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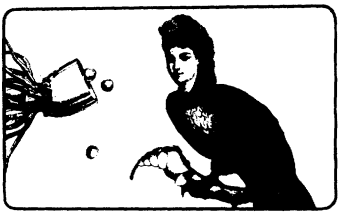
Source: *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (SPRING 1975), pp. 31-54
Published by: Penn State University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/27796489
Accessed: 05/03/2014 11:36

ART HISTORY AND THE CASE FOR THE WOMEN OF SURREALISM

Gloria Feman Orenstein



This is a particularly propitious moment for us to turn our attention to the subject of the Women of Surrealism, for we recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* and 1975 has been officially designated by the United Nations as International Women's Year. The major objective of the year is to focus world attention on the infinite and varied resources of women in all fields, and I should like to devote myself specifically to the accomplishments of some women in the fine arts.

It is particularly significant that we give the Women of Surrealism a preliminary retrospective at this time in the hope of encouraging galleries, museums, and publishers to include them in their plans for future solo shows, group shows, and publications.

I should like to begin by explaining what motivated my original quest for further knowledge about the Women of Surrealism. Trained as I was in comparative literature, my recent venture into art history came about as one of the more unexpected rewards of the research that I was engaged in for my doctoral dissertation. During the course of my study of Surrealism in the contemporary theatre I began to correspond with Leonora Carrington. In one of her early letters to me she enclosed a clipping from the rotogravure section of a local Mexican newspaper that carried an interview with her, and several color reproductions of her recent art work. I was immediately struck by the fact that I had never seen any of these paintings before in any of the books on Surrealism, nor had I ever come across any monographic study of her work. In fact, as I began to search through the literature of the surrealist movement I could find only casual or anecdotal reference to her, and most of what I did find seemed to me to be completely outdated. Thus I began to suspect that the portrayal of her importance as a surrealist artist was inadequate and needed to be brought up to date. I decided to set out in search of the lost Women of Surrealism in order to trace the evolution of their careers, to study their more recent works, and to relate my findings to the theories about women that were promulgated by André Breton and espoused by many of the artists and writers who adhered

JGE: THE JOURNAL OF GENERAL EDUCATION XXVII, 1 (Spring 1975).
Published by The Pennsylvania State University Press,
University Park and London.

to the surrealist movement. I felt committed to assuring that these women be written back into art history and be given their rightful place within the framework of a movement that had, after all, exalted the creativity of women.

The results of my research and of my visits to surrealist women artists in France and Mexico led me to conclude that the role of women in Surrealism was ridden with paradoxes and fraught with puzzling contradictions. For, although Breton in his many writings had extolled the special psychic gifts and talents of women, the specific type of woman that he admired most was the *Femme-Enfant*, the Woman-Child. She was held up as a splendid example of that being who incarnated a purity, an innocence, a spontaneity, and a náiveté that put her more easily in touch with the world of the dream, the unconscious, and the realm of the imagination. The Woman-Child, it was maintained, was uncorrupted by logic or abstract thought, and therefore, according to Breton in *Arcane 17*, "the time should have come to declare oneself in art uneqivocally against man and for woman."[1] He continued: "Art should be systematically preparing for the accession of the Woman-Child to the whole empire of perceptible things."[2] Since the Woman-Child was heralded as the ideal by the surrealists, I began to be haunted by the following questions: "How could a woman in her mid-fifties, as these women obviously were now, continue to identify with the ideal of the Woman-Child?" and "In what way or to what extent did this myth of the *Femme-Enfant* actually conspire to guarantee the exclusion of the artistic work of the more mature woman from recognition either within the surrealist movement itself, or from acceptance within the mainstream of art history as a whole?"

Many of the Women of Surrealism confided to me that, indeed, as they grew older the ideal of the *Femme-Enfant* did occasion an identity crisis concerned with the role of the mature woman as creator. In fact, it was apparent that the conflict between creativity and maturity was not specific only to the Women of Surrealism, but that it was one of the major reasons why women artists have been written out of art history down through the ages. Since this subject is so relevant to the matter at hand, I would like to point out that the major textbooks on art history—Janson's *History of Art*, Gardner's *Art through the Ages*, and Gombrich's *The Story of Art*—do not mention any women artists. This state of affairs is closely related to the theme that we have been considering—that of the *Femme-Enfant*—for when women artists are finally discussed and taken seriously by male art historians and critics, it seems that they are more readily accepted if they adhere or conform to the stereotype of the Woman-Child.

An excellent illustration of this type of criticism is to be found in François Mathey's book *Six Femmes Peintres*, a book devoted entirely to the study of women artists such as Morisot, Gonzalés, Séraphine, Valadon, Blanchard, and Laurencin. In it Mathey states: "If feminine art suggests plastically but with grace what men express with authority, if feminine painting reserves for itself the domain of exquisite and charming things that only children and fairies have access to, then Marie Laurencin is a painter."[3]

Walter Sparrow, in his book *Women Painters of the World*, published in 1905, writes: "No male artist, however gifted he may be, will ever be able to experience all the emotional life to which women are subject. And no woman of abilities . . . will be able to borrow from men anything so invaluable to art as her own intuition and the prescient tenderness and grace of her *nursery-nature*."[4] Feminist art critic Cindy Nemser notes that "Critics will praise a woman striving to paint like a man as long as she does not succeed too well. If her emulation comes too close for comfort, then the woman artist will be conden..ned for denying her female nature."[5] She quotes George Moore's appraisal of Angelica Kaufmann's work when he wrote: "Though her work is individually feeble . . . she was content to remain a woman in her art . . . she imitated Sir Joshua Reynolds to the best of her ability and did all in her power to induce him to marry her. How she could have shown more wisdom it is difficult to see."[6]

The message pervading this kind of art criticism is obviously that women artists should either cop out or opt out before maturity because the work of a mature female artist is somehow thought of as being antithetical to her "feminine" nature.

I should like to show that the Women of Surrealism forged their own autonomous identities above and beyond the restricting confines of any definitions such as those of the *Femme-Enfant* or the *Femme Fatale* bestowed upon them by the surrealists, that they maintained their independent identity and created their own artistic worlds without sacrificing their ability to penetrate the realm of the imagination or to capture the magical imagery of the dream. By their example they proved conclusively that maturity did not imply the abandoning of a woman's creative powers nor the betrayal of her sexual identity.

