

Women in the Surrealist Conversation
Introduction

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In the thirty years since Xavière Gauthier published *Surréalisme et sexualité* (1971) and the twenty-six since Whitney Chadwick's landmark *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985), studies of women who were active in the surrealist movement have proliferated.¹ No critic can claim any longer that women did not play a significant role in what I have called the surrealist conversation,² namely the launch, exchange, and constant adjustment and reformulation of circulating ideas, images, metaphors, and jokes of the sort typical of a group conversation conducted in a café or over a dinner table, or a "banquet" as Dorothea Tanning characterized the experience on the first page of her first autobiography, *Birthday* (1986). Tanning situated her own writing within a *symposium*, a philosophical exchange conducted as if at a dinner party: "You needn't make excuses for putting on a banquet and inviting one and all."³ In this issue of the *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* on women, Surrealism, and the Americas, not only the women featured but the authors of the essays themselves participate in the surrealist conversation—defining, correcting, and redefining what Surrealism means to us today, how the field is defined by critics listening and responding to one another in a spirit of exchange, a *symposium* of reciprocal respect and engagement that mirrors what true participation in the twentieth century's surrealist movement meant to the women artists and writers themselves.

Women had a place at the table and their work in art and writing reflects their visible presence in the intellectual economy of Surrealism. The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s led to the groundbreaking work on women in Surrealism by Gauthier and Chadwick. This scholarship certainly helped to

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redefine what constitutes a body of work, with its focus on the way “the personal is political,” shifting the status of letters, diaries, and autobiographies from peripheral documents to the core of study; such intensely personal expression had always been at the center of surrealist experimentation. The voices, paintings, drawings, poems, writings, sculptures, photographs, essays, dances, and films by women only consolidated what had always been a movement rooted in intimacy, of the self with the self as well as with others. This new collection of essays establishes how women in and from the Americas contributed to the surrealist conversation through their responses, interventions, and appropriations—often irreverent, as often political—of the questions that concerned the core group as it migrated from France to Spain, New York, Connecticut and Mexico. From the dissident encounter of European and Mexican philosophy to a fascination with non-Western and pre-Columbian art, emerging science, non-Cartesian notions of identity and body, and, throughout, a fervent dedication to revolutionary politics, women linked to the Americas had an impact on Surrealism. They also collectively present a renewed affirmation of the relevance of the movement to our twenty-first-century appreciation of twentieth century art, politics, and thought.

The issue begins with “*Temple of the Word*,” Georgiana Colvile’s introduction to the women involved in the surrealist conversation linked to the Americas. Her essay illuminates the liberating effects of the dislocation caused by World War Two on surrealist women who accompanied their male companions to the New World. As she persuasively argues in her comprehensive presentation of the migratory movements of surrealist artists from Europe to the Americas and back, several of the women found the move to be such a liberating enhancement to their work that they “chose to stay.” Not only did one of them, Peggy Guggenheim, concentrate on women artists in her landmark exhibition “Thirty-one Women Artists” at her new Art of This Century gallery but, as a result of this show, several of the women included in this issue—Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning, Lee Miller and Kay Sage—had individual shows as well, evidence that the dislocations of war and a newly welcoming environment fostered a burst of creativity that added new timbre, color, and effect to mainstream Surrealism.

Through analysis of the works, Colvile shows how the narrative drive triggered by trauma suffered in the early lives of several of the women was enhanced by dislocation to the Americas, presenting new outlets for “their tendency toward self-representation.” In their hands, Surrealism was reinvented as a movement that accommodated women as well as men, women whose surrealist expressions ranged from painting to poetry, photography, film, and dance. All of them wrote, leaving textual as well as visual traces of their work. Colvile sheds light on Isabelle

