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"Nobody will give you freedom, you have to take it."  
-Meret Oppenheim



Duckbill (about 1 1/2ft. long)

"Far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting or revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us, endlessly reinforcing the massive army of refusals."  
—Suzanne Césaire



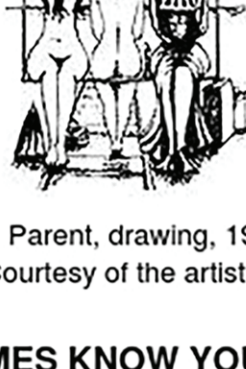
Rhinoceros (1/80)

# SURREALIST Women

## AN INTERNATIONAL ANTHOLOGY

Edited with Introductions by *Penelope Rosemont*

Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998



Mimi Parent, drawing, 1984. Courtesy of the artist.

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### ALL MY NAMES KNOW YOUR LEAP: SURREALIST WOMEN & THEIR CHALLENGE

Exerpts from the Introduction to *Surrealist Women*

"Knock hard. Life is deaf." —Mimi Parent

Although the first women of surrealism have been almost entirely overlooked in the historical and critical literature, clearly they were a bold, imaginative, and in many other ways a remarkable lot. Even before surrealism's first *Manifesto* appeared in Paris in 1924, women were active in the movement, and they have been expanding and illuminating its universe ever since. In all the arts and major genres of writing, women helped develop surrealism's radical poetic/critical outlook, and thus helped make it what it was and is. To ignore their contributions is to ignore some of the best of surrealism.

This book seeks to bring to light as much as possible the quality, range, diversity and vitality of women participants in the international Surrealist Movement. Although the contributions of women have been acknowledged and in some cases celebrated within the movement itself, they are hardly known outside it. In the U.S., the few books devoted to the topic of women and surrealism are narrowly concerned with a dozen or so "stars"—mostly painters and photographers whose work has finally, and most often posthumously, attained some standing in the art market. As a result, women surrealists whose principal vehicle of expression is the written word have been especially neglected. This neglect, in turn, has maintained old stereotypes and other misapprehensions of the surrealist project. Generalizations about surrealism based entirely on painters are bound to be misleading, because surrealism never has been primarily a movement of painters. Indeed, if the evidence of surrealism's numerous women poets and thinkers has been suppressed, how could the prevailing conceptions of surrealism be anything but false?

I hope that this gathering of poems, automatic texts, dreams, tales, theoretical articles, declarations, polemics, games and responses to inquiries will help correct this distortion by revealing some of the many ways in which women have enriched surrealism as a ferment of ideas, an imaginative stimulus, a liberating critical force, and a practical inspiration to poetic, moral and political insurgency.

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Unlike most twentieth-century cultural and political currents, the surrealist movement has always opposed overt as well as *de facto* segregation along racial, ethnic or gender lines. From the very first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, writings by women appeared alongside those of their male comrades. Works by women artists were regularly included in surrealist exhibitions. As one perceptive commentator (Robert Short) has pointed out, "No comparable movement outside specifically feminist organizations has had such a high proportion of active women participants."

Moreover, until very recently, most of the literature on women surrealists was written by other surrealists, male and female. If these women remain little known to the larger reading public it is because critics and scholars have been shirking their responsibilities.

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The fact is, apart from the rare anthologies issued by the surrealists themselves, women have almost always been left out. Well over two-thirds of the women included here have never been represented in any anthology; many of these writings have never been reprinted since their original publication. In all but a few of the hundreds of works on surrealism in English, women surrealists are barely even *mentioned*. The exclusion of women from the existing compilations warrants —indeed, compels, if only for the sake of historical accuracy—an attempt to restore balance by emphasizing what so many others have denied.

It is essential, moreover, that the recovery of surrealism's lost voices not do violence to the ideas and inspirations that motivated them. Unfortunately, the few books that do acknowledge, to some extent, women's activity in surrealism, tend to be less than scrupulous in their accounts of surrealism as a body of thought and an organized movement. My intention in putting together this mass of heretofore inaccessible material has not been to project fashionable new theories, much less to subject the recent literature on surrealism to a detailed critique, but simply to try to learn what the many women involved in surrealism have had to say *for themselves*.

