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Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement by Whitney Chadwick

Review by: Janet Kaplan

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Lauretis on semiotic theories of film and gender—forge new feminist theories of the individual not only as subject but also as subject of representation.

2. The casual format is no bonus for those in the bifocal class—tiny print and murky pictures often make for sore eyes.
3. Pollock is discussing here Mary Kelly's "Re-Veiling Modernist Criticism," *Screen* (1981), vol. 22, no. 3.

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WOMEN ARTISTS AND THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT, by Whitney Chadwick.

Little, Brown, 1985.

Reviewed by Janet Kaplan

Inherent in the Surrealist position on the nature of women is a cruel irony. André Breton exalted Woman as the primary source of artistic creativity, saying, "The time should come to assert the ideas of woman at the expense of those of man, the bankruptcy of which is today so tumultuously complete." (*Arcane 17*, 1945, 89) He advanced definitions of Woman as inspirational muse, visionary goddess, beguiling seductress, and most significantly, as *femme-enfant*, the woman-child whose naive and spontaneous innocence, uncorrupted by logic or reason, brings her into closer contact with the intuitive realm of the unconscious so crucial to Surrealism. However, these roles were predicated on the idea of Woman as object of male definition and catalyst to male creativity and left little room for the independent creative identities of the women associated with the Surrealist group.

As Whitney Chadwick points out in her groundbreaking book, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, probably no other 20th-century art movement was so explicit and far-reaching in its theorizing about women, and none attracted more women to its ranks. "Surrealism offered many of these women their first glimpse of a world in which creative activity and liberation from family-imposed social expectations might coexist, one in which rebellion was viewed as a virtue, imagination as the passport to a more liberated life." (67)

The women associated with Surrealism were from diverse backgrounds and cultures: Valentine Hugo, Jacqueline Lamba (Breton), Dora Maar, Valentine Penrose, and Alice Rahon (Paalen) from France; Eileen Agar, Emmy Bridgewater, Leonora Carrington, Ithell Colquhoun, Grace Pail-

thorpe, and Edith Rimmington from England; Lee Miller, Kay Sage (Tanguy), and Dorothea Tanning from the United States; Nusch Eluard, Germany; Leonor Fini, Italy; Frida Kahlo, Mexico; Rita Kernn-Larsen, Denmark; Meret Oppenheim, Switzerland; Toyen (Marie Cerminová), Czechoslovakia; and Remedios Varo, Spain. Some were drawn into the movement by their associations with male Surrealists, others were Surrealist "discoveries," and a few were attracted to it after seeing international Surrealist exhibitions. All were adventurous in their pursuit of a challenging life of artistic and personal experimentation. "Young, beautiful, and rebellious they became an embodiment of their age and a herald of the future as they explored more fully than any group of women before them the interior sources of woman's creative imagination." (9)

Since few of these women worked together in any collaborative enterprise and some barely knew each other, Chadwick emphasizes the importance of treating them as individuals. Yet in analyzing their work she discovered striking commonalities in terms of strategies and focus. Tracing these parallels, she organizes her argument thematically in chapters that deal with the artist as muse; revolution and sexuality; the female earth, nature, and the imagination; the hermetic tradition; and cycles of narrative fantasy. Avoiding the tedium of serial biographies, Chadwick interpolates biographical information only as it relates to these thematic explorations. (Capsule biographies of the 21 women are offered in an appendix.)

Among the iconographic parallels Chadwick examines, the most striking are found in the numerous self-portraits the women created. Some literal, others fantastic or metaphoric, they reveal an almost obsessive preoccupation with personal reality—as though the culture's denial of women's experience prompted an intense quest for greater self-awareness and knowledge. As Chadwick says of Leonor Fini when describing works in which the artist emphasized images of women as a way of rejecting a world defined by men: "By placing woman at the center of these compositions, and making her experience of the world paramount, she asserts a female consciousness that has no need of manifestoes, theories, or proselytizing." (87)

These self-portraits also record a kind of role playing, an exploration of alternative identities in pursuit of personal definition. The women often appear in costume and in highly theatrical settings, creating a stagelike artifice that stands in seemingly deliberate contrast to the autobiographical allusions that are often the real sub-

jects of the work. In Dorothea Tanning's *Birthday*, for example, painted for her 30th birthday, the artist appears barefoot, wearing a skirt covered with tangled, thorny brambles and a troubador's blouse of satin ribbons, flounced sleeves, and lace cuffs, which is torn to reveal her bare breasts. Accompanied by a winged, pig-snouted creature with staring eyes and taloned feet, she emerges from one of a multitude of half-opened doors that suggest the opening and closing of possibilities she must face as, no longer young, she confronts this watershed birthday. Given the Surrealist premium on youth for its women, her costume of satin and thorns is a poignant evocation of the significance of such a life passage.