Waldberg's experience sculpting in New York as recorded in her letters home to Paris, the Mexican influence on Bona de Mandiargue's writing, in particular her most surrealist, dreamlike narrative *La Cafarde*, and Jacqueline Lamba's "ars poetica," an "aesthetic manifesto" written to accompany her first one-woman show. Colvile's kaleidoscopic view of surrealist women includes those who wrote autobiographical narratives like Carrington, Sage, Tanning, Mandiargues, and Waldberg; those like Lee Miller who published essays; as well as those like Frida Kahlo who wrote letters and diaries that stand as narrative testaments to the ways that politics crystallized their art. The sheer quantity of names in this essay establishes the field of women Surrealists whose work was influenced by the Americas, whether as a point of departure for some such as Tanning, Sage, and Francesca Woodman, as a significant port in the storm of World War Two for such as Waldberg, or, as a landing point for such as Carrington and Remedios Varo. Her study demonstrates how interconnected they were to each other and to other members of the movement, deeply aware of how each work, statement, and letter contributed to the collective conversation that defined the experience of Surrealism.

Colvile's emphasis on the importance to the work of European surrealist women artists of the discovery of "Amerindian or pre-Columbian civilizations" anticipates Jonathan Eburne's bracing review of Carrington's black humor as fundamentally nourished by Mexican challenges to European rationalism. In "Leonora Carrington, Mexico, and the Culture of Death," Eburne insists upon Carrington's black humor "as an ethical as well as an aesthetic project" that recasts death in a distinctly non-Western light, "in terms of a pre-Columbian funerary culture that figures it [death] as a mode of recirculation." He concentrates on Carrington's focus on the Mexican "culture of death," which denies Western distinctions between life and death by asserting that these two states co-exist in a way that is analogical to surrealist claims for the co-existence of the seemingly oppositional psychological states of waking and dreaming. André Breton summed up this belief in his strong statement in the first "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924): "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*."⁴ Eburne argues that, as a result of the discovery of ancient Mexican culture to which Colvile refers, death might be viewed a "mode of recirculation" instead of as a "radical dissolution." If so, then the entire European *mentalité*, the world-view within which Carrington and her fellow surrealists from Paris were raised, comes into question. As Eburne explains: "the Mexican culture of death offered a means for confronting the modern humanistic tendency to suppress death" by introducing it as an acceptable alternative to life. Carrington chooses to deploy this perspective as a subversive way

to undermine and mock humanism's tendency towards self-importance. She does so typically through cooking, a surrealistically playful analogy for all forms of human interaction.

Cooking and eating, the basics of consumption, serve as great levelers of human beings in Carrington's work, particularly in the play Eburne studies, "La invención del mole" ("The Invention of *Mole*," 1957), in which he argues that Carrington's black humor "restores death to its sovereignty" in a "cosmology of sacrifice and reabsorption." By the 1950s Carrington was speaking out of her position within Mexican intellectual culture and resisting the idea that ancient Mexican culture could serve appropriately as an article of consumption for avid Western interlopers, even sympathetic surrealist refugees like herself. Eburne shows how Carrington's humor forces the Western reader into an uncomfortable awareness of the ethical dilemma inherent to Western consumption of new cultures, including the unconsciously colonialist surrealist admiration of the pre-Columbian objects they collected as art. By turning the tables on Western culture in her short text from 1962, "De cómo funde un industria o el sarcófago de hule" (How to Start a Pharmaceuticals Business, Or, The Rubber Sarcophagus), in which familiar Western objects within a post-apocalyptic Westernized Mexico City are recirculated and defamiliarized in the same way pre-Columbian artifacts have frequently been misidentified and misused in light of their original functions in the West, Carrington scathingly asks her readers to recognize acts of cultural consumption of which they may be guilty by proposing such acts as fundamentally reciprocal in nature. Eburne sees in this stance "a moral system governed by a visible, even didactic reciprocity" fueled by dark humor.

Eburne contends that like Georges Bataille or Maurice Blanchot, Carrington's mid-century work "identifies death as the condition of collective existence" which she situates as distinctly linked to the "living cultures of death" that, in a radical move, springs not from the Western philosophical traditions that nourished Bataille and Blanchot, but from the "metaphysical cosmologies of ancient Mexico." Carrington purposefully "deploys the imagery of death and reliquary objects as a mode of political critique" because, despite her status as a European (albeit living in exile), she speaks out of the cultural position of the objectified pre-Columbian culture the surrealists so admired. In keeping with my notion of the surrealist conversation, Carrington—as Eburne reveals her here—picks up such beloved surrealist constructs as the politics of subversion, the undermining of the rational, or the satiric snap of humor, and relaunches these ideas into the surrealist economy from a postcolonialist perspective. By activating a principle of cultural reciprocity she also resists the idea of cultural dominance, upon which much of the European

Surrealists' fascination with non-Western cultures rests, just as the male surrealists' fascination with women did.

