well as complex and far-reaching changes in the institution of the family that accelerated after the First World War. The growth of rationalized labor—or assembly line production—after the War came to define jobs for women as rote and contributed to growing conflicts between work and family activities for many women. Working women's independent purchasing power threatened the traditional structure of the family and became the basis for an ideology of gender relations which defined women as managerial, in charge of consumption in the family. Although men were still viewed as breadwinners, women were now cultivated as general purchasing managers. The threatening underside of these new gender relations is well expressed in articles which appeared in *Vogue* and other popular publications in 1925. "While there are yet vestiges of family life about us, and households, as households, still exist, it would surely be seemly to examine the characters of those who once held the position of leadership in them. We refer to fathers," opens one such lament.

The popular advocacy of the image of the New Woman was international in scope. And although the specific social and economic situations of different countries after the War affected the ways that her image was conflated and appropriated for ideological purposes, the image itself is generally most responsive to the needs of industrial capitalism no matter in which country. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and other historians have convincingly argued that despite much rhetoric about the rights and liberation of women, and despite a coherent visual imagery celebrating the sexually free working woman, no fundamental changes in women's traditional roles are evident in Weimar Germany. And in France, the New Woman may have been sexually liberated, but she did not win the right to vote until 1946.

In the end, the image that promised a new world for the modern woman in twentieth-century industrial society would exist as a reality only for wealthy and privileged women. As it filtered to masses of working women, it functioned more and more as a fantasy, remote from the realities of most women's lives but strenuously asserted through media campaigns as a means to promote consumption—selling youth, beauty, and leisure along with the latest fashions.

Whitney Chadwick: 'The Independents', Women, Art and Society (Thames and Hudson 1990)

The Independents

Referring to women artists as "independents" is already an arbitrary and misleading designation for no artist is independent of the complex of economic, social, and cultural practices through which art is produced. Nor can lumping together a diverse group of women be intellectually or theoretically justified when it produces alliances reducible only to gender. Yet at the same time, many women artists working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had an ambiguous relationship with the developing mythology of the vanguard modern artist.

The view of the modern artist as a heroic (male) individualist finds its fullest expression in the literature of post-Second World War art. The emergence of a self-conscious set of practices and characteristics through which the modern in art is understood, and the closely related notion of an "avant-garde" as the dominant ideology of artistic production and scholarship, coincides with the emergence of a first generation of women artists with more or less equal access to artistic training.

Vanguard ideology marginalizes the woman artist as surely as did the guilds in the fifteenth century, and the academies in the seventeenth and eighteenth. There is no female Bohemia against which to measure the exploits of a Suzanne Valadon, no psychoanalytic equating of artistic creativity and female sexuality, no Romantic legacy of the woman artist as an intense, gifted, and spiritual being. If Expressionism, as feminist art historians have argued, stands as a revolt of "sons" against "fathers," the relationship of Paula Modersohn-Becker, Käthe Kollwitz, and other women artists to German Expressionism is difficult to elucidate. In eliding representation by women with the social production of middle-class femininity, the work of Suzanne Valadon is left in a representational void, subject only to the creation of a new myth of the woman artist as "undiscovered." Valorizing stylistic innovation and monumental size leaves little room for the modest, stylistically consistent paintings of Gwen John and Florine Stettheimer. Identifying woman with nature

and imaging femininity in its instinctive, enigmatic, sexual, and destructive aspects places major female practitioners of landscape painting like Georgia O'Keeffe and Emily Carr in an impossible double-bind in which femininity and art become self-cancelling phrases. Admitting women artists to canonical art history only retrospectively, and basing evaluations of their work on what Anne Wagner has called a "heroics of survival," removes artists from the social contexts which, in fact, made possible their work. Constructing woman as a signifier for male creativity banishes to the margins of the avant-garde a group of gifted women Surrealists.

Another aspect of the early Modernist myth which is receiving increasing attention from feminist art historians and critics concerns the extent to which the major paintings—and sometimes sculptures—associated with the development of modern art wrest their formal and stylistic innovations from an erotically based assault on female form: Manet's and Picasso's prostitutes, Gauguin's "primitives," Matisse's nudes, Surrealism's objects. Modern artists from Renoir ("I paint with my prick") to Picasso ("Painting, that is actual lovemaking") have collaborated in fusing the sexual and the artistic by equating artistic creation with male sexual energy, presenting women as powerless and sexually subjugated.

In her article, "Domination and Virility in Vanguard Painting," Carol Duncan traces the further sexualizing of creativity in the work of the Fauves, the Cubists, and the German Expressionists. She concludes that the vanguard myth of individual artistic freedom is built on maintaining sexual and social inequalities: "The socially radical claims of a Vlaminck, a Van Dongen or a Kirchner are thus contradicted. According to their paintings, the liberation of the artist means the domination of others; his freedom requires their unfreedom. Far from contesting the established social order, the male-female relationship that these paintings imply—the drastic reduction of women to objects of specialized male interests—embodies on a sexual level the basic class relationships of capitalist society."

Suzanne Valadon and Paula Modersohn-Becker were two of the first women artists to work extensively with the nude female form and their paintings both collude with, and challenge, such configurations. Confronted with the powerful presence of Valadon's nudes, critics were unable to sever the nude from its status as a signifier for male creativity; instead, they severed Valadon (who was not a "respectable" middle-class woman) from her femininity and allowed her to circulate as a pseudo-male, complete with "masculine power" and "virility." "And perhaps in this disregard for logic," wrote Bernard Dorival, "in this inconsistency and indifference to contradiction, lies the only feminine trait in the art of Suzanne Valadon—that most virile—and greatest—of all the women in painting."

Dorival's critical position is similar to that taken by many twentieth-century critics who, having jettisoned one half of the ideology of separate spheres bequeathed them by nineteenth-century critics, have confidently asserted that "art has no sex," and at the same time admitted to the canon only work by women artists which might be contained by the term "virile." Nevertheless, Valadon's status in the eyes of Dorival and other contemporary critics was not sufficient to insure her place in histories of modern art. Although she exhibited at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, the Indépendants, and at private galleries like Berthe Weil and Bernheim-Jeune, and although Ambroise Vollard published and sold her engravings in 1897, by the 1920s her work was all but ignored.

The illegitimate daughter of a laundress, Valadon (1867–1938) became an artist's model in the early 1880s after working as a circus performer. Posing for Puvis de Chavannes, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir, and other artists, she was part of the sexually free bohemian life of early twentieth-century Paris. Her entrée to the world of art came not through education, for she was largely self-taught, but through her identification with a class of sexually available artist's models, an association which liberated her from any lingering expectations about respectability and allowed her to enter into the sort of easy relationship with other artists and with her patrons which we seldom see in the careers of middle-class women artists of those years.