In *The Two Fridas* by Frida Kahlo, painted during the process of a divorce initiated by her husband, Diego Rivera (they later remarried), two images of their hearts exposed and bound together by encircling veins, sit side by side holding hands. One is dressed in a version of the native Mexican Tehuana costume that the artist chose as her trademark—an emblem of the commitment to Mexican cultural roots (Kahlo's mother was of Indian ancestry) she shared with Rivera. The other wears a long, which Victorian gown that reflects the heritage of Kahlo's German father but also alludes to the European colonialism that Rivera so publicly denounced. This latter figure represents the woman Rivera rejected and, despite the surgical pincers she holds, she cannot stanch the flow of blood that spurts from her opened vein. Here, too, the artist uses costumes and props to externalize inner pain. The theatricality of both Tanning's and Kahlo's self-images, reinforced by meticulous attention to detail, heightens the impact of their searingly personal content. Similar devices are found in the works of many of these women.

A related series of images refers to various forms of psychic quest. Often developed through reference to alchemical hermetic traditions and to occult means of repossessing women's ancient knowledge and special creative powers, they record varieties of explorations—physical, metaphysical, psychological, and spiritual—in which female characters search for mystical truths. In contexts that range from the alchemical recipes that Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington concocted in their kitchens to Ithell Colquhoun's occult novel, *The Goose of Hermogenes* (London, 1961), such themes appear repeatedly. Most of the women explored these ideas with literary as well as visual images, and Chadwick includes fascinating excerpts from their short stories, plays, poems, journals, and autobiographical memoirs, many previously unpublished.

Identification of women's creative

powers with those of nature is yet another theme developed by many Surrealist women. Clearly aware of the debates surrounding this issue, Chadwick carefully threads a difficult course through the minefield of seemingly essentialist readings, rejected by most feminists, that associate women with nature. Pointing to evidence in the work, she presents the lush tropical landscapes of Frida Kahlo that surround and threaten to engulf her body in a number of self-portraits; the rich vegetation of Remedios Varo in whose work nature becomes a setting for magical, creative transformations; and the denuded landscapes of Kay Sage, whose austere visions of a nature empty of habitation and vegetation serve as a personal iconography of psychic desolation. Although not suggesting that nature is a domain exclusively reserved for women nor denying women access to the other realms of culture and intellect, such imagery reflects the deep identification many of these women felt with the elemental forces of nature.

Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement is organized thematically with a chronological overlay. Within this structure the women appear and disappear, thwarting attempts to chronicle the progression of their lives. While frustrating (especially because so many of the women are little known), that format serves metaphorically to mirror the reality of their lives—the women existed at some remove from the movement and their participation within it was episodic.

Decoding Surrealist theory as it relates to women, Chadwick examines the women's participation in the movement and their response to the program the men had developed whereby Woman was discussed in the abstract or, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, as "the Other." The Surrealist commitment to a spiritual and poetic ideal of Woman embodied polarized visions at once romantic and revolutionary—on the one hand reflecting the 19th-century image of woman as passive, dependent, and defined through her relationship to an active male presence and on the other the image of the erotic female as a catalyst for the transformation of consciousness. Such incompatible visions effectively gutted the Surrealist goal to radically revise gender values and rendered it ultimately alienating for women. Especially difficult was the image of the *femme-enfant*, which, in equating woman's creativity with youth and naiveté, denied women the growth inherent in the process of maturation.

It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that although the majority of women associated with Surrealism cited Breton and the others as supporters and the movement as a sympathetic milieu, they saw themselves as func-

tioning outside its sphere. They were rarely invited to partake in Surrealist debate—even in discussions of sexuality. However, if the men excluded them from serious theoretical inquiry, one senses that the women, although they remained their friends and lovers, distanced themselves from the men as well—they mocked the pomposity of their theories, made light of their excommunications, and viewed the intrigue of male allegiances and betrayals with bemused disdain.

The integration of the illustrations visually and structurally into the text echoes the story Chadwick tells. One thread of images related to the text documents the women's relationship to the Surrealist movement. A parallel but separate thread emerges in a series of extensively captioned photo groupings interspersed in double-page spreads that form a subtext. Combining intriguing documentary photos of the women (many published here for the first time) with reproductions of their work, these photo spreads are also thematic and focus on images of the male nude, of maternity, automatism, divination and nature, eros and thanatos, as well as spiritual journeys. Although the rationale for the photo choices in some of these groupings is unclear, they are visually striking and provide an irresistible invitation to read the entire text.

