

Exquisite Correspondence: A Dialogue with Whitney Chadwick

DORE BOWEN

Whitney Chadwick is co-curator of the exhibition “Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation.” She is also editor of the catalog published in conjunction with the exhibition, *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). “Mirror Images” was held at the MIT List Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 9-June 28, 1998; Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida, September 18-November 29, 1998; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California, January 8-April 20, 1999. Chadwick is Professor of Art History at San Francisco State University. Her books include *Myth in Surrealist Painting* (1980), *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1989) and *Women, Art, and Society* (1992).

Dore Bowen: What were some of your expectations for “Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation” and how well did curating the exhibition meet those expectations?

Whitney Chadwick: From the first conversations I had with Katy Kline and Helaine Posner (the other curators of the exhibition) in 1992, we discussed setting up the exhibition in terms of a situation. We wanted to stay away from an overly simplistic notion of historical influence: instead we looked across territories of work and back and forth across generations. We were interested in what remains of Surrealism in the practices of contemporary artists who are engaged with issues of self-representation, something that Posner had decided was a critical issue to historical women Surrealists. We didn’t actually know what was going to happen. I worried about the problems of mounting a gender specific exhibition, particularly how it could be done without essentializing the work. Wouldn’t people jump in and say: “There you go again, establishing this category of ‘Woman’ and playing it across several generations, making a history, a lineage and an overly determined narrative out of it”?

DB: And how did people respond?

WC: Surprisingly, they didn’t respond that way at all. I haven’t had a chance to analyze it yet, but there is something about the exhibition that brings forward a dialogue about the work rather than a question of historically determined influences.

DB: This might be why people have responded so favorably to the exhibition. Since links are suggested but not dictated there is a place for the viewer. I noticed that at your slide lecture on “Mirror Images” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

(February 20, 1999) you employed a similar strategy. You put together pairs of slides from divergent historical periods in order to place the work in a different context. The way you’ve mounted the exhibition follows this dialectical logic as well. Objects are mounted in relationship to one another such that both historical particularities and formal correspondences are illuminated.

WC: Yes. Often people float through an exhibition. There is a clear trajectory. You have your acoustic guide, you drift from work to work and you’re out the door. In contrast to this, we decided instantly that we would not mount the show chronologically. Occasionally, a reviewer will ask “did these particular Surrealist artists really influence these contemporary artists?” But that was never the outward intention of the exhibition. The idea was to explore a set of representational strategies that might be seen as spanning several generations of artists. I think the show succeeds in doing that. It has been very gratifying for me to see how the exhibition has played out. For a small exhibition with a slightly obscure focus, there have been relatively large crowds at every venue carefully analyzing the work and discussing it intensely.

DB: Perhaps this is because the narrative is discontinuous. For instance, you have Claude Cahun’s *Autoportrait* from 1928 placed next to Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Still #2* from 1977. Also, the earlier work in the exhibition is strong, and is less often seen than the contemporary work.

WC: Yes, there is plenty of work in the show that has never been seen in San Francisco and there is work that has never even been seen in this country. This is the case with the three Leonor Fini paintings. Two of them came out of Fini’s private collection. Work by historical women Surrealists is mainly in private collections and therefore hasn’t circulated as widely as that of the male Surrealists.

DB: You begin your catalog essay, “An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation,” with two quotations. In the first, Simone de Beauvoir states that for the woman “the magic of her mirror [is] a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification.” She implies that although the mirror objectifies, it also enables self-identification for women. De Beauvoir conceives of this as a type of inward dialogue, although she warns that such narcissism leads to erotomania and possibly insanity. In the second quotation Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests “leaving our mirrors empty. . . .” For Trinh the empty mirror is not a kind of madness but a release from a “lifetime searching after that which does not exist.” The two quotations express two opposing manners of approaching the paradox of the mirror—to embrace the mirror as a means of transformation or to resist fixing the fleeting image. You seem to suggest that the Surrealist strategy of illogic allows women artists to subvert their objectification and utilize the mirror as an instrument of transformation. For example, you discuss Leonora Carrington’s image/projection of herself as an animal and you note that although such images might return us to conventional images of the feminine, “the images themselves suggest a more complex interweaving of self and other.” Is this “magical mirror” tenable? Do you feel that this transformative potential is born out by the work in “Mirror Images”?