Finally, the concept of the surrealist life-style itself is one that needs to be examined more thoroughly from the feminist point of view. Many of the women who participated in the activities and events of the surrealist movement believed that it sufficed to live the surrealist life and leave the domain of artistic creation to the men.

How many female poets and artists accepted the evaluation of their role that relegated them to the subordinate position of "surrealist object" rather than that of creator of "surrealist objects"? To what extent does the avant-garde life-style mitigate against the opportunity for women to demand the right to artistic creation for themselves as well as the right to the artist's life-style?

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir criticizes Breton's ideal of reciprocal love because it does not bring up the question of woman's private destiny apart from that of man. She makes the observation that for the surrealists, woman did not represent the conventional "sex object" but rather the more unconventional "surrealist object." She says: "This unique woman, at once carnal and artificial, natural and human, casts the same spell as the equivocal objects dear to the Surrealists: she is the spoon-shoe, the table-wolf, the marble-sugar that the poet finds at the flea market or invents in a dream; she shares in the secret of familiar objects suddenly revealed in their true nature, and in the secret of plants and stones: she is all things."[7]

This brings us to a consideration of Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias*, the pre-surrealist drama for which the term "Surréaliste" was originally coined. Here is the prototype of the reverse of the Woman-Child as it relates to Surrealism. Thérèse, the protagonist, after renouncing the role of child-bearer and housewife and proclaiming that she is a Feminist, is magically transformed into Tiresias the Seer. Although this appears ridiculous and farcical because of its humorous exaggerations, Thérèse can actually prefigure that new surrealist feminist heroine who proves that once woman has renounced all stereotypes, has gained autonomy and independence, she actually acquires psychic powers and becomes a clairvoyant. In other words, in abandoning her "feminine" role, the loss of the special and unique ability to be in touch with other realms of existence which was thought to be specific to women like the *Femme-Enfant* does not occur. On the contrary, woman's psychic powers are actually enhanced when she is not defined according to her sex-role identity.

It is against this background that we can more readily appreciate why the subject matter of the paintings by the Women of Surrealism is largely dominated by the theme of Woman as Subject rather than as Object. Surrealist women, as I discovered, have long been involved in a search for a definition of their own nature and have been probing the symbolism related to the Feminine Archetype in order to postulate the attributes of this emerging identity: Woman as Goddess, Woman as the Great Mother, as the Alchemist, as the Scientist, as the Spinner and

Weaver of the destinies of mankind, and, above all, as Creator, Spiritual Guide, and Visionary. She sees herself, ultimately, resembling the *Magna Mater* rather than the *Femme-Enfant*. The paintings of these women defy the stereotypes that are usually associated with art done by women. In Leonora Carrington's works we find a mathematical preoccupation with geometrical figures of symbolic representation, and in Remedios Varo's art we find scientifically constructed whimsical vehicles of locomotion. Furthermore, the use of symbolism related to the esoteric traditions in the work of many of these artists shows a precise cultural erudition and, in general, their work can be said to reflect maturity of thought, technical mastery, and humor, in addition to a continuing search for the true nature of their female identity.

Although she currently would deny her connection with Surrealism, I would like to begin by considering some of the early work of Léonor Fini as it relates to the question of women artists, because she was one of the few women that I interviewed who, although a close friend of all the surrealists, never attended group meetings because she insisted on maintaining her autonomy and independence. However, she did participate in surrealist group shows. Arriving from Italy in 1935, she exhibited with the surrealists at their International Exhibition in London in 1936. Her first New York show was held at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1938. In an interview she told me that her imagery is usually alchemically precise. In his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* Breton observed that surrealist research and alchemical research have analogous goals. For the alchemist, the process of transforming base metals into gold was concommitant with another transformation—that of the alchemist, himself, towards the ennoblement of the soul in his quest for spiritual enlightenment. In the series of paintings *The Guardian of the Phoenixes* and *The Guardian with the Red Egg*, the Egg is associated with the alchemical vessel of transformation—the alchemist's oven, which is often referred to as the Egg. It is the vessel in which spiritual transformation transpires, and as the symbol of the female, it indicates that woman is also the universal vessel of creation, and not merely of physical birth but also of spiritual rebirth. The conclusion of the alchemical process is the production of the philosophers' stone, which is red and represents the unification of opposites and the integration of the conscious with the unconscious. It is a symbol of totality. When linked with the phoenix it suggests a parallel between alchemical transmutation and spiritual rebirth, all connected with the new definition of woman's emerging identity. Thus Léonor Fini identifies woman as the supreme alchemist and the womb as the

alchemistic retort in *La Dame Ovale*. Several of her other paintings, such as *The Spinners* and *The Seamstress*, depict the feminine principle of the Great Mother, who weaves the web of life as she creates the fabric of the child within her body. Léonor Fini's world is a Matriarchy. Her love of cats, both in her paintings and in her life, is partially related to worship of the Goddess. In Egypt the cat was linked with the moon and sacred to the goddesses Isis and Bast. Bast was, in fact, a cat-headed Goddess. The cat, the witch's familiar, also evokes the world of sorcery and witchcraft in *The Ceremony*. Léonor Fini has identified herself with the Moon Goddess as well.