With her sure grasp of Surrealist ideology, Chadwick skillfully shifts her emphasis between the Surrealist Woman and the real women associated with Surrealism. She is especially strong when re-viewing Surrealism, Freudianism, and other ideologies from a woman's point of view. In an extensive discussion of the image of Gradiva, "the girl splendid in walking," for example, she traces the figure from a classical Greek relief, to a turn-of-the-century German novel (*Gradiva: A Pompeiian Fantasy*, by Wilhelm Jensen), to Freud's analysis of that novel in terms of the workings of the unconscious, and, finally, to the Surrealists, for whom Gradiva became a mythic image of Woman as mediator between the real and the unreal. An image used by Breton, Masson, Dali, and Eluard, she became, in Chadwick's analysis, "a means of symbolically demonstrating the dynamism of repressed erotic desire and a myth of metamorphosis . . . [that] subsumed the lives of real women associated with the Surrealists." (51)

While unyielding in her critique of Surrealist theory as it pertains to women, Chadwick also captures the élan with which the Surrealists lived, recounting stories of Surrealist parties and summers in the country. She offers tantalizing vignettes of Tanning in a leopard-skin costume covered with breasts, Lee Miller sporting long green fingernails and gold handcuffs (a gift

from husband-to-be Roland Penrose), and Meret Oppenheim peeing into the hat of a pompous man seated near her on the terrace of a Paris café. But one wishes for more extensive descriptions of the individual works that these women produced, especially given Chadwick's evocative descriptive skill.

The date limitations Chadwick imposed on her material (from 1924, the date of the first Surrealist manifesto, to 1947, the year of a major exhibition celebrating Surrealism's postwar return to Paris), frame the years of the movement in its original and most sustained form. But, as Chadwick herself explains, many of the women did their most important work after leaving the Surrealist circle. It would be most interesting, therefore, to see the study extended into the 1950s, the 1960s, and even the 1970s to learn the full range of the women's achievements.

Acknowledging the feminist implications of a book that largely excludes the work of male artists and prudently avoids the comparative mode, Chadwick elucidates the ways in which the women adopted, adapted, transformed, ignored, or overruled the theories of the male Surrealists. It speaks to the still-revolutionary nature of Chadwick's enterprise that one is refreshingly surprised to find a major art movement examined in terms of its female participants. Several of the women central to the story—including Tanning, Fini, and Oppenheim, creator of the paradigmatic Surrealist object, *The Fur-Lined Teacup*—objected to the all-female nature of the book, however, and resisted or refused participation in the project. It is ironic that for fear of further marginalization, they were willing to be left out of the historical record once more.

Feminist art historians have reached the point where the "archaeology of women's lives" no longer needs to be the primary focus of their research. Yet there is still important work to be done in examining those who have been lost, misplaced, or overlooked, especially with the added focus of analyzing their place within and outside of mainstream movements. Among the most interesting developments of feminist scholarship have been challenges to the very concept of a mainstream in art history. Yet it is important to explore those instances in which women did choose to associate with major movements and to evaluate the results. This is especially true for Surrealism because it was a movement so focused on concepts and theories directly related to women.

A subtle, intelligent analysis, written with energy and style, Chadwick's book carries an enthusiasm refreshingly free from the defensiveness that often plagues studies of women artists or other marginalized groups. The author has effectively combined a

cogent and searching critique of the institutionalized ideological practice of Surrealism with illuminating insights into the complex and often troubled dynamic that developed between the Surrealist movement and its favorite subject. Rather than fixing women within pre-existing structures, Chadwick questions the validity of these structures and their different interpretations by men and women. She offers a gendered discourse on the ways these essentially powerless women negotiated power for themselves through their own work—how they found their unique voices by transmuting Surrealist ideology through their own vision and transforming it to their own ends.

Not only does this work of pioneering research constitute an essential corrective to the historical record that has marginalized and trivialized these women, it also establishes provocative areas for further investigation and analysis. When embarking on research for the book, Chadwick was warned more than once by former Surrealists "that while the lives of male Surrealists may be considered 'history,' attempts to piece together the lives of the women involved constituted a search for 'gossip.'" (7) Whitney Chadwick has written history. •

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WOMEN ART EDUCATORS, edited by Enid Zimmerman and Mary Ann Stankiewicz.

WOMEN ART EDUCATORS II, edited by Mary Ann Stankiewicz and Enid Zimmerman.

Women's Caucus of the National Art Education Association, 1982, 1985.