The subject of the nude in art brings together discourses of representation, morality, and female sexuality, but the persistent presentation of the nude female body as a site of male viewing pleasure, a commodified image of exchange, and a fetishized defense against the fear of castration leaves little place for explorations of female subjectivity, knowledge, and experience. The difficulty of distinguishing between overtly sexualized (i.e., voyeurism, fetishism, and scopophilia) and other forms of looking, and the fact that the male relationship of power and control over the female image would seem to allow women only a vicarious pleasure in looking, has prompted a significant body of feminist literature on issues of spectatorship.

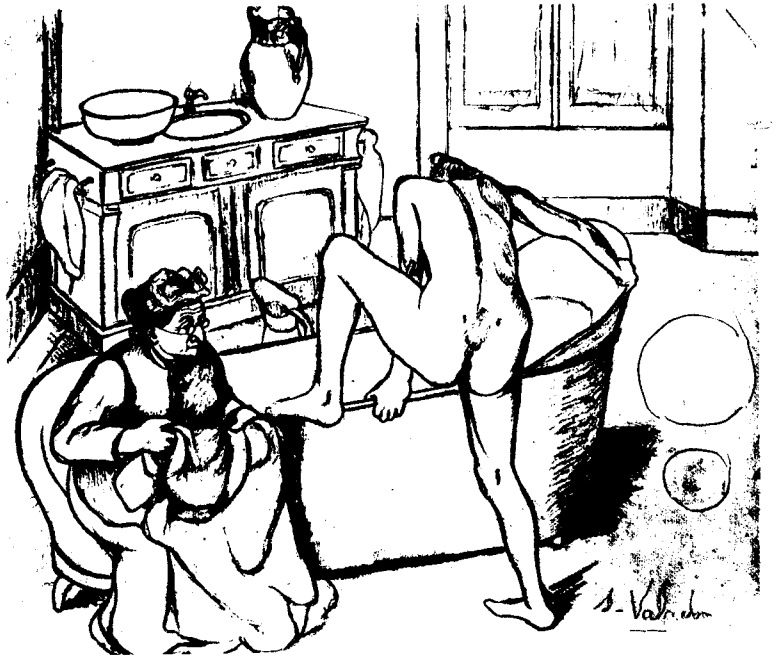
Valadon's female nudes fuse observation with a knowledge of the female body based on her experience as a model. Rejecting the static

and timeless presentation of the monumental nude that dominates Western art, she emphasizes context, specific moment and physical action. Instead of presenting the female body as a lush surface isolated and controlled by the male gaze, she emphasizes the awkward gestures of figures apparently in control of their own movements. Valadon often placed her figures in specific domestic settings, surrounding them with images of domesticity and community, as in
158 *Grandmother and Young Girl Stepping into the Bath* (c. 1908), a striking departure from the practises of her contemporaries, like Renoir, who referred to *his* models as "beautiful fruit."

Like Degas, who recognized and encouraged her talent, Valadon often turned her bathers away from the viewer and depicted them absorbed in their own activities. But in her emphasis on the tension of the body as it executes specific movements there is little or no attempt to establish the closely framed single point of visual connection between viewer and model that is the hallmark of Degas's many pastels of bathers. The nakedness of Valadon's figures is specific to the act of bathing. Her nudes are full-bodied, weighty, and sturdy.
162 Although sensuous, they stand in opposition to the archetypal and fertile female figures so prevalent in the avant-garde circles of Gauguin and the Fauves.

The shift from the imagery of seductive and devouring femininity produced by Symbolist painters and poets to an ideology of "natural womanhood" which identified the female body with biological nature was part of a reaction against feminism and the neo-Malthusians. Modest gains made by women in education and employment in France at the end of the nineteenth century provoked an intense anti-feminist backlash. It culminated in the battle over control of reproductive rights in France. Indignation among demographers over declining birth rates at the end of the nineteenth century was taken up by literary figures such as Zola, whose novel *La Fécondité* (1899) gave fictional form to a growing cult of fertility; "There is no more glorious blossoming, no more sacred symbol of living eternity than an infant at its mother's breast." The cry was taken up by artists, including Gauguin, whose colonization of the "natural" female Tahitian body reinforced early Modernism's exaltation of the "natural" female body always subject to the literal and metaphoric control of man.

Among the work of women artists associated with Expressionism, that of Paula Modersohn-Becker and Käthe Kollwitz most clearly reveals the clash between Modernist ideology and social reality.



158 Suzanne Valadon *Grandmother and Young Girl Stepping into the Bath* c. 1908

Caught between the artistic and social conservatism of the Worpswede nature painters and the influence of French Modernism, Modersohn-Becker struggled to produce images that embodied both poles of experience. Kollwitz (1867–1945) was committed to an art of radical social content unrivalled in her day, and her choice of graphic realism as a style, her exclusive use of printmaking media, and her production of posters and humanitarian leaflets, all contributed to later devaluations of her work and its dismissal by art historians as "illustration" and "propaganda."

Born in Dresden in 1876, Modersohn-Becker was the child of comfortably middle-class parents who encouraged her artistic interests until she showed signs of serious professional ambition. She made her first visit to the Worpswede artists' community in northern Germany in the Summer of 1897 where she began to study with Fritz

Makensen. Encouraged by Julius Langbehn's eccentric book *Rembrandt as a Teacher* (1890), and by their interest in Nietzsche, Zola, Rembrandt, and Dürer, the Worpswede painters embraced nature, the primitive simplicity of peasant life, and the purity of youth. Langbehn's book became the textbook of the "Volkish" movement, a utopian reaction against industrialization which celebrated the rural values of the peasantry. Although she settled more or less permanently in the village after completing her studies in 1898, later marrying the painter Otto Modersohn, Modersohn-Becker did not share the group's disdain for academic training; the flattened and simplified forms that mark her mature style derive from the influence of French painters, particularly Cézanne and Gauguin, whose work she saw during four visits to Paris between 1899 and 1906, the year before her premature death.

Modersohn-Becker's interest in her models as personifications of nature developed in the context of the Worpswede artists' cultivation of the "earth mother," but it was not until after her first trip to Paris in 1899 that it entered her work as a major theme. One of Fritz Makensen's first Worpswede canvases was a life-sized *Madonna of the Moors* (1892) and as early as 1898 Modersohn-Becker recorded her impression of a peasant woman suckling a child in her diary; "Frau Meyer, a voluptuous blonde. . . . This time with her little boy at her breast. I had to draw her as a mother. That is her single true purpose." Linda Nochlin has also pointed to sources for Modersohn-Becker's cultivation of the imagery of fecund maternity in J. J. Bachofen's *Mutterecht* (1861), which was reissued in 1897 and widely circulated among artists and writers. Surrounding her figures with a tapestry of flowers and foliage, Modersohn-Becker ignored conventional perspective and anecdotal detail to produce monumental images of idealized motherhood; "I kneel before it [motherhood] in humility," she wrote.