Yet, Léonor Fini's women are often unexpectedly bald, for she leans towards the ideal of the Androgyne. She is in favor of a world that does not worship virility. She has said about her painting *Le Fait Accompli*, where "in a café full of girls the outline of a man is drawn on the ground in chalk in the same way that police mark out the position of a dead body,"[8] that "It is in this outline that the witch rebels against all the social opacity of men. I am in favor of a world where there is little or no sex distinction."[9] This theme is echoed in *Capital Punishment*, which depicts a rebellion of women against male domination or a symbolic castration. The world of women that she explores has now investigated frankly and openly the theme of lesbianism. Léonor Fini was a precursor of the women's movement in her conscious and intelligent exploration of themes relating to woman's identity. By delving into the female psyche to unlock the symbols that the unconscious reveals, she has shown that individual autonomy can enhance a woman's ability to come into contact with the sources of her creativity in the ongoing process of spiritual and creative development. Léonor Fini has said:

> I always thought that woman is badly treated, unjustly considered. I was thus rebellious against the feminine condition when I was very, very young. I always conducted myself relative to that revolt. I feel it is just that women be independent and not submissive. But I also see in this domain a very great confusion. I detest the word equality. It doesn't exist. Women are not equal. I often feel that in wanting to be equal to men who, let's not forget it, carry on their backs the weight of an outdated civilization, they merely praise men. If women want to live in female racism, that too is bad (it is perhaps a phase that they must go through). If women think of themselves as good propagandists for women's rights by becoming academicians, it is an error. The academy belongs to a civilization that is fading. It is a vestige. Why must women get mixed up in what are only

> the remains of masculine institutions? Women should have the pride to invent other glories, other honors, or better still, to refuse them, to be authentic as they know how to be and so sovereign as to never have any need for them at all.[10]

Fini's painting *La Chambre Noire* of 1939 includes a full portrait of Leonora Carrington, whose art is born of a deep inner necessity to refine our perception of that point referred to by Breton as "le point suprême" at which contradictions cease to exist, by putting us in contact with the multiple realms and levels of our experience through a visionary process. In order for us to evolve we must become seers of the invisible, as in her painting *Sidhe: The White People of Dana Tuatha de Danaan*. The title of this painting refers to "the treasures of Tuatha de Danann (that legendary race of Irish ancestors who were at once gods and kings)."[11] According to Jessie L. Weston, in *From Ritual to Romance*, "The object corresponding to the Grail itself is the Cauldron of the Dagda. No company ever went from it unthankful (or 'unsatisfied')."[12] This is a kind of mystic meal of our ancestors. The painting is an example of her visionary art. The multiple realms and levels of our experience are shown through the visionary process in which luminous bodies of our ancestors or astral aspects of ourselves that exist on other planes of reality become manifest.

Leonora Carrington's art probes and delves into the unchartered vistas of the psyche, searching for the new territory that we discover when we are in touch with our psychic powers, with a fuller knowledge of our interior world, and with the beings both mythical and archetypal that inhabit it.

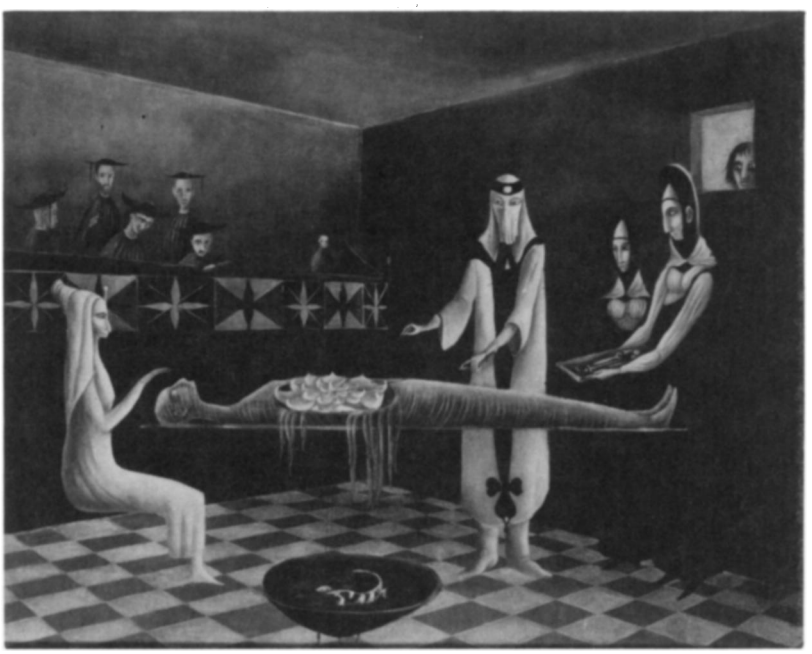
Born in Lancashire, England, in 1917, she studied art in England, Italy, and France. As a student of Amadée Ozenfant, she was soon introduced to the surrealists and participated in their International Surrealist Exhibition of 1938 in Paris. She took up residence with Max Ernst in the south of France until 1940, when he was taken prisoner by the French who were interning enemy aliens. After suffering a mental breakdown, or what might alternatively be described as a breakthrough which opened an inner universe of dream imagery, she made her way via Spain and Portugal to the United States and Mexico. Her experiences in contact with that "other reality" that she entered while in a mental hospital in Santander are related in the narrative *Down Below*, which recaptures in oneiric, mythic, and visionary imagery the story of her psychic voyage inward. She insists upon the need for woman to be given her rightful place in our religious and human systems:

> I felt that through the agency of the sun I was an androgyne, the moon, the Holy Ghost, a gypsy, an acrobat, Leonora Carrington and a woman. I was also destined to be, later, Elizabeth of England. I was she who revealed religions and bore on her shoulders the freedom and the sins of the earth changed into knowledge, the union of Man and Woman with God and the Cosmos, all equal between them. . . . The son was the Sun and I the Moon, an essential element of the Trinity with the microscopic knowledge of the earth, its plants and creatures. I knew that Christ was dead and done for and that I had to take His place, because the Trinity minus a woman and microscopic knowledge had become dry and incomplete. Christ was replaced by the Sun. I was Christ on earth in the person of the Holy Ghost.[13]

Carrington's vision is also psychologically and alchemically precise, for the symbolism of the Holy Ghost, according to Erich Neumann's study *The Great Mother*, represents alchemically the supreme spiritual principle and psychologically the archetype of the Great Mother.[14] The experience thus symbolically signifies the need to recognize and reintegrate the supreme value of the spiritual wisdom inherent in the feminine principle as a prerequisite for human evolution and psychic growth.

Her fantastic mural *El mundo mágico de los Mayas*[15] can be seen in the Chiapas exhibit of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. It evolved from the observations she made during several extended visits to Chiapas, where she gained an intimate knowledge of the people who are today the descendants of the Maya. The mural is based upon the imagery of the *Popol-Vuh*, the Mayan Bible. It combines an imaginative depiction of the magical beliefs of the cultural, legendary, mythical, and marvelous elements of Mayan civilization with a poetic evocation of the landscape that brings out the affinity between the beliefs of the Maya and those of the surrealists. According to Mayan tradition man has two souls—one immortal, which survives him after death and passes on to the other world; the other mortal, which takes the form of an animal and lives in the mountains. Knowledge of one's mortal soul (or souls—for some men had several) was revealed during sleep, through the dream. Thus for both the Maya and the surrealists, the oneiric element which provides the link between our sleeping and waking lives is the key to discovery of knowledge about that point at which our subjective and objective experiences are unified in a vaster totality.

