

Temple of the Word  
*(Post-) Surrealist Women Artists' Literary Production in America and Mexico*<sup>1</sup>

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*I will write to you with my eyes, always...*

Frida Kahlo<sup>2</sup>

*Leonora [Carrington] epitomises the woman of our latter-day Renaissance ... Indeed Leonora, who is also a sculptor and creator of tapestries, is moreover an excellent writer.*

Edward James<sup>3</sup>

In 1940 Maréchal Pétain signed an agreement with Hitler, allowing the Nazis to take over France, except for one free zone in the South, branding that year as the blackest during World War II for the birthplace of Surrealism. Many surrealist artists and/or writers, including their leader, poet André Breton, his young wife Jacqueline Lamba, already a promising painter, and their five-year-old daughter Aube, left Paris for Marseille, then the gateway to freedom for persecuted intellectuals and artists, anarchists, communists, Jews and dissident Germans. The heroic Varian Fry appointed in 1940 by the Emergency Rescue Committee to secure passages to the U.S. for a few VIPs, tirelessly went on saving lives despite negative reactions from headquarters, till he was repatriated a year later.<sup>4</sup> Exile for most Surrealists began in Marseille, at the Villa Air-Bel, where Fry lodged several of them, including the Bretons and the Lams, until he secured space on ships bound for the New World. In March 1941, the Bretons, Cuban painter Wifredo Lam, his German-born scientist wife Helena, and anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss set sail for New

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York.<sup>5</sup> They joined friends already in the U.S., such as Kurt and Arlette Seligman, Yves Tanguy and Kay Sage, and Greek poet Nicolas Calas; more arrived shortly thereafter, including André and Rose Masson, Max Ernst, Peggy Guggenheim, Leonora Carrington and, finally, Marcel Duchamp in 1942. Various Surrealists eventually joined the community of European exiles in Mexico City, by choice or by chance; among them were Austrian painter Wolfgang Paalen, his French poet-painter wife Alice Rahon-Paalen and Swiss photographer Eva Sulzer (1939); French poet Benjamin Péret and his Spanish partner painter Remedios Varo (1941); Spanish artists Esteban Frances and José Horna with his wife Hungarian photographer Kati Horna, after the Spanish Civil War (1939). In late 1942, Leonora Carrington moved to Mexico City from New York.

World War II and the subsequent exile generally had different implications according to gender. Breton's very male group, well ensconced in Paris prior to the war, had maintained the women in a peripheral situation, putting them on pedestals as love-partners and muses, and had barely tolerated them as fellow artists and writers. War appeared a bad patch to get through and exile a necessary evil. They much appreciated travel in the New World, discovering grandiose landscapes, Amerindian, Mexican and Caribbean cultures that subsequently inspired new creative drives; however, when the war ended, most returned to Paris within a year or two. The women, on the other hand, often chose to stay. The male European surrealist refugees in New York settled into a close-knit group for material reasons and consequently became more democratic toward the women. Peggy Guggenheim's presence proved instrumental in enabling women artists to show their work. She organized the collective show "Thirty-one Women Artists" at her new Art of This Century gallery in 1943 including most of the women surrealists then in New York.<sup>6</sup> In addition, as we can read in Isabelle and Patrick Waldberg's correspondence, either Guggenheim, Julien Lévy or Eleanor Lust and Jimmy Ernst at the Norlyst Gallery gave most of them (Waldberg, Carrington, Tanning, Sage, Lamba) individual shows, which represented a breakthrough at the time.<sup>7</sup> The women frequently adapted in a foreign context better than the men; the Breton couple provided a good example. André Breton re-organized the group in New York and founded the journal *VVV*. Somewhat tone-deaf, Breton proved unable to learn English, which limited his communication with American avant-garde intellectuals and artists. Conversely, Jacqueline Lamba-Breton spoke fluent English, felt perfectly at ease in America and became the main translator for *VVV* and within the extended group. At *VVV*, she worked with the editor, David Hare, a young American sculptor and photographer, eventually leaving Breton for him in 1942. When they moved to Roxbury, Lamba at last had a studio of her own, where she continued to develop a new style of painting,

unhampered by Breton's disapproval.<sup>8</sup>

Paradoxically, most of these women artists experienced at least one traumatic childhood or youth incident prior to World War II (Sage, Kahlo, Miller, Rahon, Bourgeois); in wartime, witnessed Nazi horrors (Miller, Carrington) or the violence of the Spanish Civil War (Horna, Low); endured separation from or loss of a beloved partner during the war (Carrington, Waldberg) or in later life after the war (Sage, Tanning, Bona, Lamba); or struggled against poverty (Varo, Rahon). While several suffered from serious physical illnesses (Kahlo, Sage) or acute depressions (Sage, Tanning, Miller, Bourgeois, Waldberg, Woodman), others received treatment in psychiatric institutions during periods of mental fragility (Carrington, Bona).

Trauma often triggers a narrative drive developing a strong need to exorcise fear or suffering through writing. While some of these artists had been writers for most of their lives (Carrington, Rahon, Kahlo, Deren), most started after being uprooted, in relation to their respective traumas and losses, while fresh starts and cultural discoveries in the New World. The relative freedom they experienced in the Americas encouraged these artists to write themselves into existence by exploiting their tendency toward self-representation. Exceptions existed among the Europeans: Waldberg, similar to the male Surrealists, returned to Paris at the end of 1945 and worked full-time on her sculpture; ten years later Lamba, separated from her second husband David Hare, finally returned to Paris alone to paint. American-born Tanning, Sage, and later Woodman, after living in Europe for long periods of time, chose to return to their own country, where they began to write. Miller however, once the war was over, stayed, wrote, and died in England. In Mexico, the situation was more homogeneous: Kahlo, after long sojourns in North America and France, settled for good in her native Mexico, while European exiles Carrington, Varo, Rahon and Horna remained in Mexico for the rest of their lives. Partnership, loss, and the search for an identity through writing and art also brought Bona to Mexico for periodic stays. These women never formed a school among themselves or collaborated in their work except for occasional illustrations of each other's work and the intense creative complicity between Carrington and Varo in Mexico.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently these women probably failed to see two of the common denominators I argue existed in their work: self-representation and interdisciplinary. Both of these tendencies escalated during exile and nomadic periods in the New World, in the women's literary and plastic production. The fourteen artists discussed in this article all wrote, often in a manner true to key surrealist themes including eroticism, madness, dreams, magic and the occult, gothic, fantastic, animal fetishism, hybridity and metamorphosis. Their literary input varied from one-page manifestos (Lamba, Lunderberg) to substantial oeuvres (Carrington, Tanning, Sage, Deren, Bona).