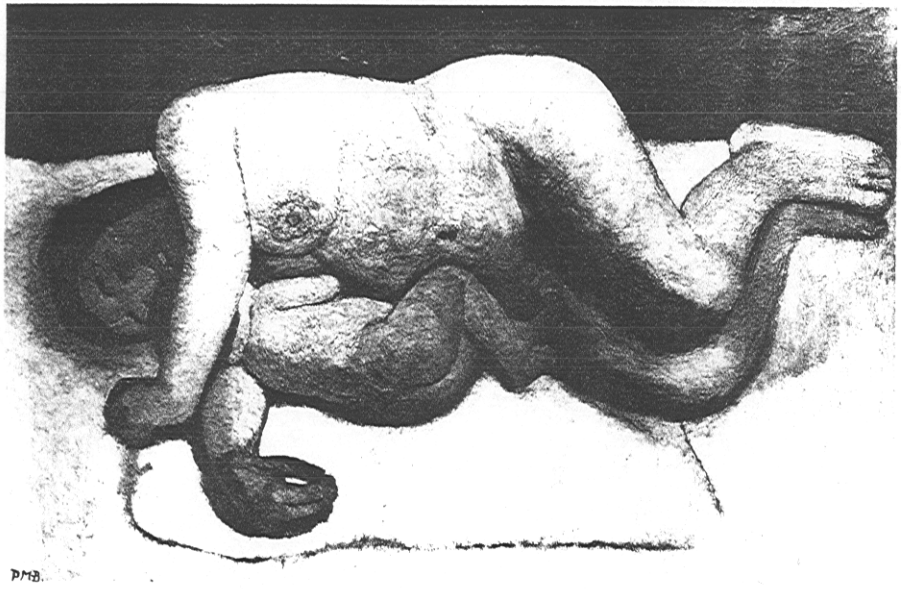
Her diary records an ambivalence toward marriage, motherhood, and art. Modeled on the diaries of Marie Bashkirtseff, Modersohn-Becker, unlike the former, had little sympathy for the growing women's movement. Although Karl Scheffler's misogynist *Die Fraue und die Kunst* (Woman and Art) was not published until 1908, the year after her death, its sentiments were commonly accepted throughout the period of Modersohn-Becker's development as an artist. Scheffler emphasized woman's inability to participate in the production of culture because of her ties to nature and her lack of spiritual insight. Modersohn-Becker's own ambivalence on these points is recorded in

an allegorical prose poem in which she acknowledges her artistic ambitions as "masculine" and remarks on the mutual exclusivity of female sexual love and artistic success.

Modersohn-Becker participated in the second Worpswede group exhibition in the Bremen Kunsthalle in 1899, despite attempts by the director of the Kunsthalle to dissuade her. Negative critical response focused mainly on the work of the women artists in the colony and Modersohn-Becker left almost immediately for Paris. There she entered the Académie Colarossi and visited galleries showing the work of Puvis de Chavannes, the Barbizon painters, Courbet, and Monet. Gradually rejecting the Worpswede artists' commitment to a crude naturalism, her work began to record influences from Rodin, Japanese art, Daumier, Millet, and other French painters. By 1906, back in Germany, she had requested a copy of Gauguin's autobiography, *Noa Noa*, from her sister in Paris and had thrown off her husband's artistic influence.

Viewing Gauguin's retrospective exhibition in Paris in 1906 helped move Modersohn-Becker's figurative works in the direction of a primordial power sought through nature. Her nude self- 160
portraits may be the first such paintings in oil by a woman artist, but as such, they are strangely ambiguous. Rejecting Gauguin's romantic nostalgia, she carries the simplification of form to an extreme which blunts the sensuality normally assigned female flesh in the history of art. The immobility, monumentality, and gravelly surfaces of these self-portrait nudes universalize the images, but the careful scrutiny of the female body and the frank confrontation between the woman and the artist fuse the issues of femaleness and creativity in new ways.

Modersohn-Becker's archetypal fertility images of 1906 and 1907, *Mother and Child Lying Nude* and *Mother and Child* are closely related 159
to Gauguin paintings like the *Kneeling Day of the God*, but they clothe the subject of fertility and nurture with dignity, while at the same time collaborating with a late nineteenth-century ideology of timeless, unvarying "natural" womanhood. The subtext of violence and control that accompanies Gauguin's representations of Tahitian women is missing from Modersohn-Becker's paintings with their lowered viewpoint and direct gaze. Gauguin's many paintings of Tahitian women replay the unequal relationship of the male artist and the female model in the inequities of the white male artist's relationship to native women in a colonialized society. His paintings bind women to nature through repetitions of colors, patterns, and