Furthermore the figure of reciprocity that Eburne finds in Carrington counters a principle of flow, shift, and movement to the certainties of Enlightenment rationalism, and even to Breton's proclamatory pedagogical style. Reciprocity also recognizes an ethical stance in Carrington's relation to the culture of her European home from her place in Mexico that is at once feminist and postcolonialist in the sense that she speaks from the place of a former European colony in a voice that echoes Simone de Beauvoir's critique of Emmanuel Levinas in the *Second Sex* (1949): "I suppose that Levinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness, or ego," she writes in a footnote, "But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege."⁵ If we add to Beauvoir's statement about "masculine" privilege the corollary notion from postcolonial theory of "colonialist" privilege, we may see a parallel world view in Eburne's reading of Carrington's ethical politics as founded on a principle of "reciprocity."

Carrington was not the only surrealist artist in Mexico to turn the tables on European Surrealism. Kahlo with her German-Jewish art-school background also expressly and intentionally positioned herself in the place of the pre-Columbian culture the European Surrealists so admired. She did this to display the sophistication of her ancient yet politically radical contemporary culture, in a tart response to the praise she received from Breton, who credulously accepted her self-fashioning as an indigenous icon. Alyce Mahon demonstrates how Breton's "discovery" of Kahlo coincided with "a new direction for the leader of the surrealist movement . . . towards the indigenous and mythical," which led him to find in Kahlo's work a new "geography of modernism," a "lost secret," feminine, hybrid, rebellious. This was not merely a matter of coincidence but partly a result of how Kahlo's skillful self-positioning as indigenous *and* European gave Breton easy access to this new world in which primitivist aesthetics and modernist liberal politics were wed according to an "international agenda of the avant-garde" that was as active in Mexico City as in Paris. Mahon analyzes the subversive way that Kahlo portrays avant-garde modernism in Mexican terms, in keeping with her participation in the surrealist conversation, by using her own body dressed in traditional indigenous clothing as a material symbol of a hybrid culture at once ancient and modern, pre-Columbian and European, through the hybridity of her own persona. Kahlo self-consciously emblemized the surrealist ideal of combining dream and reality in a way that

extended “beyond realism,” as Kahlo framed her answer to Breton’s Surrealism, in meticulous renderings that meet ? equal? Salvador Dali’s elaborately realistic precedent of showing in recognizable detail the fantastic content of psychic life.⁶

Like Carrington, Kahlo negotiates her European and Mexican identities through a conscious espousal of biculturalism, from a Mexican starting point rather than Carrington’s European one. Kahlo’s version, her synthesis of “pre-Columbian and European values” in a “radical new hybridity,” according to Mahon, turns out to be what Breton was seeking in the troubled mid-century, at a time when he feared that Euro-centered philosophy had been revealed as bankrupt by the war. Kahlo shared Carrington’s turn to “the ‘lost secret’ of the non-Western world [that attracted Breton] as Surrealism stood on the brink of the threat of a new World War and modern art of an American take-over.” This fascination with the “lost secret” from the past is also reflected in Breton’s resurrection of the late-medieval European Melusine myth as a way of turning serious attention to contributions by women, a resurrection that emerges in his writing while in exile in the United States, as does his fascination with Mexico. Both interests constitute Breton’s answer to what Eburne identifies as Bataille and Blanchot’s focus on “death as the condition of collective existence” at mid-century. They also reflect the surrealist interest in dream-time as opposed to realistic time, allowing the ancient past to penetrate the present in a natural continuum, as part of that principle of flow, shift, and movement in opposition to Western chronological time of the sort that governs Western notions of mortality that Eburne finds in Carrington’s work.