Textual genres included fiction, autobiography, poetry, very occasional drama or filmscripts, essays, letters, journals, manifestoes and theory.<sup>10</sup>

When her French husband and fellow painter Yves Tanguy died unexpectedly at their Connecticut home in 1955, a devastated Kay Sage (1898-1963) wrote an autobiography, *China Eggs*, that covered most of her life before Tanguy.<sup>11</sup> Her ironical style avoided self-indulgence, just as her painting lacked emotion and sensuality. Sage structured the book as a dialogue between herself and a skeptical double, a two-voiced unsentimental account of her struggle with family, society and the art world in Italy, France and the United States. The final paragraph develops surrealist humor in the title:

I put all my eggs in one basket—and I lost.  
I wouldn't have thought you had any eggs left.  
Oh yes, I had them all—intact.  
But you were forever putting eggs in baskets.  
I know, but those were only china eggs.<sup>12</sup>

Sage inscribed more black humor into four books of poetry, one in English, three in French.<sup>13</sup> As her biographer Judith Suther has pointed out: “The colloquial idiom of the poems is the language she had spoken with Tanguy and the link with her artistic awakening in Paris.”<sup>14</sup> Despite escalating blindness and unbearable loneliness, Sage completed Tanguy's *Catalogue raisonné* and composed an interdisciplinary catalog for her own last New York show, “Your Move” (1961), before committing suicide in 1963.<sup>15</sup> Sage deserves more credit for her writing, despite her self-deprecatory statement: “C'que j'écris / c'est pas de la littérature” (What I write/ isn't literature).<sup>16</sup>

Dorothea Tanning (b.1910) also lost her beloved artist husband, Max Ernst, in 1976 in France, where they had lived for 28 years. She began to write seriously after she returned to the United States and settled in New York in 1979: “resuming my American speech was an event in itself,” and an incentive to explore new forms of creativity.<sup>17</sup> Since 1976, Tanning, now “the oldest living Surrealist,” produced two autobiographies. The first, *Birthday*, mainly related to her relationship with Ernst, while the second, *Between Lives*, included the later years and assessed her creative trajectory.<sup>18</sup> Her gothic novel *Abyss*, rewritten as *Chasm*, evoked the Arizona desert where she and Ernst enjoyed living and working in the 1940s and developed several sinister and/or mad characters with more black humor.<sup>19</sup> A recent collection of poems, *A Table of Content*, shows Tanning's attachment to America: “you always / tote your country around / with you, your roots.”<sup>20</sup>

As young women, twentieth-century Surrealists Leonora Carrington (1917-

2011), Bona (de Mandiargues, 1926-2000), Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Isabelle Waldberg (1911-1990) experienced and wrote about their personal traumas. Carrington's World War II misadventures the incarceration of her then lover Max Ernst in French prison camps (1939-40) and her nervous breakdown and internment in a Spanish psychiatric institution, occurred in Europe. However, she wrote the alchemical narrative of her descent into madness, *En-Bas / Down Below*, much admired by Breton, first in New York in English and then dictated the text later in French to Jeanne Megnen-Mabille (1943)" in the abandoned Russian Embassy in Mexico City," after the original English transcript was lost.<sup>21</sup> *Down Below*, Carrington's only realistic, "true" narrative, proleptically written according to Philippe Lejeune's later theory of a "*pacte autobiographique*" or challenge to write the truth, provides inside information on her mental illness.<sup>22</sup> However, the hallucinatory content proved even more surrealist than her fantastic, often supernatural early fiction and later baroque novels, when, for example, she describes her identification with schizophrenic, multiple selves:

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.<sup>23</sup>

Conversely, Bona de Mandiargues wrote in Europe about a devastating Mexican experience. In 1966, divorced from her husband, French poet André Pieyre de Mandiargues, she visited her Mexican lover, artist Francisco Toledo, in his native village of Juchitàn. Their passionate relationship became so violent that she fled to Europe: "by running away from Mexico, I had no doubt narrowly escaped being murdered."<sup>24</sup> That summer, Bona accepted an invitation to a Greek island, where she composed her most surrealist text, *La Cafarde*, in French, in forty-eight hours. The title means "the Moon" in French slang and suggested a feminization of *cafard* (sneak, cockroach or depression).<sup>25</sup> The scene takes place on a moonlit night, the narrator leaves an unpleasant dinner party unseen, feeling blue, and the Kafkaesque atmosphere intimates an imminent twilight transformation into a werewolf. A delirious, semi-automatic narrative unfolds, with hallucinatory lap-dissolves of Mexico permeating the narrator's Hellenic surroundings, as the landscape she explores undergoes a metamorphosis into the sinister Juchitàn cemetery. The text is interspersed with related intertextual references to Aragon's novel *La Mise à mort* (The Kill), Buñuel's early surrealist films, and a B movie, *The She-Wolf*, seen in Juchitàn with Toledo. The narrator's eerie nocturnal wanderings redefine the whole narrative as a dream when she ends up back in her Greek room, wondering:

“how had I managed to travel from Greece to Mexico in such a short time?”<sup>26</sup> The surrealist message seems to be that the body can be in one place and the mind in another. According to Bona’s daughter: “*La Cafarde* is definitely a Mexican text” and comparable to Carrington’s *Down Below*.<sup>27</sup> Both young female narrators mourned a lost love and its exotic and / or uncanny setting: for Carrington, Ernst and Saint-Martin-d’Ardèche, for Bona, Toledo and Juchitàn. Traumas threw both artists into a state of temporary mental imbalance. Bona’s other books, two autobiographical narratives and two volumes of poetry, also composed in Europe, included occasional erotic memories of Toledo: “Your dark reptilian body / Falls like lightening into the white night of our sheets.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, Bona painted a wild stormy portrait of Toledo and a twin one of herself, *La Dame aux Chats* [*Lady with Cats*] (1971), that portrayed her as a woman with long jungle-like hair inhabited by wide-eyed felines.<sup>29</sup>

Epistolary writing frequently brought solace during periods of war, separation, poverty or illness. Although half European, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) identified completely with her native *Mexicanidad*. Her plastic oeuvre, mostly consisting of self-portraits, constitutes an iconographic, narrative, achronological autobiography, cataloguing her physical and psychological traumas. She began and ended her pictorial and literary adventures on a sickbed. Her writings, a comfort to her at the time, have attracted less attention. The letters Kahlo’s wrote between 1924 and 1927 to her first lover, Alejandro Gomez-Arias, after her terrible streetcar accident read as intimate, humorous and visual: “A short while ago ... I was a girl walking in a world of colors, of clear and tangible shapes ... Now I live on a painful planet, transparent as ice.”<sup>30</sup> Some of her poems voice her surrealist “Amour fou” for her husband, muralist Diego Rivera: “DIEGO in my urine DIEGO in my mouth—in my / heart in my madness.”<sup>31</sup> Kahlo ignored Breton’s claim that she was naturally surrealist and wrote: “I never painted dreams, I painted my own reality.”<sup>32</sup> Her statement seems debatable today. Indeed, that reality paradoxically often came with a corresponding surreality. Mexican novelist and essayist Carlos Fuentes saw Kahlo as “eternally metamorphosed by sickness and art” and her biographer, Hayden Herrera, first identified the surreal texture of her hybrid diary, kept between 1944 and 1954.<sup>33</sup> A kaleidoscopic verbal and visual assemblage, this diary contained enigmatic sketches, references to her own paintings coded messages, textual fragments in other languages (such as Nahuatl) and popular idiom as in Sage’s poems.<sup>34</sup> Kahlo’s ultimate entry, a letter thanking her doctors, reads as a suicide note:

I hope the  
leaving is joyful –and I hope  
never to return –

FRIDA<sup>35</sup>

After Kahlo's death, various pages of the diary disappeared and subsequently some of its hieroglyphics remain undeciphered, certain keys undiscovered, and its fascination intact.

Isabelle Waldberg (1911-1990) became one of the few full-time surrealist sculptors.<sup>36</sup> In 1938, she joined Bataille's Parisian "Groupe Acéphale" with her future husband, American art historian Patrick Waldberg. During World War II, he sent her and their son, Michel, to New York for safety (1942-45), while his political activities took him to Paris, Algiers, or London. From 1940 to their break-up in 1953, Patrick preferred marriage in absentia and continued to wander. During this time he maintained Isabelle's affections by writing her love letters making promises for the future and visiting her infrequently. Her numerous letters to him reflect a "tone of waiting and distress."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Isabelle Waldberg also used those missives to carve her way into an initially foreign language, French, and develop her interconnected sculpture and writing: "her sculptures were like plastic poems."<sup>38</sup> Breton remained in close contact with Waldberg during her American years and welcomed her into his exiled surrealist group. "We all believe in *VVV*," she wrote in 1943.<sup>39</sup> Peggy Guggenheim also gave her a solo show.<sup>40</sup> Isabelle's letters to Patrick provide a very informative chronicle of Surrealism in New York during World War II, including the activities and exhibitions of other women artists such as Carrington, Sage, Lamba, and Tanning, as well as an evaluation of her own professional progress. In 1943, she described a piece in process: "A large construction is on its way, it is supposed to reach the ceiling. I am struggling with the joints, string won't work with the bigger sticks. It needs very precise, finicky work."<sup>41</sup> Waldberg recorded her participation in collective exhibitions in her letters and, on a more personal level, complained about her sculptures invading her apartment.<sup>42</sup> War and separation sometimes paralyzed her artistic drive, but rarely stopped her from writing. In 1945, she "made a whimsical object, with a pine-cone, some fur and three white feathers."<sup>43</sup> Isabelle's beautiful poems to Patrick, published in an appendix to the letters, express her love, courage, anger and sexual frustration: "I will smash you like a plaster doll / and satisfy my desires astride you."<sup>44</sup> Waldberg learned self-reliance in New York. In 1946, as Jacqueline Lamba would a decade later, she returned to Paris alone to and devoted the remainder of her life to sculpture.