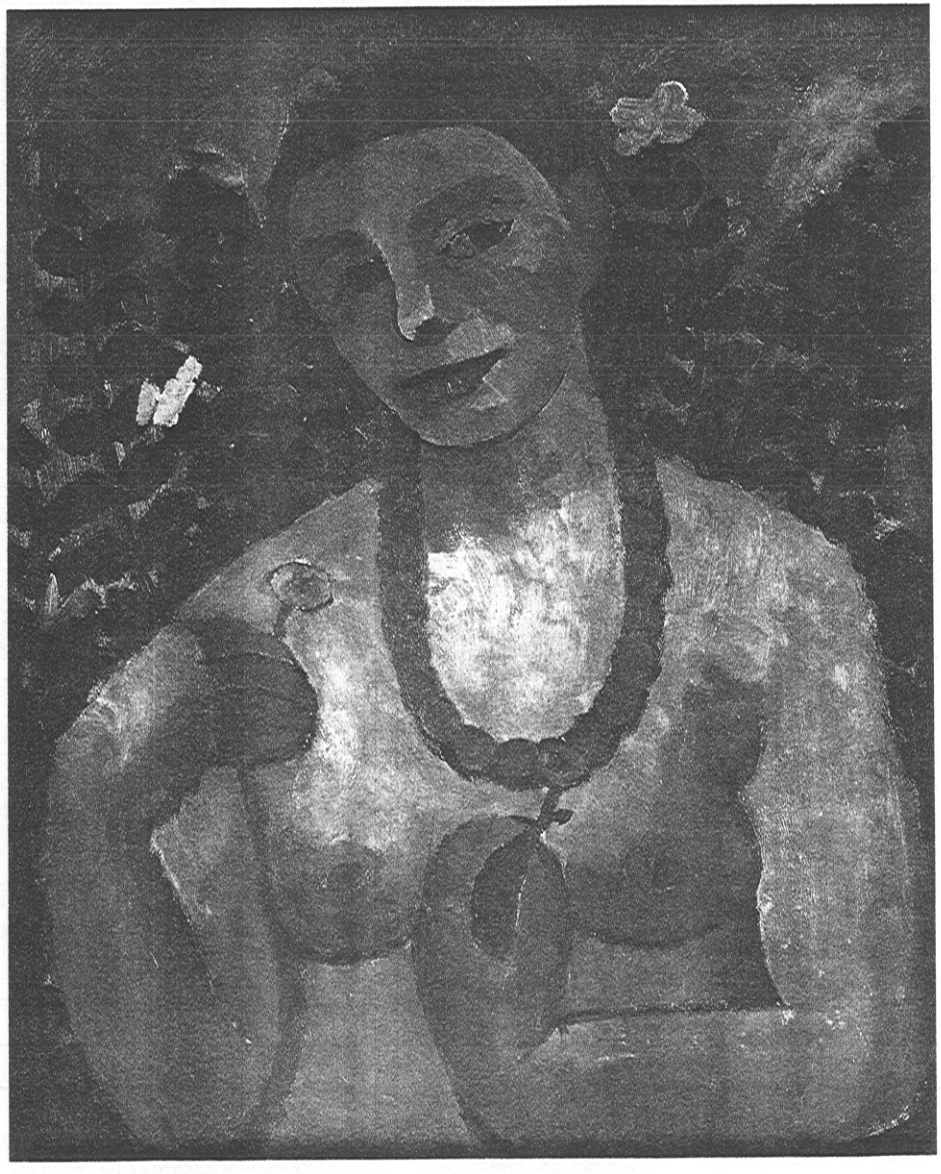


159 Paula Modersohn-Becker *Mother and Child Lying Nude* 1907

contours; crouching female figures are placed in a submissive relationship to the downward gaze of the male artist and the women's blank gazes offer little insight into the specifics of their lives.

Modersohn-Becker's death shortly after giving birth provides an ironic commentary on the gulf between idealized motherhood and the biological realities of fecundity. Nochlin has pointed out this disjunction, observing that it is Käthe Kollwitz's depictions of women and children that insert motherhood "into the bitterly concrete context of class and history."

Kollwitz replaces the archetypal imagery of female abundance with the realities of a poverty which often prevents women from nourishing their children or enjoying their motherhood; in *Portraits of Misery III*, a lithograph, and in many other works, pregnancy without material support is cause for grief rather than rejoicing. Kollwitz, the first woman elected to the Prussian Academy of the Arts (1919) and the foremost graphic artist of the first half of the twentieth



160 Paula Modersohn-Becker *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* 1906

century, was encouraged to draw as a child by her father. Studies in Berlin and Munich followed a period of training in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) under the engraver Rudolph Maurer. In 1891, she married Dr. Karl Kollwitz and settled in Berlin where she came in contact with the industrial workers of Berlin through his practice. A socialist, feminist (founder of the Frauen Kunstverband [Women's Arts Union] in Berlin in 1913), and pacifist, the themes of war, hatred, poverty, love, grief, death, and struggle dominate her mature work.

Influenced by Max Klinger's engravings, by Zola's realism, and by the memory of her father reciting Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" with its passionate appeal on behalf of working women, she turned to themes of social conditions and to the expressive mediums of engraving and lithography. Kollwitz's first major success came with a cycle of three engravings and three lithographs titled *The* 161 *Weavers' Uprising* (1895–97). Based on Gerhart Hauptmann's play, *The Weavers*, about the revolt of the Silesian weavers in 1844, the cycle moves from the sufferings, including death, of the weavers to their decision to take collective action. Somber grays and blacks and sharp lines relieved by strong lights powerfully evoke the weavers' tragic revolt against inhumane working conditions.

As a result of the success of *The Weavers' Uprising* (which proved so politically effective when exhibited in 1898 that the Kaiser refused to award Kollwitz the gold medal she had won), Kollwitz was appointed to teach graphics and nude studies at the Berlin Künstlerinnenschule. Her subsequent concentration on the mother and child theme developed hand in hand with a series of personal tragedies which included the death of a son in the First World War and the loss of a grandson in the Second. Documenting the suffering that results from war and poverty led Kollwitz away from the expressions of individual torment that mark the work of her contemporaries Edvard Munch and James Ensor and that would soon dominate German Expressionism. Although her work shares the graphic expressiveness of the prints by members of the Brücke and Blaue Reiter groups, she increasingly came to see Expressionism as a rarefied art of the studio, divorced from social reality. "I am convinced," she wrote in her diary dating from 1908, "that there must be an understanding between the artist and the people such as there always used to be in the best periods in history."

Kollwitz's insistence on the social function of art divorced her work from the Modernist cultivation of individual artistic freedom. Vanguard mythologies have proved equally difficult to sustain in the

161 Käthe Kollwitz, "Attack," *The Weaver's Uprising* 1895–97

face of work which refuses the scope, and often the scale, of Modernist ambitions.