In her study of Varo’s aesthetic investigation of science seen from a surrealist perspective, “Surrealism, Science and the Everyday,” Natalya Lusty sees in Varo’s work during her Mexican years both “a transgenerational and transnational avant-garde modernity whereby Paris” was no longer at the center of the movements it had generated. Lusty follows Gavin Parkinson’s view of Surrealism as “a fundamentally interdisciplinary ‘school.’” Like Colvile, Eburne, and Mahon, Lusty identifies the surrealist turn towards myth, “the esoteric arts of alchemy and magic,” as linked to the fascination of the Surrealists with “the pre-Columbian art and culture that saturated everyday life in Mexico.” Lusty shows how Varo’s version of the new “geography of modernism” that Breton saw in Kahlo’s work, on the one hand, becomes literalized into everyday realities in Varo’s work that resemble the familiar, everyday elements in Kahlo’s paintings—Kahlo’s dresses, gardens, and familiar animals become, in Varo’s work, equally familiar clothing, and domestic and natural spaces rendered surrealistically fantastic through exaggerated *scientific* motifs: the woman protagonist as explorer, chemist, and devotee of her psychoanalyst. Like Kahlo, Varo does this realistically in a style that goes “beyond realism” through

the transformations she performs visually. The explorer's costume, for example, seamlessly stretches into her mode of transportation, cloth transmogrified into the wooden structure of a functional boat. Varo makes this non-rational transformation look ordinary in a style reminiscent of Carrington's stories in which fantastic events are naturalized by her deadpan authorial voice.⁷

Varo's participation in the surrealist conversation includes an expansion of the Surrealists' interest in the scientific theories of psychoanalysis and anthropology in 1920s and '30s Paris to include visual representations of the surrealist thinker as a (female) practitioner of astronomy, chemistry, and, by analogy, magic. For Varo the value of the woman portrayed as a scientist resides in an appreciation of innovative science as fundamentally creative and accessible to women as well as to men, requiring intuitive knowledge coupled with objective facts. Lusty shows how Varo, like Carrington and Kahlo, used an exaggerated realism infused with a non-European non-rational intensity that conformed to Surrealism's earliest celebration of the co-existence of realities and mental states. By mid-century, these had become informed by a desire to expand the parameters of the movement to include new scientific and philosophic discoveries.

Emily Robins Sharpe shows how Mary Low's "Feminist Reportage" in the *Red Spanish Notebook: The First Six Months of the Revolution and Civil War* (1937), co-written with Juan Bréan, her Cuban husband-to-be, relied on a transnational avant-garde sensibility that also involved an ethical stance—not of reciprocity as Eburne argued for Carrington, but of collaboration. As with Carrington, Low's ethical stance is directly linked to her politics, which were less postcolonial in Low's case than directly revolutionary; her notebook records her six-months of experience in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil war, where she worked alongside Bréa in support of the Spanish workers' revolution. While surrealists in Paris preached the importance of revolution, even naming their journal *La révolution surréaliste* in 1924, and some, like Robert Desnos, supported the war in Spain in other ways (Desnos wrote lyrics for a popular song of support, "No Pasaran"), Low and Bréa moved to Spain to participate in an active way and Low worked also closely with women, the "Mujeres Libres." Robins Sharpe shows the key role that Low's descriptions of documentary photographs play in her notebook and how her written "reportage" sought to challenge her audience's beliefs by "repeatedly shifting her narrative stance, from a participant to an observer" in a move that echoes Beauvoir's understanding of ethics as founded on reciprocity.

Robins Sharpe highlights Low's intentional use of ekphrasitic descriptions "to circumvent the photographic censorship she encountered" in Barcelona, most specifically the "covert censorship" of foreign newspapers. Through reportage rather

than fiction, and with a sharp depiction of a particularly revealing exchange between Low and a visiting “elderly woman journalist” from the *Daily Mail*, Robins Sharpe effectively demonstrates how Low challenged assumptions about taste and decorum that obscure aspects of everyday reality for those experiencing war firsthand.