WC: It’s interesting how many times in the course of this exhibition the issue of doubling arises. When we titled the exhibition we were looking in two quite different directions. One was the role the mirror plays in the cultural construction and production of femininity in which the image of the woman in the mirror suggests the idea of being looked at. The other direction was the way the Surrealists themselves have used the image of the mirror, as suggested by André Breton’s “mirror of the marvelous” in which the mirror defamiliarizes the real. The mirror becomes the point of disruption because it doesn’t function as an analog but in fact distorts and makes the real seem unfamiliar, thus opening the possibility of this other space, the surreal. To the degree that self-representation is understood as offering a coherent image, it seems to me that for the historical women Surrealists the problem of self-representation is epitomized by the problem of the mirror. Until people started relying on photography, artists historically used the image in the mirror as a starting point for all self-portraiture. Women Surrealists were

tied to and grounded in the idea of the mirror image giving something back, but the giving back was only the beginning. It was not to be taken as the end of the process, or as the embodiment of self, but rather as simply the starting point from which the self might be doubled, fragmented, fractured or erased. The issue of misrecognition in the mirror is very important here. The Trinh quotation may be more relevant to the way the more contemporary artists are positioned in the exhibition. I’m not sure it provides a conceptual frame that allows us to say much about the historical women Surrealists, although there are questions about madness and being outside language that certainly enter female representation in Surrealism. I’m not sure to what extent the female Surrealist can subvert her representation. I think she can contest it and resist it. Even Cahun is constantly reproducing an object.

DB: Works by Cahun and Sherman were also featured in the exhibit “Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography” at the Guggenheim Museum in 1997. Like “Mirror Images,” this exhibit brought together a broad range of work from 1920 through the present, addressed issues of self-representation and gender and focused on art of a surrealistic nature. Yet rather than structuring these objects around formal concerns or historical lineage this exhibit found coherence in the contemporary notion of gender performance. It provides for an interesting comparison with “Mirror Images” which highlights the formal qualities of the work.

WC: Certainly there are performative strategies at work here, but nevertheless we are dealing with the reification of the image.

DB: There’s also the question of whether we would be interested in Cahun now if we hadn’t already seen Sherman’s work or heard of “gender performance.”

WC: Yes, Cahun’s initial reception and circulation in the early ’90s took place almost entirely through the theoretical lenses of Stephen Heath’s work on the masquerade and Judith Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender. While those are very interesting ways of thinking about Cahun they also generalize her actual practice. Even the fact that she’s been annexed to Surrealism is ambiguous and complicated. She produced the most radical of those self-representations three or four years before Breton ever published the first Surrealist manifesto. Her initial contacts with the group were through a small group of literary figures. By 1936, when she first exhibited with the Surrealists, her work began to change in relation to Surrealism, but the change moved her further away from the kind of radical representation she was engaged in earlier.

DB: In your essay you mention the contradictions that necessarily emerge when women work within a Surrealist tradition, a tradition that explicitly makes “Woman” of women and is often accused of downright misogyny. Rather than resolving this apparent conflict you suggest that historical lineage is a useful means to study the artistic work and practice of “individual women.” By placing these women within the lineage of art history, and Surrealism in particular, they are rescued from oblivion but placed within a patrilineage. Is there danger lurking within the creation of such a lineage, of tradition itself or of intergenerational legacies?

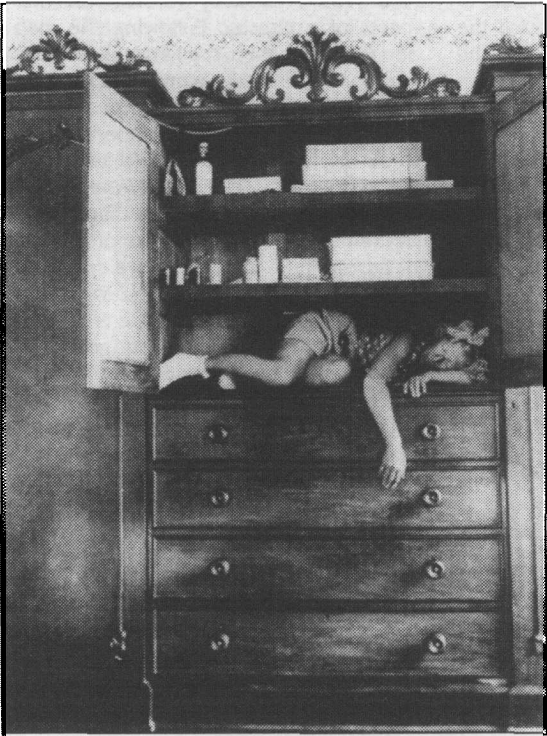
WC: I think it’s a problem. You are absolutely right. You put historical women artists in the context of Surrealism, construct them within a patrilineage and then make them the predecessors of something that must be female.

DB: A matrilineage . . .