Leonora Carrington's paintings also reveal a deep involvement in the study of alchemy. *The Garden of Paracelsus* refers on one level to



Leonora Carrington *Adieu Amenohtep* (photo: José Verde O.)

the alchemist Paracelsus, who believed that the universal spirit or astral body of man could be created by combining the quintessence of each animal, mineral, and plant. The elixir thus obtained would have the power to rejuvenate man. Paracelsus investigated the plant world, for he sought a plant in the vegetable kingdom that would correspond to gold among the metals. He believed, further, that astral bodies communicated with each other, that living beings communicate with the dead, and that this communication was connected with the influence of magnetism. Leonora Carrington's painting not only relates the story of Paracelsus in a literal pictoral image, but in addition symbolically personifies the steps in the alchemical process. The geometric plan of the painting is laid out on a circle of eight segments topped by a pyramid. The geometry resembles the diagram entitled *The Signature of All Things*, a drawing from the 1730 edition of the works of Jacob Boehn showing definite Rosicrucian influences.[16] On the top of the triangle sits a unicorn. Not only is the unicorn mentioned in the alchemical text or allegory *The Chymical Wedding*,[17] but it is also generally known as a symbol of spiritual knowledge. Its horn is connected with the organ of spiritual sight.[18] Situated at the

apex of the triangle, it indicates that interior vision is the ultimate goal of the process of transformation. The white and black figures to the right are beheaded. The beheading of kings and queens, we are informed by the commentary on *The Chymical Wedding*, indicates that "the principle involved is that through sacrifice alone can higher stages of spiritual development come about."[19] The figure of The Hanged Man in the painting is taken from the Tarot and is also known as The Sacrifice. "Man is depicted as crucified on the symbol of matter. He is the messenger from above to below, of the higher MENTAL to the lower PHYSICAL plane."[20] The Egg of the philosophers and the alchemists is omnipresent. In the Egg, which is also the alchemist's oven, the two antithetical principles, male and female, solar and lunar, sulphur and mercury, are united. The black beings represent the Nigredo; the white, the Albedo. The iconography of decapitated heads from whose source a fountain bursts forth suggests that the head was the receptacle of the spirit and that water, which is the life-force of man, issues from the "center" or the "origin." This fountain is also one containing the elixir of Paracelsus, which he thought of as green. The painting as a whole is green, both for the elixir and for the Emerald Tablets of Hermes Trismegistus.

The theme of alchemy and the allegorical reading of a work of art are apparent in another painting: *The Burning of Giordano Bruno.* Here Carrington refers to Bruno's idea of practical magic by which magic images are placed on the wheel of one memory system, to which correspond other wheels on which were remembered all the physical contents of the terrestrial world. The possessor of this system rose above time and reflected the whole universe of nature and man in his mind.[21] On the bottom at the left sits the Lion, "which corresponds to gold or the subterranean sun. . . . In Alchemy it corresponds to the 'fixed' Element—to sulphur."[22] On the right is Mercury, represented by the unicorn. The figure is a kind of symbolic hermaphrodite, for Mercury is generally the feminine principle or element, and the unicorn (as in the Tapestries of the Unicorn and the Virgin) is generally considered the masculine principle. When the painting is turned upside down, we see Giordano Bruno consumed in flames. This sacrifice is also depicted in the style of The Hanged Man of the Tarot. The geometrical designs of intersecting circles are cabalistic figures referring to the revelation of the divine majesty of the Elohim such as those seen in *The Rosicrucian Cosmology*, according to Franciscus Mercurius Van Hemont. [23]

The painting *Adieu Amenhotep* depicts a ceremony of psychic surgery. The lotus flower discovered within the body signifies a spiritual rebirth. It is the realization of potential powers of the being and is

located in the psychic center. This lotus, seemingly located below the heart, must correspond to the lotus known as the "island of jewels."[24] This is the center of consciousness-energy according to Tantrism. Leonora Carrington has been initiated into Tibetan Tantrism by the Tibetan Lama Rimpoche. The bowl might represent the Grail that received the blood of Christ. The salamander in the bowl represents the element of fire in alchemy—the agent of transmutation.

Leonora Carrington has also created the image of the woman as alchemist in an unpublished novel. Here the woman alchemist corresponds to the archetype of the Wise Old Woman. She says: "I am Nanny, an Artisan, an old woman and a midwife." She is asked whether she can hear and see everything and she replies:

> Yes, I can hear many things and my eyes have become sharp. Even the life beating inside a stone is audible to me and that is a gift, it is also a life or lives of labour. . . . I have trained all the love in my body into energy and all my hate, which is also a great force, I have trained into thought. My womb is no larger than a grain of rice because its power has all been used in discovery. I say discovery because creation is the finding of something which has always existed, existed in a different form or forms, but nevertheless already there, whole or in small pieces, waiting to come into being.[25]

The Alchemist/Artisan performs alchemy on two ivory dolls.

> Soon the instrument was filled and flowing with quicksilver and not only could they hear the silent song it made but they also heard the invisible life of the dolls and their voices. They could feel and touch the sensations of the mannikins although to the sharpest ear in the world not a sound could be heard in the kitchen-laboratory. Amagoya could now understand the voice of the Artisan as she spoke to the ivory dolls by medium of the mobile quicksilver. "Mercury speaks to Ivory: hear me, I am the Artisan but I am also Mercury. My voice is human and mineral, your two Ivory bodies are one whole body. Ivory the weapon, Saturn, the body, hear me and speak."[26]

In *Who Art Thou, White Face* a chimera or fantastic being has just laid an egg. The being's black sun face is located in its solar plexus, which represents the essential self. The egg is the world egg, a new birth and the philosophers' stone.