The war reports sent from Europe by American-born photographer Lee Miller (1907-1977) to British *Vogue* (1942-1945) read as intimate, yet open letters to all English-speaking peoples. Miller, who had been trained in Paris by Man Ray as a surrealist art photographer and by Hoyningen-Huene as a fashion photographer, joined the war in Europe as a U.S. Forces correspondent, thus technically on

U.S. territory. She later told an interviewer in Los Angeles: “I became *Vogue*’s photographer ... I only started writing by accident”; she had been called upon to replace a sick colleague as a reporter and the job became permanent when *Vogue* “approved and asked for more.”<sup>45</sup> Her son Antony Penrose discovered and published those powerful war essays after her death.<sup>46</sup> Lee Miller’s texts and photographs of World War II horrors ironically sparked off surrealist images, like the shot of Miller in Hitler’s bathtub, the description of an American “military telephone ... on a chair Hitler’s bottom had warmed,” or the harrowing vision of a dying baby in Vienna:<sup>47</sup>

He was the dark dusty blue of these waltz-filled Vienna nights, the same color as the striped garb of the Dachau skeletons ... he was a skinny gladiator. He gasped and fought and struggled for life.<sup>48</sup>

Miller’s photographs and essays were instrumental in exposing Nazi crimes. As one of the very first to enter the camps in 1945, Miller immediately cabled *Vogue*: “I IMPLORE YOU TO BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE.”<sup>49</sup> Determined to propagate the truth, she reported and took shots of incredulous U.S. medics and soldiers, who “thought the camp a grim propaganda stunt faked by their own side.”<sup>50</sup>

Back in England, as post-traumatic stress, depression and drink caught up with Miller, writing became increasingly difficult. She struggled to cope with a new life of marriage and motherhood. Her photograph of a typewriter, smashed during the London Blitz, *Remington Silent* (1940), proleptically illustrated her post-war writer’s block. Miller finally stopped reporting for *Vogue* around 1953.<sup>51</sup>

Breton’s “communicating vessels” metaphor, signifying communication between reality and surreal states like dream or madness, can apply to *correspondences* in the Baudelairean sense, between literary texts and parallel icons functioning as specular images rather than illustrations.<sup>52</sup> Remedios Varo (1908-1963) wrote a few fragmentary texts in Mexico, now published in her native Spanish.<sup>53</sup> The most complete of these texts, *De homo rodans*, a mock scientific treatise on human evolution by a fictitious pedant, was accompanied by Varo’s one and only, eponymous sculpture, made of (ironically non-human) chicken, turkey and fish bones.<sup>54</sup> Varo’s parodic fascination with science was probably linked to her father’s profession as a hydraulic engineer, involving the channeling of fluids. In her paintings, baroque networks of threads connected bodies to clothing, people to machines or vehicles, and humans or animals to their surroundings. *Homo rodans* is the skeleton of an imaginary human hybrid, with a wheel instead of legs. Her pseudo-savant expounded on an absurd connection between the words *myth* and *myrtle*.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, in an interview, Varo compared her own writing to sketching: “A veces escribo come si

trazase un boceto” (Sometimes I write as if I were sketching).<sup>56</sup>

Tanning named her first autobiography after her early self-portrait, *Birthday* (1942); both works commemorated her encounter with Max Ernst in New York, on her 32nd birthday. Carrington’s writings frequently match certain paintings like the carnivalesque canvas *Down Below* (1941), representing various motley inmates from the Santander asylum described in her book by the same name. Her somewhat hermetic novel, *The Stone Door* (Mexico 1947), which transposed her marriage to Hungarian photographer Chiki Weisz (1946), the story of his harsh early life and fragments of her own childhood into a fictitious, esoteric journey through time, space and dreams, is twinned with her painting *Chiki, Your Country* (1947). Kahlo provided her complex painting *Moses* (1945) with a detailed explanatory text.<sup>57</sup>

A French immigrant to Mexico, Alice Rahon (1904-1987), used the hourglass image, adding female forms to correspondences.<sup>58</sup> Rahon joined the Paris Surrealists with her husband, Austrian painter Wolfgang Paalen, in 1935. Unlike many other surrealist women artists, Rahon started out as a poet. Two collections of her poems appeared in France and a third, *Noir Animal* (named after a variety of black paint made from burnt bones), though written in France, was published in Mexico City.<sup>59</sup> When the Paalens arrived in Mexico City in 1939 after exploring the US and Canadian Amerindian West Coast, the poet Alice Paalen became the painter Alice Rahon.<sup>60</sup> In a seminal article, Nancy Deffebach underlines the “hourglass” effect of her two crafts.<sup>61</sup> When in Mexico, Rahon wrote poems, prose and letters episodically, while concentrating on painting. An unpublished correspondence with her sister, Geo Dupin, reveals the contrast between a life of poor health, disillusion and poverty, and the magic world of her art.<sup>62</sup> In 1960, a year after Paalen’s suicide, Rahon paid him a double tribute, first in *Le Pays de Paalen*, a poem constellated with images of the elements, and second in an eponymous painting of totems and animals rising out of a reddish mist, suffused in transparent blue and powdered with different sands, using a Navajo technique.<sup>63</sup> Rahon’s love of lyrical hues and iridescent use of ekphrasis in her writing, were clearly expressed in an earlier oneiric text on painting (1951):

In earliest times painting was magical; it was a key to the invisible ...  
Perhaps we have seen the Emerald City in some faraway dream ...  
Entering the gate of the Seven Colors we travel along the Rainbow.<sup>64</sup>

This leads us to more theoretical texts. Two artists wrote compact, ideological, aesthetic manifestoes. Jacqueline Lamba (1910-1993), as the second wife and muse of André Breton, from 1934 to 1942, embraced his philosophy during those years.