WC: Right, a matrilineage . . . highly suspect. When this question comes up I return to Susan Rubin Suleiman’s notion of dialogue. It gets around the problem of intergenerational legacies becoming a question of influence in which the younger generation is thought of as the receiver of something handed down from an earlier period. “Instead of a model of patrilineage, which implies . . . inheritance and property, hence a passive ‘receiving’ of influence,” Suleiman proposes “a model of dialogue, including polemical dialogue, an active engagement with the precursor’s work and an active response to it.” In her



Self-Deceit #1, Rome (1978) by Francesca Woodman. All images from *Mirror Images* (1998) by Whitney Chadwick.



Autoportrait (c. 1932) by Claude Cahun.

catalog essay Suleiman suggests a model of dialogue whereby younger artists might engage actively in adherence to, or acceptance of, certain issues, themes, ways of working and practices; yet at the same time she suggests that these younger artists can either challenge or reject these practices. She has used this argument to compare the work of Hans Bellmer to that of Sherman and Francesca Woodman.

DB: Although this exhibition promotes a feminist agenda, the feminist lineage is downplayed. For example, Marta María Pérez Bravo's *Protection* (1990) owes as much to Hannah Wilke's *Starification Object Series* (1974-82) as it does to Surrealism. What of the political legacy of feminism? What do we, as women, gain by contextualizing such work within the Surrealist tradition?

WC: The category "Feminist Art" is as problematic as the category "Surrealist Art." Many of the younger artists in the exhibition who reject the notion of being Surrealists would probably reject being categorized as feminist artists. I think what's important, interesting, provocative and hopefully useful for the future is to get away from these thematic exhibitions and to set up multiple relationships between artists and groups of artists that are more open-ended.

DB: I am interested in the way you brought works together based upon representational strategies. It suggests a way of thinking about formal analysis, not as a dry external method of analyzing the art object, but as a way to find something in the works themselves that organizes them. It suggests that these formal qualities are not necessarily ahistorical or apolitical but that there is a politics of form.

WC: It's true, although it has its own dangers. One is equating very different work on the basis of formal similarities. It gets into the old "Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art" exhibition problem of so-called affinities. One has to wonder if one is in fact glossing over the specificities of history and culture in putting up works from very different contexts, generations and places. We had to make decisions at the beginning regarding how we were going to see Surrealism in terms of its appearance in the work. In some ways we limited ourselves to work that we felt directly addressed Surrealist notions of deforming the body. Although this is only one of the many ways one could think about Surrealism, to introduce too many directions—unless we accompanied the work with long didactic wall labels—was going to confuse people. It was a curatorial decision to focus, rather narrowly in some instances, on a particular notion of Surrealism expressed as a point of collapse between interior and exterior, high and low, the real and the unreal. If one produces a narrative that encompasses the work, one is in danger of overdetermining the influences and also of categorizing and closing off debate. But if one tries to keep everything open-ended and keep the positions unfixed, then one risks the danger of producing, instead of the old narrative, a set of potted biographies or potted histories. One instantly falls back into the old monographic format. For example, despite the nature of a group exhibition you can only talk about individual artists because you don't want to make links. It does leave things open-ended, but it also ultimately reproduces the conventional art historical monographic format from a postmodernist position. We decided to come down on the narrative side.

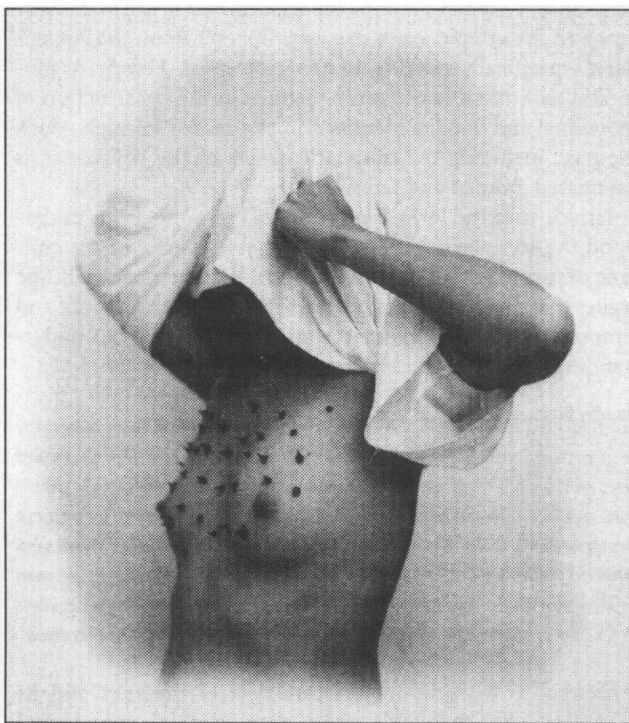
DB: Making a link between contemporary work and traditional Surrealist art seems daring. Is it important to promote Surrealism as a way to view contemporary art and not merely a historical movement?