Robins Sharpe insists upon Low’s desire to strip bare the way “the foreign media’s notions of brutality, decency, and bravery obscure war’s realities and sanitize Spanish tragedy, supposedly to protect foreign women’s delicate nerves.” Like her fellow British Surrealist Carrington, Low’s target is in part the sensibilities she left behind in the United Kingdom, which she seeks to expose as hypocritical, self-centered, and profoundly unethical. Low ironically undercuts the *Daily Mail* journalist by quoting her verbatim: “Sending out photographs of those dead children! It’s too dreadful.” “We think so, too,” Low replies in her reconstitution of the dialogue, “Too dreadful that they should have been killed. But of course we didn’t kill them . . .” So that when the journalist retorts accusatorily, “How can you be such brutes? Think of all the women who are going to suffer when they see that . . .” Low replies simply: “That would be the very best thing that could happen.” Like Carrington, who spoke from the perspective of a person living in a former colony, Low sought to implicate her readers “in the international community’s continued blindness” to the violence being done to children and women in a place that was viewed as inferior, if not exactly a colony. Finally, and again like Carrington, Low left her native United Kingdom for good in the 1930s and wound up in the Americas—first in Cuba, where she worked in support of the Cuban revolution, and then in the United States, where the politics she expressed in her *Red Spanish Notebooks* “continued to inform her social engagement.”

Miller’s political engagement took her in the opposite direction from Low, moving from the United States to Europe—France and the United Kingdom. In the quotation from Miller’s powerful photo-essay in *American Vogue* (1945) about the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp, and with which Laurie Monahan opens her essay on “Waste Management: Hitler’s Bathtub”—“Believe it”—Monahan shows how Miller, like Low, sought to expose World War Two’s harshest realities so that no amount of distancing could spare American readers from “the sort of things which ought to be kept decently hidden,” as the *Daily Mail* journalist cited by Low puts it. That journalist *wanted* certain realities to stay hidden that Low and Miller strove to reveal. They wanted to lay bare the fact that war inevitably entails all “sorts of things which ought to be kept decently hidden” and those who engage in war, even indirectly, should know about those “sorts of things.” Miller refused to hide what she saw in her photographs, in keeping with Low’s marriage of political and aesthetic sensibility. Her part in the surrealist conversation may be

seen in her passionate investment in the war against fascism; like Desnos she used journalism as a venue for social commentary. As an American who became a G.I. journalist in order to get close to the action, she was less vulnerable than he was, working in German occupied Paris, or Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon, who also both participated in the French Resistance.

Miller's irony works through the same kinds of juxtapositions deployed by Low: "A photograph of 'well fed' and healthy German children," explains Monahan, "is paired with 'burned bones of starved prisoners'"; "a small 'orderly' village" is matched by "'orderly furnaces to burn bodies.'" Like Low, Miller skewers the concept of "decency" as an excuse for avoiding indecent realities that must be believed by ethical citizens. "Readers may not believe their eyes," Monahan notes, "but they cannot be blinded by deceptive appearances of normality if they follow Miller's narrative." Indeed, Monahan's emphasis on the tension between sight and blindness in Miller's war photography captures in aesthetic terms the ethical stance studied in Carrington's work by Eburne, and in Low's work by Robins Sharpe. She takes it a step further by blurring the opposing poles explored by Carrington—former colonizer and former colony's assumptions about each other—and asking the question Carrington and Low raised about the differences between "us" and "them" in a way that destabilizes the viewer's position. Are the Allies really so different from their Nazi opponents, Monahan shows Miller asking in perhaps her most famous photograph: of herself taking a bath in Hitler's tub. "Who is occupying Hitler's space and what does it mean to do so?" asks Monahan of the photographs Miller staged and her companion David Scherman shot: "The photo signals something much more ambiguous about the war and Miller's—if not the viewer's—relationship to it." Monahan suggests that this image represents "Miller's attempt to manage the wastes of war" which involves extreme discomfort, a feeling Miller passes to the viewer with this image, having already warned her readers of "the danger of accepting appearances of normality."