She stopped being a Surrealist in 1948, while married to American sculptor David Hare. Lamba's true passion was painting. She wrote private letters, journals and the still surrealist short "ars poetica" for her first one-woman show: "Art, poetry, is the precipitate of beauty in emotion ... Any expression in art, not stemming from Liberty and Love is false."<sup>65</sup> Like Rahon and Tanning, Lamba remained deeply influenced by Amerindian life and crafts, as well as Mexican culture.<sup>66</sup> After divorcing Hare in 1955, she settled permanently in France and devoted the rest of her life to her painting, which became increasingly abstract. Today, Lamba's luminous oeuvre is finally being recognized.<sup>67</sup>

Chicago-born painter Helen Lundeberg (1908-1999) also wrote a single, one-page manifesto, titled 'New Classicism' and addressed to fellow artists. She co-founded the movement led by her husband Lorser Feitelson, named *New Classicism* in her 1934 manifesto, which she illustrated with her own painting *Plant and Animal Analogies* (1934-35).<sup>68</sup> She sought differentiation from the Surrealists through "organization of intellectually significant forms creating an idea-entity, the synthesis of which appeals to our conscious intellectual nature, rather than to our sensual, emotional or subconscious nature," while intending to "found a unique order, an integrity of subject matter and pictorial structure unprecedented in the history of art."<sup>69</sup> *New Classicism* soon became *Post-Surrealism* and Lundeberg joined the West Coast artists. Although opposed to automatism and anti-logic, she retained affinities with various individual Surrealists such as Chirico and Magritte, as well as with the 1950s abstract tendencies.

After training in the family tapestry craft and completing a very thorough Parisian fine-arts education, French-born artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) married an American, moved to New York, and embarked on a lifelong career in fine arts, mainly as a sculptor.<sup>70</sup> She kept a stream-of-consciousness diary, wrote to friends, produced auto-analytical texts and gave interviews about her work throughout her long life.<sup>71</sup> Her metatexts in both French and English provide keys to her often less readable plastic oeuvre. She painted New York: "I love this city, its clean-cut look, its buildings, its scientific, cruel, romantic quality."<sup>72</sup> Her early sculptures, representing French loved ones, expressed acute home-sickness. Bourgeois's interest in the *uncanny*, eroticism and psychoanalysis frequently prompted critical associations with Surrealism, which will most likely remain, although she herself repeatedly claimed to be an Existentialist or "a daughter of Voltaire ... and the 18th century rationalists."<sup>73</sup> She further contrasted the Surrealists' "theatrical" art with Picasso's *reality*.<sup>74</sup> She was very critical of the Surrealists in New York, Breton and Duchamp in particular:

I had mixed feelings toward them ... since they were not interested in women period. They were interested in rich women, of course, but that is a special breed of women ... they were not interested in other artists. They were interested in themselves.<sup>75</sup>

Unlike the Surrealists who functioned in groups, Bourgeois was a solitary artist. Her art constituted her identity and religion, a sometimes masochistic struggle against fear, depression and obsession with her childhood: “I have spent a lifetime in self-improvement, self-analysis.”<sup>76</sup> Her endless self-expression is what created a strong link between her and the women more drawn to Surrealism. Semi-abstract figures, objects and patterns emerged from her unconscious, as she sought to destroy and subsequently repair a traumatic oedipal family romance: the father’s infidelity with a young Englishwoman, whom he deliberately hired as a governess for his children in order to keep her in the family home, and the mother’s painful tolerance of the situation. The famous giant spiders represent Bourgeois’s beloved, industrious, ever-weaving mother. Although her whole oeuvre stemmed from a defense of her mother against her father, and in spite of her fascination with women’s art and creativity, Bourgeois remained ambivalent regarding feminism. After overcoming her initial feeling of alienation, she considered herself an American artist. She wrote: “In America, I found my independence.”<sup>77</sup> Independence is the key word here. Bourgeois’s phenomenal legacy of self-representational, self-expressive sculptures, paintings and drawings, all consistently backed-up with more explicit written texts, traced the trajectory of a long, on-going and basically successful struggle. She wrote:

I was the third daughter of a man who wanted a son. So to survive I had to create ways of making myself likeable. It was the only way of escaping the depression which came from feeling superfluous—from feeling abandoned. Having been privileged with a native energy I switched from a passive role to an active one, which is an art I have practiced all of my life—the art of fighting depression (emotional dependence).<sup>78</sup>

Filmmaker, writer and dancer Maya Deren (1917-1961), known as “The Mother of the [American] Avant-garde Film” enhanced experimental Film Theory in the United States with her new, daring writings.<sup>79</sup> Deren lectured and wrote on Film, Film Theory, Photography and Dance, as long as she lived. Born Eleanora Derenowsky, in Kiev, Ukraine, to Jewish parents who fled the pogroms and immigrated to America (New York state) in 1922, the family shortened their name to Deren once in the

U.S. Exceptionally brainy, diligent and energetic, Eleanora attended the International School in Geneva and entered the University of Syracuse at sixteen, became active in the University's Young People's Socialist League, and at eighteen, married one of its leaders, Gregory Bardacke. By 1939, at twenty two, Deren was divorced and held a Master's in Literature and Psychology from Smith College, having written her thesis on the verbal and visual influence of the French Symbolist poets on the American Imagists. From 1939-41, she did freelance work in Greenwich village, secretarial jobs for writers, photography for various magazines, and wrote poems and short stories. In 1941, she took on a full time position as secretary and assistant to African American choreographer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham, who had her own all-black dance company. Dunham charged Deren with organizing and accompanying the dancers on tour around the country. She learned a great deal about dance and black Caribbean culture from Dunham, which later led to her Haitian project. When her work took her to California in 1942, Deren met and married a young Czech photographer and filmmaker, Alexander Hackenschmied, who helped her become a professional in both his arts. He changed his patronym to Hammid and she adopted the first name "Maya" meaning "illusion," thus sealing her new identity as an autonomous artist. Deren produced her first two and best known short films, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and *At Land* (1944) with Hammid. Their collaboration ended in divorce in 1947. After the next four experimental films, very involved with dance and also shorts: *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945), *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945-45), *Meditation on Violence* (1948) and *The Very Eye of Night* (1952-55), as well as various unfinished works, Deren's career as a film director became less important than her writing, consisting mainly of film and dance theory.

