

# Paalen Counts

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**WOLFGANG PAALEN: ARTIST  
AND THEORIST OF THE AVANT-GARDE**

Amy Winter

Praeger

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Born in 1905, Wolfgang Paalen was raised in a castle in Silesia to which he was entitled only by family wealth, but he later claimed the title “Count von Paalen.” In prewar Paris his art was embraced by the surrealists while his wife, the beautiful Breton poet Alice Rahon, briefly embraced Picasso, then returned to Paalen. In 1939 the couple fled Europe for America in the company of Paalen’s mistress and benefactor, Eva Sulzer. On their way to Mexico, where they had been invited by Frida Kahlo, the threesome took a leisurely detour through Canada and the Pacific Northwest, documenting Indian culture and collecting artifacts. These included a fifteen-foot-high carved screen from a Tlingit chief’s house that Paalen installed against one wall of his Mexican studio, beneath a six-foot-long petrified whale penis suspended like a beam from the ceiling. From this totemic space Paalen as shaman attempted to project a transformative power into the art world, recruiting young initiates such as the visiting American Robert Motherwell, organizing exhibitions like the first New World Surrealist International held in 1940 in Mexico City, and publishing the short-lived but influential journal *DYN*. After a brief effort during the early 1950s to live out the *DYN* project as a communal experiment in California with a new wife, Luchita Hurtado, and longtime surrealist associate Gordon Onslow Ford, Paalen returned briefly to Europe but eventually resettled in Mexico. He married for a third time, now to Isabel Marín, sister of Diego Rivera’s first wife. But Paalen suffered the withdrawal of Eva Sulzer’s patronage and became involved in smuggling antiquities across the Mexican border. After turning to alcohol and drugs, he

finally committed a carefully staged suicide in 1959.

This is the stuff of movies (perhaps a sequel to *Frida*?) or of romantic novels. In fact, the latter part of Paalen’s career has been fictionalized in the novel *Acts of Theft* by Arthur A. Cohen (1980). However, in the first full-length study of Paalen to appear in English, Amy Winter barely registers the romance of the artist’s life, although the book’s organization is loosely chronological. Winter’s focus is on the sources and influence of Paalen’s ideas. Paalen the theorist overshadows even Paalen the artist. His magnum opus, in Winter’s account, appears to be the journal *DYN*, which Paalen claimed to have undertaken “that one day it will not be said of me ‘He was only an artist.’” Intensifying the bias in favor of theory, Winter’s appendix, listing the contents of the six issues of *DYN* from 1942 to 1944, records only the textual content, although the issues were lavishly illustrated. Winter’s goal of stating the case for Paalen’s influence may seem to demand this bias. His one indisputable innovation in the technique of painting is the “automatic” practice of *fumage*, tellingly described by Paalen as “passing candle-smoke swiftly over a freshly prepared surface and then interpreting through new brushwork the design suggested by it.” To the motive of formal invention, the chief force that propelled the avant-garde throughout the twentieth century, Paalen adds the suspiciously literary motive of “interpreting.” Throughout Paalen’s career, the medium becomes liberated from the message only in rare instances, such as the untitled drawing of 1938 that Winter reproduces and reasonably characterizes as “predicting the ‘action’ and ‘drip’ painting that became the hallmark of Abstract Expressionist style.” But Winter adds, “[t]o allow such instinctive and involuntary creations to stand as artworks was unusual for Paalen, whose intellectual and conceptual powers more often intervened.” If we are going to end up with ideas anyway, why not get them more directly through Paalen’s discursive texts?