Monahan cites a letter Miller wrote to her editor at *Vogue* that clarifies Miller's own discomfort with how her proximity to the place where Hitler lived made him "a little less fabulous and therefore more terrible," because she was chilled to recognize that perhaps she was less unlike him than she had believed. "'There, but for the grace of God walk I,'" she wrote. What is most "terrible" for Miller, Monahan suggests, is the disturbing realization that he is "closer to human" than she had thought, which she demonstrates by doing something as ordinary and quotidian as taking a bath in his tub, washing off dirt in a way that reminds the viewer "that any of us could be like him." Furthermore, no matter how horrible the reality in the photographs she took on the day Buchenwald was liberated, Miller emphasizes the truth that that

reality was the result of “*human acts.*” Monahan argues that what Miller fears most in her confrontation with the consequences of the war is the dissolution of her faith in the differences between herself and the enemy perpetrators of war she confronted with her camera, that their transformation into prisoners by 1945 exposes the extent to which they are as possibly normal as she is and vice versa.⁸

In this uneasy version of the recognition of reciprocity Monahan reads a resistance to the sort of classification that might make it easier to distance oneself from the perpetrators of war. She sees in this resistance an echo of Bataille’s fascination with the *informe* or formlessness, which insisted on the very un-Cartesian “disorder of things”—such as categories as simple as the “good” and the “bad” side of any war. This resistance to classification could be understood as a rejection of absolutes, similar to Carrington’s embrace of the Mexican culture of death as a repudiation of Western European notions life and death as separate and unbridgeable states. In Carrington’s defiance Eburne reads an ethical stance that resonates with the uncomfortable ambiguity embraced by Miller, an ambiguity that in Miller’s case turned out to be difficult and destructive of her personal happiness, as Monahan explains. In a final irony, Miller wound up experiencing the end of the war as a terrible loss, her sense of purpose replaced with depression. We viewers should not try to “manage” our own discomfort at the insight Miller’s photograph leads us to—that dirt washed off her own American GI’s body may not be that different from that washed off the tub’s prior occupant.

Reciprocity again emerges as a key element in the autobiographical exhibition and catalogue created by Sage towards the end of her life, *Your Move* (1961). Set up as a kind of interactive game in which Sage summons her viewers to see, read, absorb, and return parts of themselves to the interaction of looking at her work, it functions in the manner of a purposely playful dinner (or philosophical) conversation. This woman surrealist artist, who moved from Albany, New York, to Europe and back to the greater New York area (Connecticut) during World War Two with Yves Tanguy, her surrealist painter-partner-husband, entered the surrealist conversation in the sense that she understood the “Manifesto” as an invitation to participate, which she did with works that provoked response in the shape of questions—her titles sometimes worked like riddles—and thus insured the prolongation of the interaction involved, as Elisabeth Sherman argues.⁹ In “Kay Sage’s *Your Move* and/ as Autobiography,” Sherman suggests that the catalogue created for the exhibition of these 17 mixed-media works shown at the Catherine Viviano gallery during two weeks in November 1961 “manages to convey the impression” of the exhibition “rather than simply the documentation” of it. The invitation inherent to the show’s and the catalogue’s title, “your move,” is consolidated by the heavy card stock on

which the catalogue was printed, which suggests more of a board game than a conventional paper book.

The images of the works along with the seventeen-line poem that extends throughout the catalogue work reciprocally, argues Sherman, encourage a reciprocity of engagement between the artist and her viewers, just as the call of the title to the viewer to “move” in response to it does. Sherman further insists upon a reciprocity between the catalogue and Sage’s autobiography which, Sherman argues, had a combinatorial aspect, a crazy-quilt of experiences and personae—from wealthy heiress to Italian princess to surrealist painter and then partner to a fellow Surrealist, first in Paris and then New York, a checker-board of different communities between which she moved according to an itinerary as much governed by chance as by fate. Sage’s writing here in particular, argues Sherman, attaches her to the surrealist community through the principles of the surrealist conversation—an ethical engagement with her fellow artists involving giving each one his or her *move*.¹⁰