Her early films (1943-46) are often considered surrealist; she tended to disagree "because they were not involved in registers of the irrational."<sup>80</sup> She also denied being influenced by either Buñuel or Cocteau. *Meshes* and *At Land* are composed of startling images, often provoking the Bretonian poetic spark obtained by juxtaposing reality with a corresponding surreality such as dream, the imaginary, erotic desire, madness or death. The fact that Deren herself played the main protagonist in these films and that the surreal dimension becomes a woman's self-representative point of view, created a link with the as yet disparate production of women Surrealists, who unlike Deren were not feminists, with the noteworthy exception of Leonora Carrington. Deren's position vis-à-vis the group, like that of certain other women frequently considered part of the surrealist movement against their will, such as Bourgeois, Kahlo and Leonor Fini (who, like the others, were not feminists), remained distinct from the movement. Paradoxically, Deren was involved with Surrealists on a work level: she collaborated with Roberto Matta on

an unfinished film, *The Witch's Cradle* (1944), starring Marcel Duchamp and Matta's wife Anne. In addition, two other close friends of the New York Surrealists and of Deren's, Anaïs Nin and Charles Duit, acted in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. She was also known to have a selection of books by surrealist poets in her library, alongside some of their favorites, such as the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. She does not appear to have quarreled with Breton, who was said to have admired *At Land*. It was in fact Deren who photographed the founder of Surrealism with the superb window display conceived by Duchamp and titled *Lazy Hardware*, for the launching of Breton's book *Arcane 17* at *Gotham Book Mart*, in April 1945.<sup>81</sup>

According to Maureen Turim, "Deren's notion of form constitutes the kernel of her innovation"; she considered form as a moral issue.<sup>82</sup> These views are evident in her article "Cinema as an Art Form," which advocated that cinema (other than Hollywood commercial production) should be "treated as an independent art form, rather than as an instrument for the illustration of literary narrative."<sup>83</sup> Deren defied conventional narrative with the innovative form of *An Anagram of ideas on Art, Form and Film*, defined by the author as "an organization of ideas in an anagrammatic complex instead of the linear logic to which we are accustomed."<sup>84</sup> The essay dealt with oblique and / or ritual interactions between three pairs of concepts related to Man and Nature: "The State of Nature and the Character of Man"/ "The Mechanics of Nature and The Methods of Man"/ "The Instrument of Discovery and the Instrument of Invention." Deren's last project, a "plan for a film in which Haitian dance, purely as a dance form, would be combined (in montage principle) with various non-Haitian elements," sponsored by the first Guggenheim Fellowship for film (1946), grew into a vast study of Voodoo as religion and mythological ritual.<sup>85</sup> Deren's four field trips to Haiti produced the book *Divine Horsemen/The Living Gods of Haiti*, including descriptions of her personal initiation and possession ceremony.<sup>86</sup> Joseph Campbell praised the volume as "delineating the Haitian cult of Voodoo, not anthropologically ... —but as an experienced and comprehended initiation into the mysteries of man's harmony within himself and with the cosmic process."<sup>87</sup> Deren's third husband, Teiji Ito, posthumously edited a corresponding ethnographic film on Voodoo from her vast amount of Haitian footage.<sup>88</sup> Deren's avant-garde oeuvre provided a bridge between early Soviet film theory and both surrealist fascination with "Primitive" cultures and 1970s American feminism.<sup>89</sup> Surrealist film is a small field, and surrealist women filmmakers are few and far between. Apart from Nelly Kaplan and Deren (in spite of herself), they are/were mostly post-surrealists. As well as a staunch feminist, Deren was a politically active leader for the community of American Avant-Garde film directors and thanks to her stubborn lobbying and other organizational skills, they began to be recognized, as

well as obtain grants and other benefits. To Deren, art was communication, helping others, and individual expression.

. Women artists' writing at times remained behind the scenes, like Varo's texts or Kahlo's diary. Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), an American child prodigy and meteoric genius in the field of photography, kept a diary described by her father as "more literary than confessional" and "not so much of a record for her thoughts as a refuge from them."<sup>90</sup> Woodman studied in both the United States and Italy. She discovered surrealist art and literature in Rome, at the avant-garde bookshop Libreria Maldoror, where she "saw a good deal of surrealist material" and joined a "group of artists and political activists."<sup>91</sup> In her journals and letters, Woodman discussed her art, technique and attitude: "Photography is too connected with life. I take pictures of reality as filtered through my mind."<sup>92</sup> Sometimes Woodman merged words and images by scrawling graffiti-like titles across the inner frames of her photographs. Most of the latter could be described as anguished self-representation. Woodman came across as the natural heir to Claude Cahun (1894-1954), the polyvalent, iconoclastic French photographer and writer, whose work, far ahead of her time, reached out beyond Surrealism.

Humor, frequently but not always of the surrealist "black" variety, often lightened these women's texts. Again, Carrington remains the expert, with her Carroll-esque nonsense piece, *Jezzmathatics* (1965), and the cabalistic adventures of mutinous nonagenarians, inmates of an uncanny retirement home, in her novel *The Hearing Trumpet*, led by Marian Leatherby and her friend Carmela, who are obvious, affectionate caricatures of the author and Remedios Varo.<sup>93</sup> In *Between Lives*, Tanning pens a grotesque portrait of her maid's kinky lover, no doubt seeking consolation for her loss of Ernst, by making gentle fun of the Surrealists' fascination with all forms of eroticism.<sup>94</sup>

Whether these European women returned to Europe (Lamba, Waldberg, Bona) or preferred to stay in Mexico (Carrington, Varo, Rahon, Horna), or American women remained in or reintegrated their native United States (Sage, Tanning) or Mexico (Kahlo), their World War II nature/culture experiences in the New World enriched their writing and its links with their visual art, so that consciously or not, they either moved away from Surrealism or began to reinvent it.