What is different about this anthology is that here, for the first time, an unprecedentedly large number of surrealist women are allowed to speak *in their own voices*, and in a specifically surrealist context—which is, after all, the context they freely chose for themselves. This anthology is thus the opposite of isolationist, for its guiding purpose is rather one of *reintegration*. By making these writings available at last, I hope to make it impossible—or at least inexcusable—for students of surrealism to continue to ignore them. I want first of all to call attention to an impressive number of important surrealist writers who for various reasons have not received the attention they deserve. The fact that they happen to be women helps explain why they have been ignored outside the movement, just as it also affects what surrealism has meant to them. I try to show not only what they took from surrealism but also what they gave to it; how they used it for their own purposes, developed it, played with it, strengthened it, endowing it with a universality it could not have attained without them.

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The achievements of surrealism's women writers, and the challenges they pose, were and are important, not only for the Surrealist Movement, but for all genuine seekers of knowledge, inspiration and a better world. It is striking how contemporary so many of these writings are—how much they anticipate present-day radical and cultural preoccupations, how often texts written thirty, forty or sixty-five years ago seem to go beyond the limits of current debates. Nancy Cunard, for example, unlike many who consider themselves anti-racists today, fearlessly acknowledged the revolutionary implications of the critique of "whiteness"; far from being merely academic or aesthetic, her passion for African art and African American jazz was inseparable from her practical support to the world movement for Black Liberation. Similarly, the "gender-bending" texts in these pages convey the message that true sexual freedom cannot be attained in a society mired in what Marx called the "fetishism of commodities." And it is impossible to overlook the radical ecological sensibility that runs through this book like a pack of wolves. Ecological concerns engaged the surrealist movement as a whole almost from the start; in surrealism, the adjective *wild* has always been a term of the highest prestige. But it is primarily the women in surrealism who stressed these matters, and they who deserve credit for making the ecological critique an integral part of the surrealist project.

Nature, wildlife, wilderness are constant, compelling themes in the work of surrealist women. Redefinition of the relation between humankind and other animals, solidarity with endangered species, a non-exploitative regard for the planet we live on: These are some of the dreams whose realization they call for. In their poetry and other writings, as well as in the plastic arts, dance and film, we see the natural world in myriad new lights. Time and again in the texts that follow, surrealist women voice the latent yearnings of a planet on the verge of disaster. Agar, Carrington, Césaire, Johnson, Mitrani, Low, Oppenheim, Rahon, Senard and many others are not only manifest forerunners of deep ecology and ecofeminism, but could even be considered exponents of these currents, decades before either had a name. As surrealists, of course, they avoided the "New Age" techno-mysticism and other ideological fads—not to mention racism—that mars so much mainstream feminist and ecological literature today. What is most important is that these women found that surrealism itself embraces feminism as well as ecological concerns. Always implicit in surrealist thought, a radical ecological awareness is increasingly explicit in movement publications after 1945.

Meret Oppenheim identified the key methodological principle here when she pointed out in 1955 that works produced via psychic automatism "will always remain alive and will always be revolutionary . . . because they are in organic liaison with Nature." This is the very basis of surrealism as a revolutionary community: the unity of theory and practice at the highest point of tension of individual and collective creation.

Such a conception of life and the world, defined by audacity and readiness for change, is the opposite of all the dominant ideologies of our time. In these pages you will find no "postmodern" complacency, no apology for human misery, no blasé hopelessness, no age of cataclysm, no cynicism in lesser evils, no scorn for utopia, no cynicism. All here is urgency and expectation, and the conviction that a poetics of revolt is the only way that might—just might—lead us all to something at least a little closer to earthly paradise.

By emphasizing the ecological dimension of revolutionary social transformation, women surrealists gave the surrealist notion of a non-repressive civilization a far more concrete actuality than it had before. Not only did they perceive the links between the emancipation of women, of the working class, of all humankind and of Nature—they also comprehended that all these emancipations are in reality but one. "Here at last," wrote Suzanne Césaire in 1941, referring to the domain of the Marvelous, "the world of nature and things makes direct contact with the human being who is again in the fullest sense spontaneous and natural. Here at last is the true communion and the true knowledge, chance mastered and recognized, the mystery now a friend, and helpful." In the heat of such inspirations, poetic insight points the way to a life worth living. Suzanne Césaire and other women in the movement deserve a large share of the credit for surrealism's becoming in effect a *new universal*, in the Hegelian sense: a realizable global vision of marvelous freedom for all.

The women's movement has never demanded too much; too often, alas, it has settled for much too little, too late. In no society on Earth are women fully equal; there is not one in which any of us, woman or man, is truly free. Many of the early surrealist slogans—such as "Open the Prisons!" and "Disband the Army!"—seem to me to be just what the women's movement needs today. And beyond all slogans, isn't it obvious that nothing less than our *wildest dreams* will enable women to rise from the depressing military-industrial depths of the current political impasse?

Penelope Rosemont

Chicago, January 1997