Reviewed by Renee Sandell

Inspired by the work of feminist artists and art historians, women art educators have been uncovering the women hidden in their professional history. The nine essays in the 1982 edition of *Women Art Educators* encouraged further research about the contributions, role, and status of women in art education. The 1985 publication *Women Art Educators II*, with 14 essays, is twice the thickness of the first volume and attests to the growing interest in excavating female professional roots. Both volumes were sponsored by the Mary Rouse Memorial Fund at Indiana University and reflect a pioneer spirit in both content and form (e.g., inexpensive binding of

photocopied papers). Critical issues related to professionalism are explored as the books identify notable yet under-recognized women who have made important contributions to American art education in its broadest sense. The term *art educator* is loosely defined to include college educators, art supervisors in public school systems, museum educators, researchers, and artists as teachers, as well as artist-educators in traditional societies.

Art education, the offspring of two disciplines—art and education—boasts a list of well-known males in the profession, among them Horace Mann, Walter Smith, Arthur W. Dow, Henry T. Bailey, Thomas Munro, and Viktor Lowenfeld. These two volumes raise important questions about women in the field: Who, for example, were the female teachers of our artists, art historians, and critics, and how have they helped shape the aesthetic values of the American art public? In responding to these questions, the authors of these essays explore the conditions under which the women worked and the obstacles they faced. The biographical studies provide insight into the nature of the field of art education and its valuing systems, as well as into the situation of professional women in 19th- and 20th-century America.

The first volume opens with a tribute to and profile of Mary Rouse (1925-76) (to whom the book was dedicated) by Guy Hubbard, her close colleague and textbook collaborator. Hubbard discusses Rouse's strengths, noting the gender obstacles she faced and overcame. Although in the field for only 13 years—from age 38 to her death at 51—she became an outstanding and influential educator. Rouse's achievements are also highlighted by Eleanor Neal in the opening essay of Volume II. These include Rouse's challenge to Viktor Lowenfeld's Haptic/Visual Theory at a 1963 National Art Education Association (NAEA) convention, her work with pioneer art educator June King McFee, her research on southern black colleges, her devotion to her students, and her local and national service. Neal closes with testimonials from well-known art educators and comments that Rouse "proved that there was no limit to what a woman could achieve as a professional in the field of art education." (18)

Robert Saunders' "The Search for Mrs. Minot: An Essay on the Caprices of Historical Research" is a report of the author's amusing but frustrating search for the elusive Mrs. Minot, who worked as an art educator c. 1838, a time when even women of achievement assumed a modest pose. Saunders happened on Mrs. Minot by chance, as did other authors serendipitously find the subjects of their subsequent searches. Saunders' quest illuminates the problems of

doing research on women: few documented their lives, which, along with the rest of society, they assumed were of little value. (The fact that the dates of many of the women in these studies are incomplete is further evidence of how much of women's history is lost.)

Mary Ann Stankiewicz's "Woman, Artist, Art Educator: Professional Image Among Women Art Educators" focuses on the roles and images of women art educators at Syracuse University from 1900 to 1940. Discussing first the Victorian stereotypes of both artists and women, she then explores the fusion of the personal and professional lives of Mary Ketcham (b. 1882), Rilla Jackman (b. 1870), and Catherine Condon (b. 1892), known locally as the "Syracuse ladies." They were all single and enjoyed homemaking, took little part in national activities, spent their free time making art, and stressed to their students that "good teachers were artists first." (45)

Better known were Belle Boas (1884-1953) and Marion Quin Dix (b. 1902). Boas's professional contributions, reviewed by Enid Zimmerman, include several books, outstanding programs at New York City's Horace Mann School and the Baltimore Museum of Art, and active participation in national conferences. Anne Gregory's interview with Marion Quin Dix, the first female NAEA president, is followed by Jerome Hausman's tribute to her as "facilitator, helper, colleague and friend." Dix not only was an outstanding classroom teacher, but as a spokeswoman for the field, "she helped bring women art educators out from behind their fans." (5)

Zimmerman also recounts the life of a once-famous sculptor in "Whatever Happened to Malvina Hoffman?" Known throughout the world in the 1930s for her monumental bronzes depicting the races of man, she fell into obscurity shortly thereafter. But Hoffman (1887-1966) also lectured and gave workshops, and her book *Sculpture Inside Out* (1939), still used today, gives a history of sculpture, helpful technical instructions, and advice on how to organize a studio.

In "American Indian Women as Art Educators," Leona Zastrow discusses how basketweaving and pottery design and construction methods are still transmitted through female family members in Native American tribal societies. However, now that the teaching of traditional craft skills is moving from home to school, new roles are being developed for the women who have taught these skills.

In "Searching for Woman Art Educators of the Past," the final essay in the first volume, Stankiewicz gives a three-page bibliography of basic references for doing historical research. She describes research as being both "tedious