1 Title of a 1954 Leonora Carrington painting, sometimes erroneously referred to as *Temple of the World*.

2 *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 209.

3 Edward James, "Leonora Carrington," *Leonora Carrington*, (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991), 42-43. This text was written in Ireland (1975).

- 4 See Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand* [1st edition, Random House 1945] (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1997).
- 5 For the various arrivals in New York and Mexico, see “Chronology 1938-1947,” in *Les Surréalistes en exil*, (Strasbourg, France: Musée d’Art Moderne & Contemporain, 2000), 437-444.
- 6 Laurence Tacou-Rumney, *Peggy Guggenheim* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 126-127.
- 7 See Patrick & Isabelle Waldberg, *Un Amour Acéphale/Correspondence 1940-1949*, edited by Michel Waldberg (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1992), 148, 173, 190, 192, 215-217, 272, and 275.
- 8 See Salomon Grimberg, *Jacqueline Lamba* (Easthampton, NH: Pollock-Krasner Study Center, 2001), 9-31.
- 9 See Teresa Arcq, “Mirrors of the Marvelous: Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo,” *Surreal Friends/ Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna* (Farnham: Surrey, UK & Pallant House Gallery, 2010), 98-115.
- 10 There was very little surrealist drama. For the few plays by women, mostly Carrington, see Gorla Orenstein, *The Theater of the Marvelous* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 99-147.
- 11 Finally published in a bilingual edition, *China Eggs / Les Œufs de porcelaine*, ed. Judith Suther, French trans. Elisabeth Manuel (Seattle and Charlotte: Starbooks / l’Étoile, 1996).
- 12 Sage, *China Eggs*, 302.
- 13 *The More I wonder: 73 Poems by Kay Sage* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957); *Demain Monsieur Silber* (Paris: Seghers, 1957); *Faut dire c’qui est* (Paris: Debresse, 1959) and *Mordicus* (Paris: P. André Benoît, 1962).
- 14 Judith Suther, *A House of Her Own: Kay Sage Solitary Surrealist* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 177.
- 15 Catherine Viviano Gallery. See Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors* (Nebraska University Press, 1994), 173-98.
- 16 In “Au pied de la lettre,” in *Faut dire c’qui est*, in Suther, 182-3.
- 17 In “Dorothea, Her Lights and Shadows (a scenario),” *Ten Recent Paintings and a Biography* (Paris: Gimpel-Weitzenhoffer Gallery, 1979). Originally written in French, Paris, 1976.
- 18 “[T]he oldest living Surrealist” is the title of an article on Tanning by Michelle Falkenstein, *Art News* 100.8 (Sept., 2001): 146-7. See *Birthday* (Santa Monica & San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986); and *Between Lives* (NY and London: Norton, 2001).
- 19 *Abyss* (New York: Standard Editions, 1977) and *Chasm* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2004).
- 20 Dorothea Tanning, *Table of Content* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004), 3.
- 21 Leonora Carrington, *En-Bas/Down Below*, version used here (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1972),
32. For detailed analyses of this text, see Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 49-78; and Georgiana Colvile, “Hystérie de l’Histoire et histoires d’hystérie,” *Mélysine* 24 (2004): 277-291. Marina Warner, “Introduction,” *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* by Leonora Carrington (London: Virago, 1989), 17. *Down Below* was first published in French by Henri Parisot (1945) and in English in *VVV* (1944), translated by Victor Llona.
- 22 See Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975).
- 23 Carrington, *Down Below*, 32.
- 24 Bona de Mandiargues, *La Cafarde* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1967), 19. Born Bona Tibertelli de Pisis, married to French poet André Pieyre de Mandiargues, this Italian artist signed her plastic art “Bona,” and her literary works “Bona de Mandiargues.” Bona and Mandiargues discovered Mexico on a privileged 6 month tour in 1958, during which Bona kept a diary and Octavio Paz organized a solo show for her at the Galeria Antonio Souza, Mexico City, including the oil canvas *El Sueño de la tierra*

(c.1957).

25 Bona provides a dictionary quote, as an epigraph.

26 Bona de Mandiargues, 46.

27 Sibylle Pieyre de Mandiargues, e-mail to author, February 15, 2009.

28 *Bonaventure*, with Alain Vircondelet (Paris: Stock, 1977); *La Vie en herbe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001); *A Moi-même* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1988), *I Lamenti di Serafino* (Rome: Le Parole Gelate, 1985). Examples of poems devised from erotic memories include the prose poem "Toledo," in *Bonaventure* (Paris : Stock, 1977), 271 and a poem "A Toledo, 1963," in *A Moi-même* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1988, no pagination). My quote is from the latter, my translation.

29 *Portrait of the Mexican Painter Toledo*, acrylics, 1968, (89x130cm), Museum of Oaxaca, Mexico.

30 Letter to A.Gomez-Arias, c. September, 1926, in *The letters of Frida Kahlo*, ed. Marta Zamora (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), 25.

31 Undated poem, in *The letters of Frida Kahlo*, 158-59.

32 *Time*, April 27, 1953: 90.

33 Carlos Fuentes, introduction to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1995),

24. Hayden Herrera, *FRIDA: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 263.

34 Including a remarkable early sketch (241) for *The Love Embrace of the Universe* (1949) and the story of her imaginary childhood friend (245-47), which had inspired a large double portrait, *The Two Fridas* (1939).

35 Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1995), 285.

36 Born Margaretha Farner in Oberstammheim, Switzerland, she took the name IsabelleWaldberg in 1938.

37 Michel Waldberg, preface to *Un Amour acéphale* [Patrick & Isabelle's Correspondence 1940-1949] (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1992), 11. All translations are mine.

