by the subjects of sorcery, including Paddy Compass’s Maam figures—subjects that were at the time discouraged or suppressed by the Methodist missionaries. As profane spirits of the dead, Maam figures are malignant forces that threaten to capture the unsuspecting. With contorted clawed limbs and exaggerated genitalia, featured in Breton’s bark, Maam figures embody the carnal and the licentious, threatening retribution for sexual misconduct.5 Surrealism’s atavism and its obsession with sex was charged by such antipodean encounters, and characters like Kupka became key interlocutors for such conversations. In 1962, the year before he met Paddy Compass, Kupka had published Un art à l’état brut (later translated by Kupka himself into The Dawn of Art: Painting and Sculpture of Australian Aborigines). In his preface, André Breton cites the “poetic magnetism” of Australia and applauds an artistic vision untainted by Western ways of seeing. Breton cites the enchantment of Aboriginal art, offering it as a salve for European alienation and a means of uniting heterogenous fields of enquiry.6

Like Kupka, the Bohemia-born, Australia-based Surrealist Dušan Marek (1926–1993) was goaded by Breton’s Surrealism. Declaring himself a Surrealist at an early age, and exposed to the work of French Surrealists during his studies at Prague’s Academy of

Fig. 3. Dušan Marek (1926–1993), Birth of Love, 1948, Dillenburg, oil on wood, 14.7 × 72.0 cm (16.0 × 73.5 × 3.1 cm including frame), Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia, inv. HQ-884P13, gift of the artist 1988. © Art Gallery of South Australia.
Fig. 4. Dušan Marek, *Perpetuum mobile*, 1948, SS Charlton Sovereign, oil on board, 121.7 × 91.2 cm, Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia, inv. HQ-721P4(A), South Australian Government Grant 1972. © Art Gallery of South Australia.
Fine Arts, Marek, like Kupka, became a conduit for Surrealism and a follower and collector of Oceanic art. In Marek we have an antipodean counterpoint to the northern narrative that Kupka embodies. Both men were born in Czechoslovakia with a penchant for Paris, Surrealism and Oceanic art. There is no evidence that the two artists ever met, despite their shared enchantments. Fifteen years before Kupka’s mission to Croker Island, Marek and his older brother and fellow artist, Voitre Marek, arrived in Australia. As Stephen Mould asserts, “the Mareks had arrived in Adelaide bearing the calling card of Surrealism.” While Paris, the home of Surrealism, had been the Marek brothers’ first choice for relocation, Australia had its own creative appeal—according to Mould, the brothers were “fascinated at the possibility of discovering the art of the Aborigines.”

En route to their new home (at that stage undetermined), the brothers spent five months in a refugee camp in Dillenburg, West Germany. Having arrived in the camp with oil paints, Dušan made two paintings, Birth of Love (fig. 3) and The Voyage, both of which are held in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. Painted directly onto found materials—the timber slats from Marek’s camp bed—the two paintings conjure the hallucinatory and metamorphic imagery of Surrealism. With their elongated timber forms, the works possess a materiality and an objecthood that approximates that of bark painting, with necessity and ingenuity dictating the entire body of work made during the long journey to Australia. To mark their crossing of the equator, and their transition “down under,” the painting titled Equator and its verso, Perpetuum mobile (fig. 4), was made using both sides of a gaming table stripped of its felt. With a painting for each hemisphere—front and back—the work is displayed at the Art Gallery of South Australia with both sides visible. “Break the mirror to see what I am” is written across the lower timber band on the Equator painting (fig. 5). This Surrealist text, with its focus on the ocular and altered perception, was expanded upon by Dušan in a text published in Adelaide newspaper The Advertiser in 1950, reading, “Man is not privacy. Break the mirror, which changes your sides. Empty yourself to see what you are.”

Fig. 5. Dušan Marek, Equator, 1948, Gibraltar, SS Charlton Sovereign, oil on board, 121.7 × 91.2 cm (126.5 × 96.0 × 5.5 cm including frame), Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia, inv. HQ-721P4(B), South Australian Government Grant 1972. © Art Gallery of South Australia.
At roughly the same time that Karel Kupka was making his first visits to northern Australia, seeking inspiration for his own practice and collecting Aboriginal art, Dušan Marek was drawn to Papua New Guinea, the place on the Surrealist Map of the World that dominated the Australian continent in both size and positioning. With his wife Helena, Marek moved to Papua New Guinea in 1954, where he remained for five years. There, amid employment that included jobs as a photographer and an engineer, Marek continued to make work, holding a Surrealist exhibition in Port Moresby in 1954 within months of his arrival. He avidly collected Melanesian art during his time in Papua New Guinea and displayed it in his home, in conversation with his work and other collectibles. Objects from of his Melanesian collection were gifted by his widow to the South Australian Museum, with the ethnographic context of the Museum, and its significant holdings of Oceanic cultural material, deemed the most appropriate location for his collection. Marek’s time in Papua New Guinea represents, in the words of Rex Butler and ADS Donaldson, “another important milestone in the world-wide dispersion of Surrealism.” In their world history of Surrealism, Butler and Donaldson also note the precedent of art from “Papua New Guinea hanging above the hearth of Surrealism in Breton’s flat.”

Marek and Kupka died within weeks of each other in early 1993—one on each side of the equator. Today in Adelaide, at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Marek’s contribution to a southern Surrealism is keenly felt in the loose re-creation of Breton’s wall in the Elder Wing of Australian Art (fig. 6). Marek’s Melanesian collection is brought into play alongside his own work, including animations and puppets, and art by his antipodean contemporaries, including Aboriginal artists. Among them is Yirawala, a Kuninjku artist whose early bark paintings were collected by Kupka in 1963 from Croker Island alongside those of Paddy Compass Namatbara. The Elder Wing installation intends not only to signal a southern articulation of Surrealism, one forged in the specific context of South Australia (as opposed to New South Wales, Tasmania or Victoria) but also
to situate the local within the global, and vice versa. The risk here is that the trophies of encounter and the conquests of colonisation are valorised and reinstated. Breton’s wall of enchantment returns “boomerang-like,” to quote Breton himself, who in turn was referencing Comte de Lautréamont, in his preface for *The Dawn of Art*, and with it the trappings of colonisation. The revival of the drama and spectacle of the ethnographic museum can feel dangerously close to neo-primitising.

Alternatively, can the insistence on the local, and the visual strategies of the *Wunderkammer* reinvigorated in Breton’s wall, reorient the viewer, turning the tables on empire and validate seeing from the south? Can the concepts crafted in the north take on different inflections or modalities when seen from the south? As seen in the work of contemporary artists, the redoubling or recursive reference to the archive, the ethnographic display and the *Wunderkammer* can play a role in decolonising collections. What does this mean for the re-presentation of historic material by curators? Can ideas from the old world change form in the new world and, in doing so, reveal that the most ancient is not where you expect to find it?

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NOTES


2. Association Atelier André Breton, André Breton [URL: https://www.andrebreton.fr/en/desktop]. This photograph from the Association Atelier André Breton website shows the bark painting, however earlier photographs taken by Sabine Weiss in May 1960 do not show it, affirming the work’s provenance and connection to Kupka.


4. Ibid.


8. Ibid., p. 24.


10. The catalogue from the exhibition containing drawings and ephemera has been recently gifted to the National Gallery of Australia.


12. This display was curated by Tracey Lock, Curator of Australian Art, and Elle Freak, Assistant Curator of Australian Art, and was opened to the public in December 2018. Elle Freak is currently working on an exhibition titled Dušan and Voitre Marek: Surrealists at sea, scheduled to open in November 2020 at the Art Gallery of South Australia.