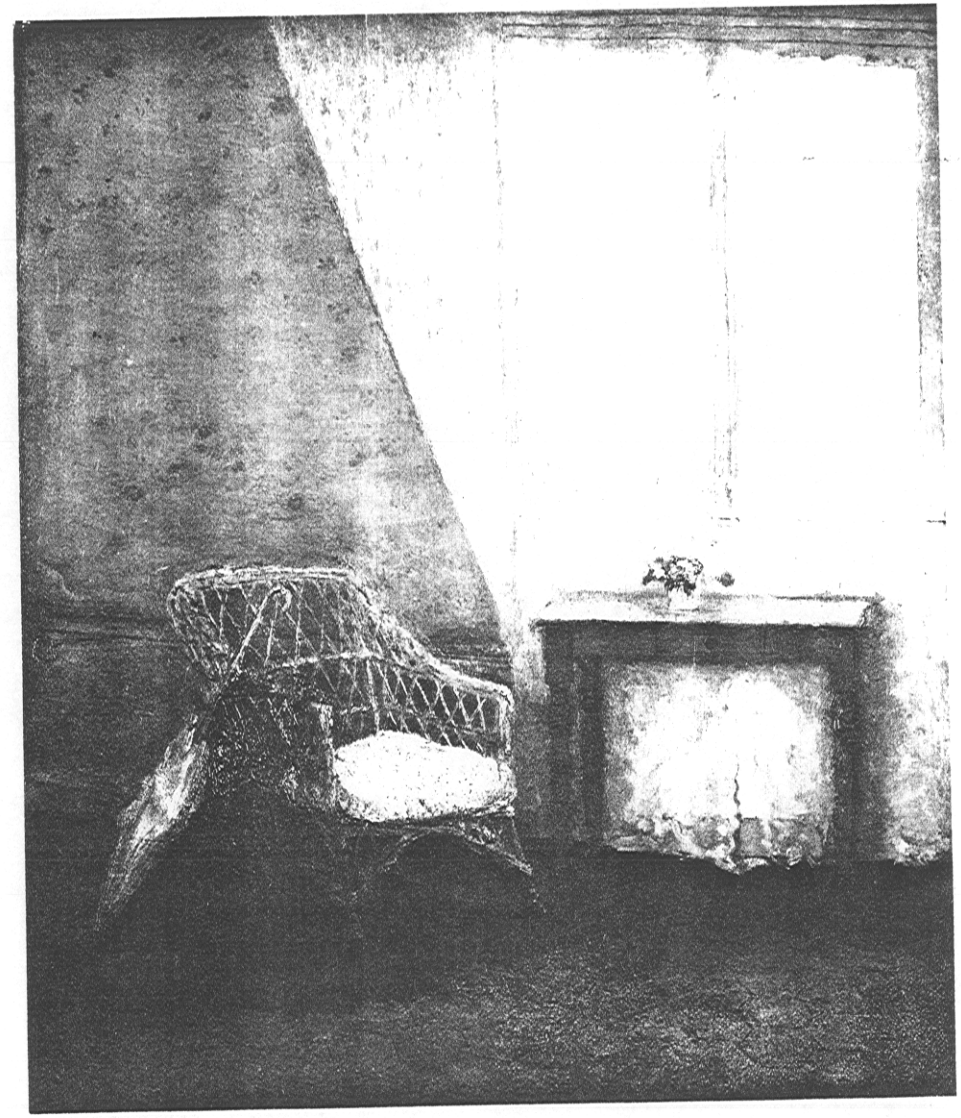
Despite regular exhibitions, Gwen John (1876–1939), like Valadon, was until recently most often presented as an "unknown," to be regularly "rediscovered" by subsequent generations of curators and critics, always in relation to her brother Augustus John, whose work bears little similarity to hers; her lover, the sculptor Auguste Rodin; and her patron, the American collector John Quinn.

Though she knew Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Rodin, and many other contemporary artists, and read widely, John had little interest in the theoretical aspects of artistic movements. Nor was she a joiner. Born and raised in Wales, and educated at the Slade School in London under Whistler's influence, John went to France at the age of twenty-

162 Suzanne Valadon *The Blue Room* 1923

seven and remained there for the rest of her life. Her work contains superficial affinities with that of Rodin, Puvis de Chavannes, Vuillard, Bonnard, Modigliani, and Rouault, but its dry surfaces, restrained color and patterned brushwork are closer to the paintings produced by the Camden Town Group in London than to the French Modernists. Her reliance on intimate subject-matter was shaped by her early experiences at the Slade and her paintings, subdued in tone, and formal in arrangement, evoke powerful emotional responses.

John first exhibited in 1900 at the New English Art Club, returning to Paris after that exhibition partly to escape Augustus John's influence over her life. She supported herself by posing as an artist's model, often for English women artists, and by the Summer of 1904 she was posing for Rodin. John's relationship with Rodin belongs to



163 Gwen John *A Corner of the Artist's Room, Paris, 1907–1909*

the difficult history of women who, lacking familial and social support for their endeavors, have annexed their talent to that of male mentors and seen their own work suffer as a result. But it is art historians who have extracted her life from the historical circumstances in which she lived, and from the lives of the hundreds of other women painters working in London and Paris in the same years. Like many other women artists, she has been "rediscovered" as an exception and re-presented as unique.

Rodin defined his own artistic genius in sexual terms and his critics followed suit; "The period when Rodin was caught up in the grand passion of his life coincided with the creation of his most impassioned works," notes one twentieth-century critic. "Such was his innate vigor, even in decline, that everything which flowed from his hands with such dangerous facility bore the imprint of genius. . . ." John, like
164 the sculptor Camille Claudel (1856–1920), who entered Rodin's studio as an assistant in 1883 and remained to become model, lover, collaborator, and artist in her own right, saw her creative life merged with that of Rodin in the eyes of others. Claudel's assistance in Rodin's studio helped insure his myth of superhuman productivity during the 1880s and early 1890s, and much of her creative output remains to be disengaged from his work of these years. John's relationship with Rodin, while equally intense, was not played out through their commitment to a shared medium. Describing herself as "une petite morceau de souffrance et de désir," and expressing a growing coldness toward painting, she nevertheless continued to paint, executing numerous drawings and at least a dozen paintings during her first decade in Paris.

Distinctive themes emerged in John's work during this period: simple interiors bathed in soft light and isolated female figures set 163
against textured walls. Formally constructed, these works capture 165
specific moments filled with light and atmosphere. The repetition of compositions is characteristic of her mature work and provided a means for the formal investigations which were her primary concern as a painter.

John's reflective, dedicated life allowed her to live largely independent of the social obligations placed on most women of her time, but critics continue to search for the "essentially feminine" in her work. The term "feminine" has also been used to build contexts within which to view the work of other women who moved in avant-garde circles, but whose personal and idiosyncratic styles have no place in vanguard mythology. Marie Laurencin's work was promoted by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who introduced her to

164 Camille Claudel *Auguste Rodin*
1892

165 Gwen John *Young Woman Holding a Black Cat*
c. 1914–15

166 Frida Kahlo
The Broken Column 1944

167 Leonora Carrington
Self-Portrait 1938

the Cubist painters; Florine Stettheimer's social relationships with the New York avant-garde before and after the First World War proved more binding than her artistic ties to them. Both artists embraced the decorative and the fanciful in their work, and both fashioned a myth of the feminine that allowed them to be heard, but that insured they would never be taken as seriously as their male colleagues.