38 She was German Swiss. See Dominique Le Buhan, introduction to *Waldberg: Sculptures* (Paris: La Différence, 1991).

39 02/03/1943, *Un Amour acéphale*, 42. The journal *VVV* was directed by Lionel Abel & David Hare, who published the Surrealists during World War II.

40 In 1944 at Guggenheim's "Art of this Century" Gallery; it was Waldberg's first individual exhibition.

41 *Un Amour acéphale*, 109.

42 *Un Amour acéphale*, 131.

43 *Un Amour acéphale*, 244.

44 Waldberg, *Un Amour acéphale*, 475, my translation.

45 Unpublished interview with Ona Munson, Los Angeles, August 1946.

46 Antony Penrose, ed., *Lee Miller's War* (London: Condé Nast Books, 1992).

47 Quoted in Antony Penrose, *The Lives of Lee Miller* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1985), 142.

48 Penrose, *Lives*, 152-3.

49 Penrose, *Lives*, 139.

50 Penrose, *Lives*, 140.

51 First published in the 1940 album, *Grim Glory*; reproduced in Penrose, *The Lives*, 102.

52 Dream and reality, as in the title of his book on dreams, *Les Vases communicants* (1932).

53 Remedios Varo, *Cartas, sueños y otros textos*, ed. Isabel Castells (Tlaxcala, Mexico: Universidad autonoma, 1994).

- 54 Written in 1959 and published posthumously as a booklet (Mexico City: Calli-Nova, 1970).
- 55 “*De homo rodans*,” *Pleine Marge* 4 (December 1986): 89-94. My translation of the French translation by Walter Gruen and Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron.
- 56 “Unpublished [and n.d.] Interview,” *Cartas, sueños y otros textos*, 43-44. My translation.
- 57 Kahlo, *The Letters*, 120-24.
- 58 Rahon’s second poetry plaquette (1936) was titled *Sablier couché*. See Georgiana Colvile, “Through an Hourglass Lightly: Valentine Penrose & Alice Rahon-Paalen,” in *Reconceptions: Reading Modern French Poetry*, R. King & B. McGuirk, eds. (Nottingham: The University of Nottingham Monographs in the Humanities 11, 1996), 80-112.
- 59 Alice Rahon, *À Méme la Terre* (Paris: Éditions surréalistes, 1936); *Sablier couché* (Paris: Éditions Sagesse, 1938); *Noir Animal* (Mexico City: Editions Dolorès La Rue, 1941).
- 60 Rahon was her mother’s maiden name.
- 61 Nancy Deffebach, “Poems of Light & Shadow, Painting in Free Verse,” *OnTheBus* 8-9 (Los Angeles, 1991), 173-96.
- 62 Alice Rahon, unpublished letters to Geo Dupin (1948-1960), Paalen Archives, Berlin.
- 63 The poem was published in *Pleine Marge* 4 (December 1986): 25. Rahon describes the picture in a letter to Geo Dupin, January 6, 1960.
- 64 Written by Rahon in Mexico, for her show at the Willard Gallery, New York, December 4-28, 1951.
- 65 At the Norlyst Gallery, New York, 1944.
- 66 Lamba traveled to the American Southwest with Hare (1944-46), visited Mexico with Breton (1938) and returned there to stay with Frida Kahlo (1944).
- 67 For more information, see Alba Romano-Pace’s biography of Lamba (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).
- 68 The text and painting are reproduced in the exhibition catalog: *An 80th Birthday Salute to Helen Lundeborg* (Los Angeles: American Council of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1988), 4-5.
- 69 *An 80th Birthday Salute*, 4.
- 70 Art historian Robert Goldwater, they married and moved to the United States in 1938.
- 71 Her writings have been collected in *Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997* (London: Violette Editions, 1998-2007). All my references on Bourgeois are to that book.
- 72 Bourgeois, *Destruction*, 45.
- 73 “Rosalind Krauss, who is a great Francophile, has got it into her head that I’m a Surrealist ... I’m bending over backwards to explain that I’m an Existentialist” (Bourgeois, 303). Bourgeois, 162.
- 74 Bourgeois, 40.
- 75 Bourgeois, 191.
- 76 Bourgeois, 245.
- 77 Bourgeois, 266.
- 78 Bourgeois, 167.
- 79 See Cecile Starr, “Maya: The Mother of the Avant-garde Film,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1976, sec.2, 13.
- 80 *Mesbes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944), *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945), *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). See Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 67.
- 81 In *The Legend of Maya Deren*, Vol. I, Part Two (New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1988), 145-148.

- 82 Maureen Turim, "The Ethics of Form," in Bill Nichols ed., *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), 78-79.
- 83 *New Directions* 9, 1946. In *Essential Deren*, Bruce McPherson, ed. (Kingston, NY. 2008), 19-33, 32.
- 84 Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (Yonkers, NY: The Alicat Book Shop Press, 1946; reprinted 2008), 34-109; Deren in McPherson, *Essential*, 36.
- 85 Maya Deren, "Author's Preface," *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston and New York: Documentext, McPherson & Co., 1983), 5.
- 86 Originally, London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1953; New York: McPherson & Co., 1983, 2004.
- 87 Joseph Campbell, "Editor's Note," in Deren, *The Divine Horsemen*, xi.
- 88 The film *The Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti* (1977), edited by Teiji & Cherel Ito.
- 89 By Eisenstein, Vertov et al.
- 90 George Woodman, "Seething With Ideas," in Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman Scattered in Space and Time* (London & New York: Phaidon Press, 2006-2007), 240.
- 91 In Townsend, 28-29.
- 92 "Journal Extracts," in Townsend, 243.
- 93 In Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy & Art* (New York: Lund Humphries, 2004), 148-50. Her second novel, *The Hearing Trumpet*, was written in Mexico in the early 1950s and first published in French translation as *Le Cornet Acoustique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974).
- 94 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 304-13.