WC: No, I don't think the idea is to promote a way to view contemporary art. We need to look at contemporary art in many different ways but at the same time we need to be aware of historical precedents and relationships with the past. To me, the most exciting thing about this exhibition is that when you look at all the work you notice that, when confronted with the problem of self-representation, women artists coming from many different perspectives and positions over a significant length of time have resorted to similar strategies. At the same time, we need to remember that the contemporary work is mediated by discourses that were not present during the historical Surrealist movement—e.g., AIDS and advanced medical technologies. Consequently, the body is seen today through many different lenses and the result is a barrier between the work of today and that of yesterday.

DB: I'm interested in your emphasis on "how the body is marked by femininity as lived experience." In your essay, you state that "while postmodern theories have opened up new spaces for consideration of the feminine, they have often directed more attention to inscriptions of sexual difference in representation than to the practices of individual women. Yet outside the academy, women artists remain engaged in their own explorations of difference and agency and their own critiques of the structures that mark their difference." "Lived experience" is admittedly ignored by much contemporary theoretical work. How is the artist's lived experience to be best addressed by critics, theorists and curators?

WC: I am continually struck by the fact that, on the one hand, there has been a great deal of important theorizing regarding sexual difference that has allowed us to talk in a more sophisti-

cated way about social constructions of femininity. On the other hand, there has been a tremendous emphasis on the positioning of women outside language, outside the symbolic, outside certain representational orders, just at a moment when the art world is full of women artists who are speaking out very strongly. A terrific contradiction exists between the theoretical body of work and an ongoing desire on the part of women to make their experiences visible through texts or images. I'm not arguing that these two tendencies should collapse into each other because I think it's impossible. The devaluation of one category and the overevaluation of the other is what I think has created the tension. It seems to me that we need to acknowledge both tendencies—that visual work needn't simply address theoretical paradigms and that theory needs to be elastic in the way it deals with bodies of evidence that actually exist out in the world, that is, actual practices.



Protection (1990) by Marta María Pérez Bravo.

DB: I think a quotation from Diane Neumaier's book *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies* (1995) speaks to this. She writes that "For the most part, feminist academics seem more interested in producing feminist critiques of dominant cultural production than in critiquing feminist alternative cultural work." It seems to me that one unfortunate effect of this is that the dominant culture is reinstated as the object of critical study, and research is abandoned as a means to bring to light less well-known art practices. Furthermore, lived experience of actual artists is ignored altogether as being irrelevant to the analysis of representation. In this exhibition you brought together some work that we haven't seen before. Maybe this explains the excitement around it. We are used to seeing well-known work critiqued in unconventional ways rather than new work.

WC: I agree. There will always be a conflict between the intellectual life inside the academy and a more engaged life outside. This is very problematic. There was an interesting article in the *New York Times* by Edward Said (February 25, 1999) critiquing the language used by academics as inaccessible. It seems to me, in the context of this debate, that it is important to have a specialized vocabulary when it is the vocabulary of professional and peer group evaluation, but it's not a useful language to apply to everything in the world.

DB: Do you think that the presentation of the work in the exhibition gives people a sense of the lived experience of the artist or of the time this work was produced?

WC: I'm not sure. I think there is a sense of groundedness, a level of material reality that is part and parcel to the practice of these artists. In some ways, the continual reference to the body of the artist does serve to ground the work. This is one of the things that makes this work look different from the work by the male Surrealists which is primarily involved with projection onto the body of the Other, with issues of eroticism and the body and with formlessness and the *informe*. These issues are certainly taken up in this exhibition by a number of the younger artists. Yet, it is rather different to talk about the grotesque body, the transgressive body or the absent body when there is a signified for all of those things, the actual body of the artist. I think the linguistic structure is rather different.