Educated at the Lycée Lamartine and at the Académie Humbert, where she met the Cubist painter Georges Braque, Laurencin (1885–1956) had a long, stormy affair with Apollinaire, which placed her in the group of artists who gathered around Picasso in the studio at the Bateau Lavoir, a run-down former wash house in Montmartre. Her painting *Group of Artists* (1908) includes Apollinaire, Picasso, herself, and Picasso's companion, Fernande Olivier, but the presence of herself and Olivier in the painting signals friendship rather than art. 168

In his 1913 treatise, *Les Peintres Cubistes: Méditations esthétiques*, Apollinaire called her a "scientific Cubist," but in fact her work has little to do with Cubism's conceptual and formal investigations. Instead it was her "femininity" which became the artistic yardstick against which her work was measured. She brought "feminine art to major status," claimed Apollinaire, but it was as his muse that she entered the Modernist mainstream and it was this construction which provided the Surrealists with a new image of the creative couple. Henri Rousseau's painting of Apollinaire and Laurencin, *The Muse Inspiring the Poet* (1909), presents her as a nature goddess. Apollinaire designated her "a little sun—a feminine version of myself," thereby removing her entirely from the creative ferment that propelled his male friends. "Though she has masculine defects," he wrote, "she has every conceivable feminine quality. The greatest error of most women artists is that they try to surpass men, losing in the process their taste and charm. Laurencin is very different. She is aware of the deep differences that separate men from women—essential, ideal differences. Mademoiselle Laurencin's personality is vibrant and joyful. Purity is her very element." Laurencin exhibited alongside the Cubists in 1907, and from 1909 to 1913, while Florine Stettheimer had only a single solo exhibition during her lifetime. After 1916, she exhibited only at the Independent Society of Arts Annuals, using her wealth and social position as a defense against art world intrusion and elaborating a notion of the "feminine" until her life and her art became largely indistinguishable.

Born in Rochester, New York, in 1871, Florine Stettheimer was the youngest of five children in a prosperous family. She studied at the

< 168 Marie Laurencin
Group of Artists 1908

169 Florine Stettheimer
Cathedrals of Art 1942
(unfinished)

Art Students' League in New York from 1892 to 1895 and then travelled in Europe with two of her sisters, taking painting lessons in Germany and visiting museums. The outbreak of war in 1914 forced the Stettheimer sisters to return to New York where the family home soon became famous as the social center of a group of avant-garde art dealers, dancers, musicians, artists, and writers. Stettheimer's paintings of this period are bright, calligraphic sketches full of personal symbolism, amusing anecdote, and social satire. Her unique personal style evolved out of a rigorous academic training, but her paintings focus almost exclusively on the social milieu in which she lived. The *Studio Party* (1917), like many of her other works, includes her social and artistic circle: Maurice Sterne, Gaston and Isabelle Lachaise, Albert Gleizes, Leo Stein, her sisters.

Stettheimer produced paintings as part of a self-consciously
169 cultivated lifestyle which drew few, if any, distinctions between making art and living well. Protected by her wealth from having to exhibit or sell, she further insulated herself from the professional art world through her demand that any gallery wishing to exhibit her works be redecorated like her home. Stettheimer's exaggerated "femininity" was a way of establishing a role for herself as a woman and an artist; her contemporary, Georgia O'Keeffe, on the other hand, spent much of her life trying to escape attempts by critics and a well-meaning public to read her life in her work.

O'Keeffe's place in the history of American modern art, while far more secure than that of Stettheimer, remains circumscribed by critical attempts to create a special category for her. Her career, the critic Hilton Kramer later wrote, "is unlike almost any other in the history of modern art in America," for it embraced its whole history, from the founding of Alfred Stieglitz's gallery with its shocking displays of European Modernism to the eventual acceptance of modern art in America. And it anticipated by some years the color field paintings of Clyfford Still, Helen Frankenthaler, Ellsworth Kelly, Barnett Newman, and others. The "rediscovery" that began her recent meteoric rise to the forefront of American art came only with her retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum, New York, in 1970 when a new generation of viewers were drawn to the uncompromising example of her life and the quiet integrity of her work.

Her relationship to her colleagues in the circle around Stieglitz, with whom she began living in 1919—the painters Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, and the photographer Paul Strand—was often equivocal. Referring to them as "the boys," she later commented that, "The men liked to put me down as the best woman painter. I think I'm one of the best painters." O'Keeffe chose to live much of her life away from New York, developing her paintings in relation to the vast, austere landscape of the southwestern United States, particularly the area around Abiqui, New Mexico, where she moved permanently after Stieglitz's death in 1946.

Born in 1887, O'Keeffe studied anatomical drawing with John Vanderpoel at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1905; two years later she was in New York studying painting at the Art Students' League. Quickly losing interest in academic styles derived from European models, she left to work as a commercial artist in Chicago. After attending a course on the principles of abstract design taught by Alan Bement—a follower of the art educator Arthur Wesley Dow—she taught Dow's principles in schools in Virginia, South Carolina, and Texas. She met Stieglitz after she sent a batch of abstract charcoal drawings based on personal feelings and sensations to Anita Politzer, a friend in New York who subsequently took them to Stieglitz.

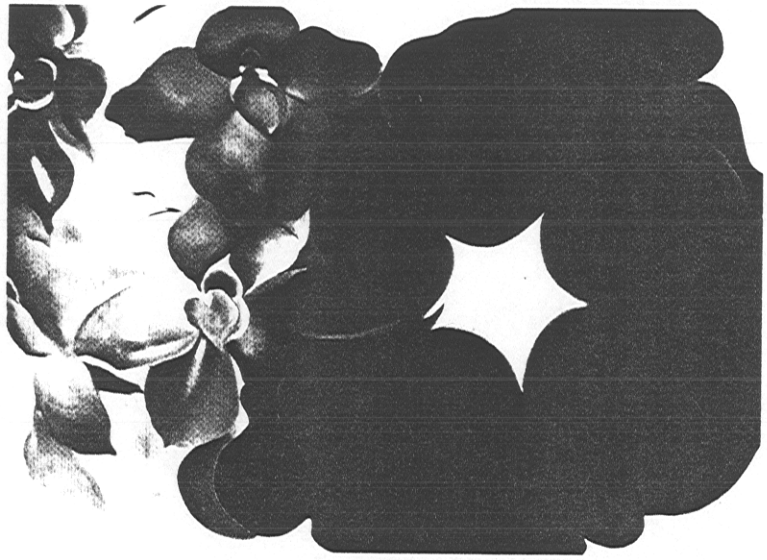
In 1916, Stieglitz was one of the organizers of "The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters." The only woman included among the seventeen leading American Modernists was Marguerite Zorach, a California artist who helped introduce Fauve painting into the United States, but who is better known for her brilliant abstract tapestries. Thus, O'Keeffe was not the only woman shown by Stieglitz at his avant-garde 291 Gallery, but her situation there was unique.