In *Lepidopterus* or *The Butterfly People Eating a Meal* the artist informs us that the black swans are suggested by the refrain of an ancient song of the bards: "I am the Black Swan, Queen of them all." Their

food is red, for Britons of the Stone Age painted food for the dead red. The black swan is also the sacred sign of the Goddess of the old Matriarchal Religion. The swan is being fed food for the dead because the Old Religion has been buried, but by eating this food, the religion of the Goddess is being revived. The black swan is also equivalent to the black sun. Alchemically the stage of blackness known as the "crow's head" or the "black earth," when boiled, becomes known as the "swan." It finally results in the production of the philosophers' stone. The Butterfly People represent possibilities of psychic metamorphosis.

The Godmother is directly inspired by the nursery rhyme "Goosey Goosey Gander, whither dost thou wander?" The query immediately opens the door to speculation about the nature of the worlds we inhabit. Suddenly the invisible becomes manifest. The central being with the invisible face shows no differentiation between the five senses. According to the artist it also contains the sixth and the seventh. It is blue for the planet Earth (The Blue Planet) and for the sky. It is "Baraka" the life-essence and Prana. Anti-Being is contrasted with being in the image of the beasts chasing each other in the endless karmic circle around the being whose black monkey face is the black sun. In order to reach illumination, one must see through the black sun. This symbolism parallels the alchemical imagery of transforming black primal matter (the Nigredo) to gold.[27]

Her *Women's Liberation Poster* rejects the traditional biblical interpretation of Eve as born of Adam, because woman's procreative powers are denied by a myth that renders her subordinate and inferior to man. It depicts the rising of the new woman or the Goddess resurrected. She is identified with the power of the serpent or the concept of Kundalini. Through Yoga this power or energy rises up through the chakras of the body until it reaches the third eye corresponding to illumination. The poster is green for the Emerald Tablets of Hermes. The interior or psychic evolution of the new Eve is analogous to a kind of interior psychic alchemy.

The Compassionate Tree can be related to the Egyptian Date Palm Goddess dispensing nourishment. In Egyptian art it is the Tree Goddess who gives birth to the Sun-Child. It is linked with the rites of harvest in which women are intimately connected to the lunar cycle. The female imagery is obvious in the comparison between the woman as childbearer and the compassionate palm tree. Woman and tree also represent the Great Earth Mother as examples of fecundity and fertility.

Nine Nine Nine is the title of another painting. It symbolizes the triangle of the ternary, the triplication of the triple, and incarnates an

image of three worlds—the corporeal, the intellectual, and the spiritual. The interpenetration of these planes of existence is made visible and suggested by this visionary painting, whose title makes reference to the end limit of a numerical series which precedes the return to unity.[28]

In her recent play *Opus Sinistrus*, the Egg is used to link the female symbol with the alchemist's oven. This play, which is a surrealist opera-parable for our planet, is a total-theatre spectacle expressing a radical protest against the destructive aspects of contemporary civilization. In it the only vestige of female life left on earth is a giant egg laid by a female ostrich. Men, who are cannibals, have destroyed all human values and lived upon each other's flesh.

Her play *Penelope* was staged in Mexico in 1957 by Alexandro Jodorowsky. It is about a *Femme-Enfant*, Penelope, who rebels against the authoritarian rule of her father. She falls in love with her rocking horse, Tartar, and at the end of the play, they form an androgynous couple and are transfigured and disappear through the window in a flash of white light.

In speaking of her work, we must not overlook the satire and humor. Her version of psychiatry is seen in the painting entitled *Transference*. Her surrealist variation on the theme of "Picnic on the Grass" is entitled *Pastoral*. The charm of Carrington's humor is that while mocking every conceivable human institution, seeing the absurd and the ridiculous in all forms of social and political pomposity, she is the first one to find humor in herself as well, and is one of the few women whose writings are included in André Breton's *Anthologie de L'Humour noir*. Her cosmic humility stems from the fact that she sees mankind as just one species among many that inhabit our earth. She feels that in a deeper sense we are really sisters and brothers of the plants and animals with whom we share our terrestrial abode and that we are intimately connected with the sun and the moon, related to all the planets whose celestial courses affect our lives. Thus her paintings remind us that true devotion should be reserved for the realm of the human spirit, which has only begun its evolution towards awakening.

Méret Oppenheim's *Fur-lined Teacup and Saucer*, originally entitled *Le Déjeuner en Fourrure*, is one of the surrealist objects best known to the American public. Born in 1913, in Berlin, Oppenheim spent her childhood in Switzerland and studied at the Ecole des Arts at Métiers in Bâle. In 1932 she left for Paris to enroll in the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. In the same year Arp and Giacometti visited her studio and were so impressed with her work

that they spoke about her to André Breton. She exhibited with the surrealists Ernst, Dalí, Magritte, Tanguy, Man Ray, and Miró at the Salon des Surindépendents in Paris. In contrast to Léonor Fini, Méret Oppenheim regularly attended the meetings of the surrealists and identified closely with them in her life-style and her art. In 1936 she modeled for Man Ray, created the *Fur-lined Teacup*, and had her first show in Bâle. In 1937 she returned to Bâle and experimented in the creation of fantastic furniture, shoes, belts, and gloves. Some of the humor of her earlier creations can be perceived in *Ma Gouvernante*. Between 1944 and 1956 her artistic production declined, for she went through the troubling period of self-doubt and questioning that is familiar to many women artists. She was in her 30s, no longer a *Femme-Enfant*. Little by little, through a careful Jungian analysis of her dreams, her self-confidence returned and in 1958, at the age of 45, she began to paint, sculpt, and exhibit her works again. In December 1959 she created the inaugural feast for the International Exposition of Surrealism in Paris. She stresses that there are three men and two women feasting upon the naked woman. The entire scene was intended as a celebration of springtime or Easter—as a fertility rite, not as a cannibal feast, as it is so often labeled.