Tanning’s notion of identity is similarly relational. For an autobiographical game about the self that requires the interactions of others, Tanning substitutes a straight autobiography with the twist that both versions, *Birthday* (1986), revised as *Between Lives* (2001), are as much biographies of her husband, Max Ernst, as they are the story of her own life. She presents her life as an extended “banquet” held in dialogue with Ernst and with the Surrealists more generally, even after she established distance between herself and surrealist activities in Paris. Tanning’s focus on lived experience as fundamentally interconnected with others emerges in her lifelong fascination with the gothic, a mode of writing and painting founded on the surrealist belief that all of everyday reality is complemented by unseen forces that co-exist with it. For the origins of Tanning’s gothic imagination, Victoria Carruthers returns to Tanning’s account of her midwestern American childhood fascination with gothic fiction that informed her work from New York to Paris to Sedona and back to New York, in a career that spanned most of the twentieth century. Like Sage, whom Tanning knew, Tanning settled back in New York after having lived in France with her surrealist partner-painter-husband. Like Miller, who photographed Tanning and Ernst in their self-built Arizona house, Tanning explored a psychological space caught in between rational categories and moral certainties, a space she infused more with sensual intensity and less with politics—even though she and Ernst were refugees from the war when they settled in Sedona.

Carruthers characterizes the young women who populate the paintings Tanning made in Arizona as representing “an emotional and physical in-between: not yet fettered by the rigors of adult rationality and bourgeois constraint, these girls violently tear at the veneer of normality, coming into direct contact with

otherworldly forces.” This in-between threshold space is indeed typical of surrealist automatism, the suspended moment in time wherein non-chronological, non-rational dreamtime reigns, and the distinctions between what we see in our released imaginations and what we hear coming through our physical bodies converge. This is what Michel Foucault identified as *expérience* in Bretonian automatism. Foucault captures the essence of the suspended experience of automatism, stating that what we owe Breton is “the discovery of a space that is not that of philosophy, nor of literature, nor of art, but that of experience. We are now in a time when experience—and the thought that is inseparable from it—are developing with an extraordinary richness, in both a unity and a dispersion that wipe out boundaries of provinces that were once well established.”¹¹ Tanning herself visually evokes this suspended experience of immersion in sensual experience in her paintings, just as she describes it beautifully in her autobiographies, and in the brochure for her exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2000 (the year she turned 90), *Dorothea Tanning, Birthday and Beyond*, from which Carruthers quotes: “I wanted to lead the eye into spaces that hid, revealed, transformed all at once and where there would be some never-before-seen image, as if it had appeared between dreaming and waking—with no help from me.”

Carruthers insists upon Tanning’s ability to collapse “the boundary between physical ‘place’ and psychic space, providing the perfect metaphor for the unconscious or the imagination.” This collapse carries over into Tanning’s move to abstraction which, for Carruthers, is no less gothic, except that Tanning’s new “uses of the surface” serve “to submerge, fragment, contain and control the action in ways similar to a more contemporary, postmodern gothic that focuses on the fragmented body.” Carruthers sees in the ensemble of Tanning’s work, from her most surrealistic realism to her most abstract works, a lifelong obsession with “the grand drama, excesses and psychological hauntings of the gothic,” irrational and forceful challenges to conscious, quotidian reality founded on the Enlightenment thinking of the sort the first Surrealists sought to access, and Breton thought he might have found in Mexico.

While not exactly the condition of reciprocity with which Eburne sees Carrington defying Western European distinctions between life and death, or Robins Sharpe sees Low as examining through her challenge to conventional standards of “decency,” or even Monahan’s analysis of Miller’s photographs as provocatively questioning Western European and American moral classifications founded on stable notions of good and evil, Tanning’s insistent focus on the in-between state of being also challenges fixed distinctions, conventional standards of decorum, and moral classifications by opposing states of radical *instability* to behavioral, moral, and

rational norms. Together these women artists and writers embraced the fundamental tenet of Surrealism that rational reality is doubled by an opposing yet equally forceful reality founded on dream, which they explored analogically as death (Carrington), a reality “beyond realism” and Western approaches to knowledge (Kahlo), esoteric science founded on non-Western practices (Varo), ideology (Low), the uneasy truth of moral ambiguity (Miller), the interrelational view of the psyche as located in between rather than solely contained within singular human beings (Sage), and as life lived surrounded by invisible forces (Tanning).