O'Keeffe's paintings of the 1920s—from the planar precisionist
171 studies of New York's buildings and skyline to the New Mexico landscapes with their distilled forms and intense colors, and the many paintings of single flowers—are intensely personal statements expressed in the reductive language of early Modernism. Her emergence during the early 1920s as an artist of great promise coincided with what appeared to be more liberal attitudes toward women including their increased attendance in art schools. Between 1912 and 1918, a number of women students at the Art Students' League, among them Cornelia Barnes, Alice Beach Winter, and Josephine Verstille Nivison, contributed drawings and illustrations to the radical Socialist magazine, *The Masses*, which promoted women's causes from suffrage to birth control. Other women produced paintings addressing current social realities, like Theresa Bernstein's *Suffragette Parade* (1916) and *Waiting Room—Employment Office* (1917), which depicts a group of weary women waiting for jobs.

Throughout the 1920s, the complex associations between
170 O'Keeffe's paintings of natural forms and the female body elicited readings which the artist herself recognized as ideological constructions. Responding to the widespread popularizing of Freud's ideas in America, Henry McBride noted; "Georgia O'Keeffe is probably what they will be calling in a few years a B.F. (before Freud) since all her inhibitions seem to have been removed before the Freudian recommendations were preached upon this side of the Atlantic. She became free without the aid of Freud. But she had aid. There was another who took the place of Freud. . . . It is of course Alfred Stieglitz. . . ."

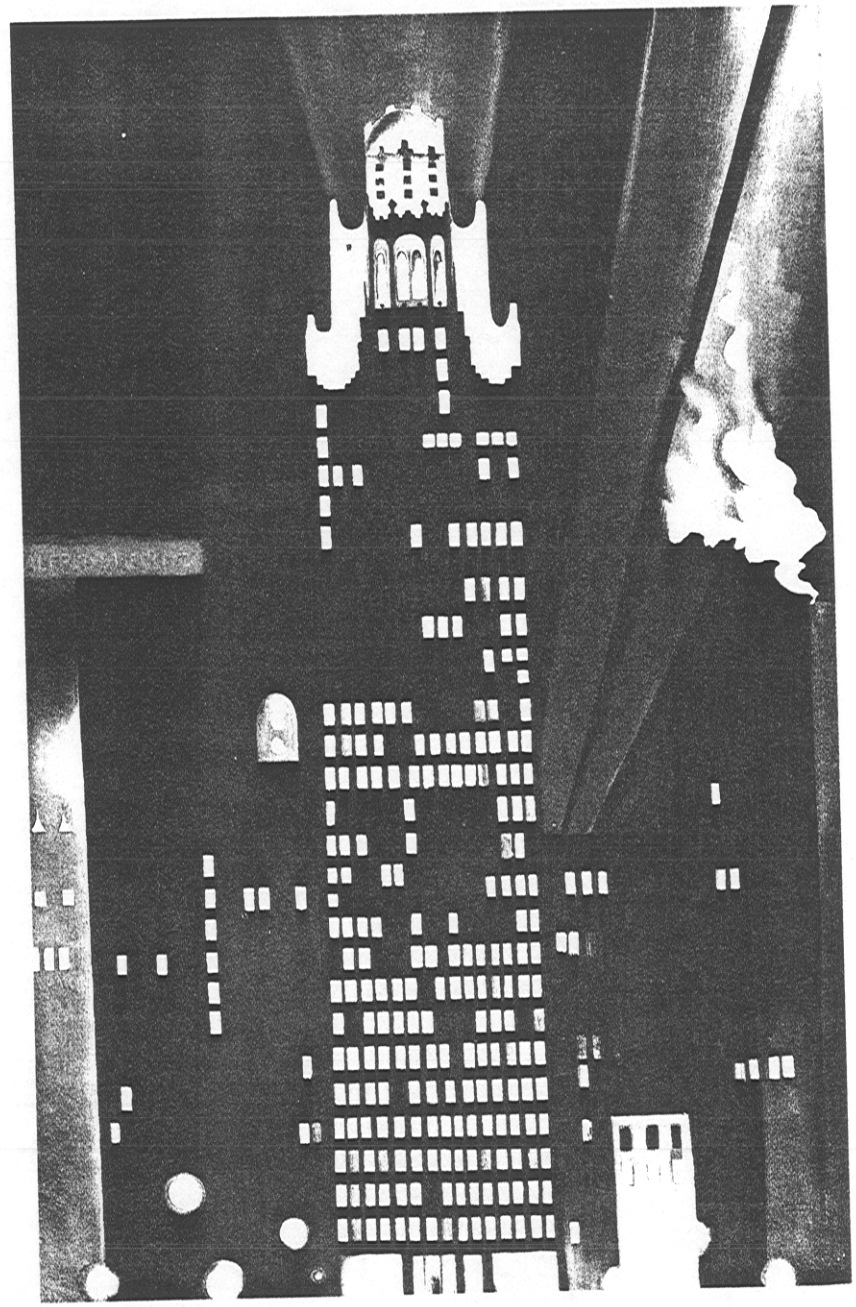
The ideology of femininity, which presented O'Keeffe as Stieglitz's protégée, that constructed her considerable talent as "essentially feminine" legitimized male authority and male succession. "Alfred Stieglitz presents" read the announcement for O'Keeffe's 1923 exhibition at his gallery; the following year he declared, "Women can only create babies, say the scientists, but I say they can produce art—and Georgia O'Keeffe is the proof of it."

In a decade of declining birth rates women were confronted by a barrage of literature urging them to stay home where, as mothers and homemakers, they became perfect marketing targets for a new peacetime economy based on household consumption. Throughout the 1920s, O'Keeffe was forced to watch her work constantly appropriated to an ideology of sexual difference built on the emotional differences between the sexes which supported this social reorganization. Men were "rational," manipulating the environment for the good of their families; women were "intuitive" and "expressive," dominated by their feelings and their biological roles. She was shocked when, in 1920, Marsden Hartley wrote an article casting her abstractions in Freudian terms and discussing "feminine perceptions and feminine powers of expression" in her work and that of Delaunay and Laurencin. "No man could feel as Georgia O'Keeffe," noted the Modernist critic Paul Rosenfeld in 1924, "and utter himself in precisely such curves and colors; for in those curves and spots and prismatic color there is the woman referring the universe to her own frame, her own balance; and rendering in her picture of things her body's subconscious knowledge of itself."