Méret Oppenheim's story is exemplary for women, for it renews our faith in the ability of the creative spirit to reemerge triumphant after a period of introspective doubt. Her recent works are "Objets Porteurs d'Idée." According to Oppenheim, every idea comes to the mind clothed in its own form. Since each new idea presents itself in an entirely new form, it takes a certain amount of time for it to be understood by the contemporary public. The concept of the "multiple," according to Oppenheim, defeats the purposes of the "Objet Porteur d'Idée." The only time that the multiple would be justified is when the concept of mass reproduction of the object is inherent in the artist's original idea. This would be the case for statuettes of gods and saints, and for her satire on her own legend in which she made an edition of 120 fur-lined teacups and saucers. Among her more recent works are *Cloud on a Bridge*, *Libellule Campofornio, Octavia,* and *The Old Serpent Nature*. Concerning the last work, when asked by Alain Jouffroy if her objects would have been the same had she been a man, she replied:

> My first impulse was to say yes. It seems to me that most of my things could have been done by a man. But there are some that a man wouldn't have done—or at least not at this time—during the Patriarchy. Serpents—about a dozen appeared in my works around 1968. In 1970 I made the big black serpent in anthracite

> rolled around a bag of coal. His head is white. This summer (1973) I read that many matriarchal Goddesses of the Orient were black from the foot to the mouth. The head, starting from the mouth, was white. The serpent is an attribute of matriarchal deities and in general a symbol of the earth. In 1972 I did the painting *The Secret of Vegetation.* A statue is hidden by sunlit leaves. On the left and right two serpentine lines arise. When the work was finished I looked at it and said to myself. That's curious. Until now there was only one serpent in my paintings or sculptures. Why these two serpents? I recalled those goddesses in clay (Cretan or Minoan) that have their arms raised above their heads and hold in each hand a serpent. But what do these serpents signify? Looking at my work and seeing this sort of blue eye on top of the serpentine on the left and the circular white light above the one on the right, it occurred to me that it could be a question of those two currents of energy that "fill" the universe—the positive and the negative, life and death, the Yin and the Yang. The symbol of the spiral is not unrelated to the serpent. Perhaps, in a more abstract way, it signified eternity. "Two Birds," 1964 and "Spiral—Serpent in Rectangle," 1973. Why is the serpent reappearing? Once, a long time ago, it told Eve to give the apple from the Tree of Knowledge to Adam. The Serpent Nature wanted man to follow the path of intellectual development. Eve was then condemned and the Serpent Nature along with her, by man. . . . Does the old Serpent Nature want us to go in a new direction towards a stage in which the intellect will be added to all that has been neglected for so long in order to arrive at true wisdom at last?[29]

Méret Oppenheim's imagery curiously joins that of Leonora Carrington. Their search, through Surrealism, for the meaning of their female identity, has evolved in certain symbolically similar directions.

Remedios Varo, born in 1913 in Cataluñia, Spain, went to Paris to flee the Civil War. There she joined the surrealists Breton and Ernst, and married the poet Benjamin Péret. They settled in Mexico and although she separated from him and later remarried, she remained in Mexico until her sudden and unexpected death in 1963. The Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico gave her a complete retrospective exhibition in 1964 and published an important book on her work in 1966. She resembles Leonora Carrington intellectually and spiritually. Both friends were deeply involved in a search for revelations that would enable them to decipher the occult significance of the great mysteries.

For Remedios too, woman is the alchemist. In *Planta insumisa* we see the female scientist at work within the egg-shaped alchemical retort, or the world egg of the composition's shape. In letters to her brother, Remedios Varo has given her own explanation of the imagery in her paintings.[30] In *Armonia*, for example, she explains that the woman is trying to uncover the invisible thread that unites all things. When all the objects are in their correct places on the metal staff, a harmonious music will be produced. The figure on the wall represents "le hasard objectif" or objective chance that intervenes in all discoveries. *The Flautist* shows her interest in esoteric theories, for the musician is constructing an octagonal tower of stones which are levitated by the vibrations produced by the music. The octagonal tower symbolizes the esoteric theory of octaves. The other half of the tower is sketched in, because although it is not yet built, it already pre-exists in the imagination of the creator. The tower symbolizes ascent in the spiritual sense.

Remedios Varo's imagery makes the impossible appear plausible. She reveals the secret connections between spirit and matter, tangible and intangible, abstract and concrete. The voyage of exploration is facilitated by a fantastic array of vehicles, adapted to suit the needs of the voyager, depending upon whether it is inner or outer reality that is being explored. In *Vagabond* the outfit of the vagabond can be hermetically sealed at night and even locked with a key. The outfit comes fully equipped with its own propellers and wheels and is furnished with a library, a living room, and a kitchen—all integral parts of this traveling suit for an astronaut of psychic spaces. Her inventiveness in costumes is also apparent in *Tailleur Pour Dames*. It is the salon of a dressmaker for women. The model has another sort of traveling suit which features a boat for a journey across waters. It is attached to the back and can be lowered from the shoulders. It also sports wheels and a rolled-up sail. The seated model is designed to be worn for a cocktail party. It is intended for those who never know where to put down their glasses or where to sit. Here the dress itself stiffens out into its own chair. The third model is for a widow. Remedios Varo's imagination for inventing methods of locomotion ranges from voyage by beard and hair—*Capillary Locomotion*—to an incredible array of little vehicles adaptable for flight, sea-voyage, and land travel, such as in *Exploration of the Fountains of the Orinoco* and *La Roulotte*. Woman as scientist and artist is seen in *The Creation of Birds*, and woman as mystery unto herself in *Encuentro*. The moon is also associated with the female in Varo's universe. In *Papilla Estelar* woman is seen nourishing the moon. Her humorous rendition of psychoanalysis is depicted in *Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst's Office*—she is throwing away her father's head. She also carries a

clock, the symbol of arriving late. The doctor is called FJA: Freud, Jung, Adler.

Thus Remedios Varo joins the other Women of Surrealism in portraying woman as alchemist, scientist, inventor, explorer and cartographer of a world that intersects with our own in imperceptible ways. She is in search of the lost key to explain the links between the worlds which penetrate our own and those we have yet to discover.