Answering this question in favor of the texts does not solve Winter’s problem in tackling Paalen, since the further question arises: which of Paalen’s

ideas is most powerful or influential? On this question, Winter herself appears to be divided, judging from the contradictory impulses that threaten the coherence of her book. Her announced intention is to show that *DYN* “made a major contribution to the discourse of modern art and had a profound impact on the development of New York School Abstract Expressionism.” In light of this intention, one would expect her to focus on the sixth issue of *DYN* (November 1944), in which emerging American artists (Baziotes, Motherwell, Pollock) are placed on an equal footing with surrealist exiles (Paalen, Matta, Onslow Ford), both in the reproductions of artwork and in the texts. Motherwell’s lecture, “The Modern Painter’s World,” follows Paalen’s essay, “On the Meaning of Cubism Today.” This conjunction suggests that Paalen’s most important contribution to the development of important contribution to the development of avant-garde art, with its increased tendency to abstraction, was his definition of “the crisis of the subject,” as he called it. Paalen’s and Motherwell’s essays in *DYN* share this concern, as did Motherwell, Baziotes, Newman, and other artists when they founded a school called “The Subjects of the Artist” in New York in 1948. Winter notes this connection, but she buries it in a disjointed chapter titled “The New Man in Barnett Newman,” which digresses extensively on the attraction of “Nietzschean archaism,” as Ann Gibson has called it, among artists in New York in the mid-1940s. To suggest that Paalen, too, displayed Nietzschean tendencies is hardly to claim a distinctive contribution for Paalen himself. On the other hand, by devoting an entire chapter to the special “Amerindian” issue of *DYN* (double number 4–5, December 1943), Winter highlights Paalen’s concern with the development of a scientific anthropology, the source of the most powerful idea connecting Winter’s study overall. We might call it the idea of the Other, the possibility of recognizing independent existence outside the domain of the romantic, imperialist ego. The best chapter in Winter’s book draws an extended comparison between André Breton’s and Paalen’s treatment of Mexican culture along these lines, with Breton poetically reinventing Mexico as a dream landscape and Paalen in *DYN* “publishing the work of anthropologists and archeologists as well as artists and poets...to distinguish and harmonize the differences between art and science, to construct a pic-

ture of American cultures truer to indigenous perception and reality,” as Winter explains.

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The alternative accounts that generate unresolved tension in Winter’s study seem to come down to the question of whether Paalen’s significance is to be measured in historical or contemporary terms. To trace Paalen’s connections to the New York School argues for his importance at a crucial turning point in the history of modern art. To focus on Paalen’s idea of the Other is to suggest that his significance may have had to await recognition until the present moment, when the Other has emerged as a central idea in politics, philosophy, psychology, and the arts. I suspect this may be a false dichotomy, however, and that Winter has in fact missed an opportunity to give a more fully integrated account of Paalen’s theory and practice. The problem of “the subject of the artist,” the problem that linked Paalen and Motherwell, was fundamentally a problem of the ego. In “The Modern Painter’s World,” Motherwell advocates formalism not for its own sake but as a means to “the objectivization of the ego,” in contrast to the subjectivism that he criticizes in surrealism. Yet Motherwell praises surrealist “automatic” techniques as “one of the twentieth century’s greatest formal inventions.” The connection between the discovery of form and recognition of the Other that is implied in Motherwell’s lecture was made explicit much later by the New York School poet and art critic John Ashbery in a commentary on surrealist automatism, including Paalen’s technique of *fumage*. “In all these instances,” Ashbery writes, “the governing principle seems to be not so much automatism...as self-abnegation in the interests of a superior realism, one which will reflect the realities both of the spirit (rather than the individual consciousness) and of the world as perceived by it: the state in which *Je est un autre*, in Rimbaud’s phrase.” Paalen had also looked back to Rimbaud in an essay entitled “Surprise and Inspiration,” published in the second issue of *DYN* (July–August 1942) and later reprinted in the company of a Motherwell collage in Paalen’s collection *Form and Sense* (1945). Winter, who tendentiously

cites this conjunction as evidence that Motherwell may have translated Paalen's essay, reads the relevant passage in the light of "Jungian principles," but it is clear that Paalen's authority is artistic practice at least as much as psychological theory. He declares, "the dream, egoistically preoccupied with satisfying individual desire, usually remains without collective importance even when using universal symbols—while artistic creation, using symbols personally, attains collective importance when it succeeds in formulating what inspiration reveals in the depths of the ego—there where 'I is another' ('je est un autre')."

On the basis of such insight, achieved both through theory and through practice, Paalen should count today as much as he did during his lifetime. Amy Winter's study does not in itself accomplish a full accounting, but it is, in more than one sense, a dry run.

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