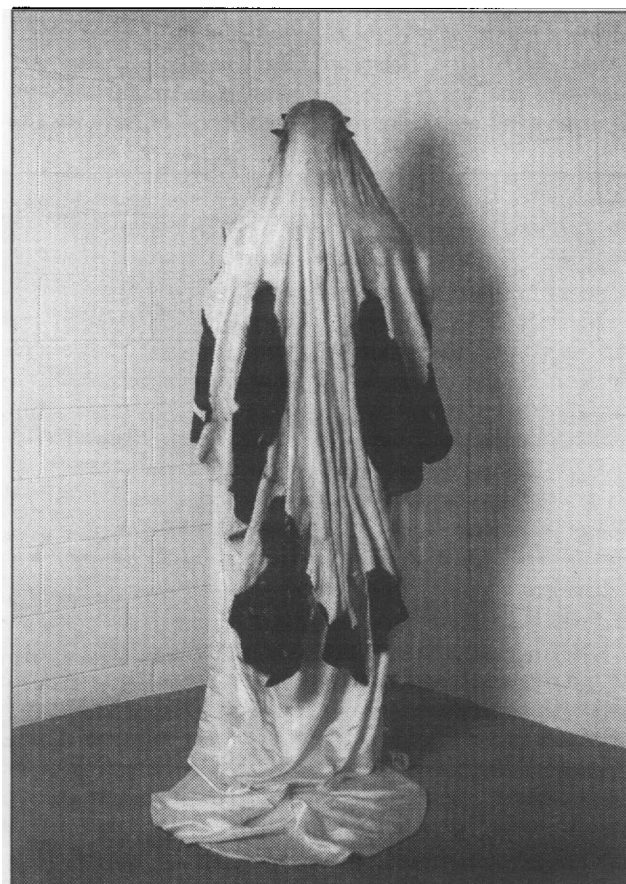
DB: Rather than viewing Surrealist work through the lens of the psychoanalytic texts of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, I wonder what these works of art teach us about the unconscious and subjectivity. It seems that the works included by Yayoi Kusama, for instance, engage with the tools of Surrealism—juxtaposition of disparate elements, repetition, montage—in order to express something that might be outside language, and theoretically beyond comprehension, but that she approaches nonetheless through such devices. What do you think these works can teach us about our theoretical notions of female subjectivity?

WC: Strict psychoanalytic theory argues that feminine subjectivity is an impossibility . . . so what are we to do with all of this work? Are we to take all this as a representation of exclusion from subjectivity, as reproducing the conditions of that exclusion? Or are we to argue that in some way, however tentative, the work begins to make a case for a notion of female subjectivity? In some ways Surrealism did set out to unfix subject positions while at the same time reproducing them from a patriarchal position. On some level, however successful or unsuccessful, the Surrealists were at least attentive to, and desired to unfix, subject positions. I think the work of artists like Kusama and Louise Bourgeois is very interesting in terms of the interpolation of the phallus and its challenge to the strictly defined polarities of sexual difference. There is a lot of ambiguity in that work and in Eva Hesse's too. During the 1950s and '60s, when historical Surrealism was far behind, the culture was gendered much more strictly. Suddenly, there were artists challenging the notion of sexual difference.

DB: To return to the question of the mirror, it's clear that the mirror is instrumental in self-representation, yet I'm wondering if the mirror is altered by our practices as well. For instance, by mounting an experimental exhibition like this you have altered the parameters of what is commonly thought of as Surrealism. In one sense, you are putting the artists in the context of Surrealism and in another you are challenging our definition of Surrealism itself, particularly by relating it to the contemporary work.

WC: One can only hope. I think there are two issues at work in this show and they are slightly confusing. There is an historical movement known as Surrealism which provides one kind of context. Then there is surrealism with a small "s" that has simply been absorbed into the culture. It permeates film, popular culture, music and writing. That notion of surrealism is much less specific and far less historically grounded, yet very widely disseminated. Certainly a number of the younger artists are working much more from surrealism than they are from any notion of historical Surrealism. We carefully chose only younger artists whose work has been discussed in critical literature through the use of the terms surreal, surrealism, surrealist and surrealist. We felt that these terms had been broadly applied to a wide range of work, yet at the same time the work had not been situated in relation to historical Surrealism. Although it is completely arbitrary to situate the younger artists in relation to the historical women Surrealists since the influences certainly don't move along gender lines, the strategies of self-representation are so different from male to female Surrealists that it seemed to legitimize taking that gendered approach to the subject very broadly. Although none of the younger artists consider themselves Surrealists, Dorothy Cross will be the first to say that one of the first moments of frisson for her as a young artist came when she first encountered Meret Oppenheim's *Fur-Covered Cup* (1936). Examples like this testify to the fact that there are very specific moments when a young artist confronts artwork from the past, and such encounters open up new territory. We've tried to create a complex exhibition that address this dialogue between generations.

DORE BOWEN is an artist, critic and Ph.D. candidate in the Visual and Cultural Studies Program at the University of Rochester. She currently teaches at San Francisco State University.



Virgin Shroud (1993) by Dorothy Cross.