Another female artist whose work is of capital importance in the history of the surrealist movement is Toyen (Maria Cernisova). She was born in Prague in 1902 and participated in revolutionary and avant-garde activities in Czechoslovakia. She belonged to the group DEVETSIL, and had her first exhibition with them in 1923. From Abstract art she evolved to Surrealism, and in 1933 was one of the main founders of the Czech surrealist group, whose other artists were her husband Jindrich Styrsky and Karel Teige. The group received Breton and Eluard enthusiastically when they attended the International Surrealist Exhibit in Prague in 1935. In 1938 Toyen had her largest personal exhibition in Prague. During the war her works were banned, and in 1947 she left for Paris and eventually renounced her Czech nationality after the coup d'état in 1948. She is one of the few women artists to whom Breton has devoted a chapter in his book *Surrealism and Painting*. Toyen's imagery, particularly in her drawings of the '30s and '40s, describes the remains of an exterior landscape devastated by war and an interior universe haunted by fear. Examples are *The Rifle Range* and *War*. Opposed to these images of terror are her images of love. Later, themes that are closer to the alchemical inspiration of the other Women of Surrealism begin to appear, as seen in *At the Golden Wheel* and *The Clairvoyante*. Since she comes from Prague, the magical city of the alchemists, it is natural that her titles evoke resonances of the alchemists and their search for enlightenment and illumination.

Dorothea Tanning is an American artist from Illinois whose career became closely linked with that of Max Ernst, whom she married after meeting him in New York in the early 1940s. Her first personal exhibition was also held at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in 1944. Since then her career has blossomed and her works have evolved from imagery of the dream world, depicting solitude and the unfulfilled wishes and frustrations of a puritanical childhood to abstractionism, as exemplified in *Birthday* and *Palestra*. In her paintings *Maternity I* and *Maternity II* she shows the dehumanization of woman overwhelmed by the consequences of unquestioning acceptance of the dictum "biology is

destiny." Despite the overwhelming influence of Max Ernst upon her life, she has nonetheless succeeded in creating a personal style and in speaking out for women in her art by depicting their desires and anxieties within the surrealist esthetic and perspective. She has related, in an interview with Alain Jouffroy, that one critic remarked—about what she had conceived of as "the poetical and sublime manifestations of her conviction that all of life is a desperate encounter with unknown forces"—that "These are sweet *feminine* dreams bristling with sex symbols."[31] She adds that for critics who identify art by the gender of the artist, a set of teeth becomes a vulva and what the artist conceives of as a moment of beauty and grace is transformed into a phallus. When asked by Jouffroy why André Breton did not write about her in *Surrealism and Painting*, she replied: "I had noticed with a certain consternation that the place of woman for the Surrealists was not different from the one she occupies in the general population including the bourgeoisie."[32] And when asked whether she believes that the next revolution will be made by women, she replied: "I am not obsessed by the question of women. Neither am I stupified by masculine creation. . . ." She adds, "Revolution is a woman."[33]

Jane Graverol was born in Brussels. Her father was an illustrator who frequented Verlaine and other artists and writers of his time. She attended the Beaux Arts Academy in Brussels and had her first exhibition at 18. In 1948 she wrote to Magritte, and in 1949 met him and another Belgian surrealist, Scutenaire. In 1952 she met Paul Nougé, who has written "Portrait d' Après Nature" about her work. She founded a group called TEMPS MÊLÉS in collaboration with André Blavier, and since 1952 they have been publishing the review *Temps Mêlés*. The main influences on her work have been those of Magritte, Nougé, and Marcel Mariën. She combines a fine sense of humor with a kind of melancholic nostalgia within the surrealistic vein of the "insolite." She painted the famous tableau *La Goutte d'eau*, now at the Musée de Beaux Arts in Liège, which is a group portrait of the principal Belgian surrealist writers and artists. Her most important personal exhibitions have been in Holland, Leopoldville, Buenos Aires, Geneva, Nassau, Washington, and throughout Belgium. Her pictorial images are often related to her titles in a humorous way, disclosing hidden "jeux de mots" or "doubles entendres." *The Memorial of St. Helena* illustrates her wit and tongue-in-cheek asides to the viewer. It depicts the dreams of glory of the dinosaur—as he would dream it, had he been the Napoleon of the Dinosaurs. The analogy between the dinosaur and

man is not without relevance, but it makes its statement through a subtle wit rather than through violent overstatement. She also often treats the subject of woman as in *Trait de lumière* and *Rien*. One critic has said of Jane Graverol's paintings that they show "une demesure 'bien' feminine."[34] This is the kind of critical statement that must be eliminated today. It is much too naive to use words such as emotional, hysterical, nervous, sensitive, or delicate in describing woman's art.

Bona de Mandiargues has written to me that she spoke out against the myth of the *Femme-Enfant* on a program about Surrealism on French radio. She writes: "It seems to me that every self-respecting artist is born a child and dies a child, but that the woman-child is merely a doll, a pin-up . . ."[35] Bona is the niece of Italian artist Filippo de Pisis. She was born in 1926 in Italy and owes her origins and surrealist roots to Ferrara, the metaphysical city where the esoteric movement was born. When her father died in 1946 she went to live permanently with her uncle, de Pisis. In 1950 she married the surrealist writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues and began to participate in the meetings of the surrealist group in Paris. Writing about the situation of women artists in Europe, her husband remarks that "in France and Italy the situation of women in the art world, like in marriage, is still under the domination of a sort of Napoleonic Code." He adds that a society "imbued with the principle of masculine superiority treats women in a manner similar to the way witches were formerly treated by the Church. They don't burn women artists," he admits, "they don't torture them either . . . not in their carnal body at least, but their activity is relegated to a shadowy zone and they are oppressed with a sort of malediction or more precisely excommunication that separates them from the vaster public, which deprives them of the warm approbation that they need as much as all other artists."[36] He is alarmed and terrified by the vast number of women artists who have ended in psychiatric hospitals because their work has been totally ignored. Bona's technique evolved from the influence of de Chirico to a use of the technique of "Décalcomanie" created by Ernst and Domínguez. Later, after trips to Egypt and Mexico, she began to explore assemblages, collages, and sewn tableux, which use bits and pieces of materials and textures to evoke images drawn from the subconscious in a style resembling Art Brut, as in *Sewn Portrait*. Bona too has treated the themes relating to the search for woman's identity. Her triptych *Birth* explores these images. More recently her work has been preoccupied with the use of the spiral—a basic form of nature which, like a labyrinth, leads to

and defends the psychic center. She uses it to reconcile the duality of energies, masculine and feminine. In a more humorous vein is her *Panic Candelabra.*