What the authors of these essays on women in the surrealist conversation show about the current state of research in the early twentieth-first century is how far scholarly work on women surrealists has moved since the early days of what was called gyno-criticism in the 1970s, the important period of discovery and historical exposition of the quantity of women writing and making art in association with the surrealist movement. The authors in this issue of the *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* place the women studied here in depth—Carrington, Kahlo, Varo, Low, Miller, Sage, and Tanning—not only within history, but more specifically within the histories of twentieth century philosophy, theory, and ideas, as well as art. This reassessment shows how many of these writers and artists were in sync with Beauvoir’s articulation of a feminist ethics founded on *Mitsein*, the fundamental notion of reciprocity between human beings, an idea that took most of the twentieth century to sink into social practices in Europe and the Americas where these artists and writers lived. They also extended that idea to challenge fundamental certainties upon which Western identity rests, from what it means to be a moral individual to what it means to live and die. Colvile, Eburne, Mahon, Lusty, Robins Sharpe, Monahan, Sherman, and Carruthers show the importance of these authors as thinkers not simply creating in a surrealist idiom, but adding to the greater philosophical conversation in which Surrealism engaged. With this (virtual) volume the study of women surrealists establishes a new standard upon which future work may build, work that will continue to show the extent to which these women participated fully in the theoretical, ideological, political, ethical, and intellectual histories of their era, not as footnotes, but as central to our growing understanding of the century from which we have only just emerged.

1 Xavière Gauthier, *Surrealisme et sexualité* (Gallimard, 1971), Whitney Chadwich, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Little Brown, 1985). Also critical to the launch of the study of women surrealist artists was the early work of Gloria Feman Orenstein, including “Leonora Carrington’s Visionary

Art for the New Age,” *Chrysalis* 3 (1978): 65-77, and “Reclaiming the Great Mother: A Feminist Journey and Back in Search of a Goddess Heritage,” *Symposium* 36.1 (1982): 45-69. See, as well, Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent* (Harvard, 1990), Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors* (University of Nebraska Press, 1994), Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman* (University of Nebraska Press, 1996), Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. *Significant Others* (Thames & Hudson, 1996), Whitney Chadwick, ed. *Mirror Images* (MIT Press, 1998), Katharine Conley and Georgiana Colvile, eds. *La Femme s’entête* (Pleine Marge, 1998), Georgiana Colvile, *Scandaleusement d’elles* (JM Place, 1999), Stefan van Raay, *Surreal Friends* (Lund Humphries, 2010) to name just a few of the books dedicated to women in Surrealism that have been published since the 1980s, complemented by books dedicated entirely to a single artist such as Hayden Herrera’s *Frida* (Haper Collins, 1983), Antony Penrose’s *Lives of Lee Miller* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), Judith Suther’s *A House of her Own* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), Janet Kaplan’s *Remedios Varo* (Abbeville Press, 2000), Susan Aberth’s *Leonora Carrington* (Lund Humphries, 2004), and so on.

2 I describe the idea of the “surrealist conversation” in the introduction to *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (Nebraska, 2003).

3 Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday* (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986), 11.

4 André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 14.

5 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1952), xix.

6 Herrera cites art historian Antonio Rodriguez’s memory of Kahlo having said: “I adore surprise and the unexpected. I like to go beyond realism. For this reason, I would like to see lions come out of that bookshelf and not books” (255).

7 In stories like “The Oval Lady” and “Royal Summons” in *The Oval Lady*, inanimate objects like toys and natural forms like trees speak in a style that presents these occurrences as ordinary. See Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (New York: Dutton, 1988), 35-65.

8 For a theoretical approach to the factors that made the war that Miller found repellent attractive to her look for Marian Eide’s forthcoming book on violence and its lures.

9 I am thinking about the title that refers to common road signs in the United States, *Danger, Construction Ahead* (1940) and the ironic *The Giant’s Dance* (1944).

10 Sherman refers as much to poems published here and there in her lifetime and reproduced in exhibition catalogues such as *Kay Sage* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) as to Sage’s posthumously published autobiography which ends abruptly with her meeting the surrealists in Paris, *China Eggs/Les Oeufs de Porcelaine*. ed. tans. Elisabeth Manuel, ed. Judith Suther (Charlotte and Seattle: Starbooks/L’Etoile, 1996).

11 Michel Foucault, “A Swimmer Between Two Words,” trans. Robert Hurley, *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 173.