Marie Wilson was born in Cedarville, California, and received an M.A. in Art at the University of California in Berkeley in 1945. She participated in surrealist group activities from 1952-1960 in Paris, lived in Greece with the surrealist poet Nanos Valaoritis between 1961 and 1968, and now lives with him and her children in Oakland, California. Nanos Valaoritis has written of her art:

> Marie Wilson's work produces forms which far from being accidental are part of a central scheme or design which appears to belong to the Universal symbolic order. The clustering of mythical elements around a central point, the axis of the world or the focus—the navel—are in other terms the meeting place where multiplicity is translated into oneness and pairs of opposites such as the yinyang compose the primal unity . . . Marie Wilson's painting and drawings were executed and conceived under the ever bright, if more remote, star of Surrealism, before the word psychedelic came into use in the fifties, and can be described as an authentic psychogram, in which the totality is first experienced as an "image." This image, sacred or profane, is not only a return to what is inside as it is sometimes termed in opposition to what is outside since the two terms in and out are really part of one reality, an awareness which science is finally coming to after a few centuries of dualism. Inner liberation, means outer too, and vice versa. . . . The aim and object of this endeavor is always and will remain what surrealism has so neatly termed the total emancipation of man from the chains of "himself"—an emancipation in which woman, a woman, women, are called upon as the priestesses of old to lead the way. In the term "himself" read also "others" and "herself" since the exploitation of one human being by another takes place inside us and outside simultaneously, the aim is to change life—this inner life which is left unchanged and victim of its obsessions will only reassert itself once more.[37]

Another contemporary woman of Surrealism is Susana Wald, born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1937. She resided in Chile until recently when she emigrated to Canada with her husband, the surrealist artist and poet Ludwig Zeller. She writes about herself: "Susana Wald, born 3,000 years ago between pottery and stylized drawings on papyrus.

She spent her last life-cycle in Hungary, South America and Canada. She is a painter and ceramicist and considers her art to be the reflection from the edge of a knife. Her works deal with eroticism and religion."[38] She adds:

> I belong to the Surrealistic line. This is more evident in my drawings than in my ceramics. The drawings are not abstract at all but they are ideas that deal with the unconscious part of the mind where we have things that we don't like to see. My ceramics are a little bit different from what people are used to seeing here; the outlook on ceramics being very restricted in this country. I think of ceramics as one of the many media in art, not just as a craft, although craft is an important and necessary part of it, the means, the road, the vehicle to express the essential. To be an artist as a woman is no different than from being an artist as a man. I do feel though, that women will eventually have to find a different way of working in art and in every other human endeavor. . . . Eventually there will be a mixture of masculine and feminine spirit and women will be able to contribute a new kind of thought which will be refreshing to everybody.[39]

Ellen Lanyon is an American artist from Chicago. She paints in the surrealist tradition and is inspired by the use of boxes opening to reveal unexpected and marvelous contents, such as those of Joseph Cornell. She is concerned with the magical properties of things and is interested in animism, witchcraft, voodoo, table magic, and stage magic. *Housekeeper's Terror* shows the magic performed by an absentee trickster. The objects have begun to take on a magical life of their own. Relating to the domestic domain, but inspired by the boxes of Cornell and Duchamp, are such works as *Thimblebox, Spool-Thread-Web Production, The Italian Box, Twinbox, Xocolatyl, Pandora,* and *Ginko Fan.* All of these works make use of objects from the interior of a house, while *Cicada* evokes a state of feeling relating to the house itself, suggesting new states of soul expressive of woman's emerging feelings towards her traditional domain. The cicada, in Navaho mythology, is a spirit power. Thus it is symbolic and significant that the domain of the female is now being connected with a spiritual power and a magical force.

The Women of Surrealism have been excluded long enough from art history. What are the chances of success, statistically speaking, for the woman artist to receive recognition in America today? The Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles, headed by June Wayne, has

published a statistical survey of the art market in terms of women's representation, sales, and coverage by the media. The report reveals that a woman artist who might have spent years and huge sums of money in order to prepare for and mount her first solo show can hope to have at most a 6- to 8-line review in some art journal. The survey reviewed all issues of art magazines and important newspapers from June 1970 to June 1971. If the Women of Surrealism are to survive the odds against them in the art market, we must resolve to change the situation at once. Frida Kahlo is one of the major artists whose works are praised by André Breton, and about whom very little has yet been written.[40] Many Women of Surrealism have been omitted from all serious study. Female art critics have an important role to play in devoting time and space to a consideration of the works of these women artists who have been overlooked until now.

Lise Vogel[41] in her recent investigations reminds us that the norm in the world of art criticism has always been that of the white upper-class male. It is from that lofty and privileged position that art has traditionally been judged. Art critics such as Lise Vogel, Linda Mochlin, Ann Sutherland Harris, and Cindy Nemser are beginning to question what those accepted norms are based on. Lise Vogel questions the judgments that reflect class privilege, the capitalistic economy, and all systems in which art is solely maintained by private riches. Linda Nochlin has questioned the notion of "genius" and the distinction between "high art" and "decorative art, folk art and crafts."[42] She asks why the traditional art forms of women such as quilting, lace-making, and genre painting, for example, have been undervalued. She asks why the lives of women artists have been written about as mere human-interest stories, and why no serious studies of their works have appeared until recently.

We must begin to rewrite art history immediately. We must document the long-forgotten history of women in the arts through bibliographies, interviews, articles, books, video tapes, films, and all sorts of archival material to serve as tools for future research. If International Women's Year can bring this about, it will have been more than just another token phrase nominally designated by the UN for another commemorative postage stamp and a banner. It must be truly a year devoted to the discovery of International Women in all the arts, and what better place to start than with the Women of Surrealism?[43]

Notes

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25. Unpublished manuscript.
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34. René de Solier, *Jane Graverol* (Bruxelles; Editions Derache, 1974).
35. Letter from Bona de Mandiargues to Gloria Orenstein.
36. André Pieyre de Mandiargues, *Bona, L'Amour et la peinture*, (Geneva: Skira, 1971), p. 378.
37. Letter from Nanos Valaoritis to Gloria Orenstein.
38. Letter from Susana Wald to Gloria Orenstein.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Gloria Orenstein, "Frida Kahlo: Painting for Miracles," *The Feminist Art Journal* (Fall, 1973).
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