170 Georgia O'Keeffe *Black Hollyhock, Blue Larkspur* 1930

Criticisms such as these constructed a specific category for O'Keeffe. Hailed as the epitome of emancipated womanhood, she was accorded star status, but only at the top of a female class. The biological fact of her femininity took precedence over serious critical evaluations of her work. At the time when radical feminists were advocating "androgyny," and designers like Coco Chanel were "masculinizing" women's fashions, the art world countered by presenting a woman who was "emancipated" but "feminine," and in a class by herself. While Edmund Wilson lauded her "particularly feminine intensity," and the *New York Times* critic declared that, "she reveals woman as an elementary being, closer to the earth than men, suffering pain with passionate ecstasy and enjoying love with beyond-good-and-evil delight," O'Keeffe threatened to quit painting if Freudian interpretations continued to be made. Complaining that Hartley's and Demuth's flower paintings were not interpreted erotically she struggled against a cultural identification of the female with the biological nature of the body that has long been used to assign woman a negative role in the production of culture. It is hardly



171 Georgia O'Keeffe *The American Radiator Building* 1927

surprising that she responded with so little sympathy to attempts by feminist artists and critics during the 1970s to annex her formal language to the renewed search for a "female" imagery.

O'Keeffe met the Canadian painter Emily Carr (1871–1945) at Stieglitz's gallery in 1930. Although no details remain of the brief meeting, these two major figures in North American landscape painting were evidently sympathetic. If O'Keeffe finally found the art world's insistent refusal to allow her painting to stand in relation to that of her contemporaries a burden and a barrier to her development as a painter, Carr's isolation in British Columbia saved her from most such intrusions. After studying painting in San Francisco, London, and Paris for short periods between 1890 and 1910, Carr's strong, brooding paintings of the Pacific northwest and its Indians went almost completely unnoticed until the 1920s, when she met Mark Tobey and the painters of Canada's Group of Seven. Although never formally a member of the group, she exhibited with them beginning in 1927 in an exhibition called "Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern." Like O'Keeffe, Carr built an intensely personal style from a range of influences, and she distilled essential forms from a
172 monumental and imposing nature and presented them without sentiment, moralizing, or anecdote. The breadth of these painters' visions, and the muscularity of their forms, should provoke new investigations into the contributions made by women artists to the traditions of modernist landscape painting. The success of such

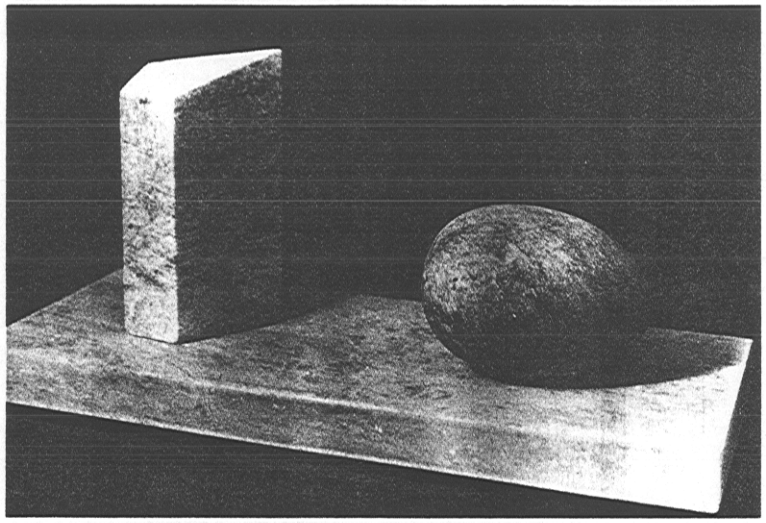
172 Emily Carr *Landscape with Tree* 1917–19

173 Germaine Richier *The Batman* 1956

investigations will, however, rest on our ability to redraw the boundaries between woman, nature, and art.

During the 1930s, the sculptors Germaine Richier and Barbara 173
Hepworth also elaborated the connections between nature's cycles of
generation and erosion. Hepworth (1903–75), one of England's 174
leading sculptors, studied at the Leed's School of Art and at the Royal College of Art in London where she and Henry Moore became fascinated by the interplay of mass and negative space. Visits to the studios of Constantin Brancusi and Jean Arp in Paris in 1931 encouraged Hepworth to explore biomorphism within an increasingly abstract vocabulary. Living with the painter Ben Nicholson in the 1930s, she was an active participant in the development of abstraction in England. She worked steadily, even after the birth of triplets in 1934 slowed her sculptural production, and gradually evolved a totally abstract, geometric vocabulary.

Adrian Stokes, the painter and essayist, was a member of the group in England—with the painter Paul Nash and the physicist J. D. Bernal—who helped define this formal vocabulary. Writing in *The Spectator* in 1933 after Hepworth's exhibition at Reid and Lefevre, he



174 Barbara Hepworth *Two Forms* 1934

noted; "These stones are inhabited with feeling, even if, in common with the majority of 'advanced' carvers, Miss Hepworth has felt not only the block, but also its potential fruit, to be always feminine. . . ."

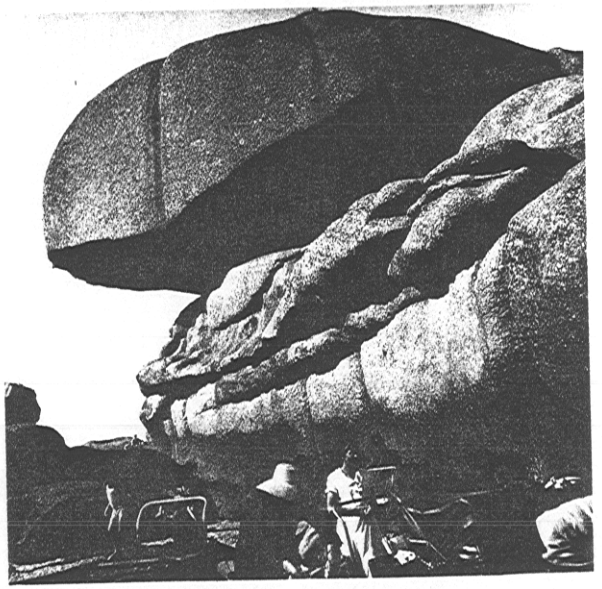
This generative metaphor was deeply internalized by artists working under the influence of Surrealism. In a poem written in the early 1930s and dedicated to Max Ernst, the English poet David Gascoyne celebrated "the great bursting womb of desire." Jean Arp also chose procreation as a metaphor for artistic generation, writing in 1948 that "art is a fruit that grows in man, like a fruit on a plant or like a child in its mother's womb." The reasons for this particular trope lie outside the present work, but its effects proved nowhere more conflicting than for women artists in the Surrealist movement.

No artistic movement since the nineteenth century has celebrated the idea of woman and her creativity as passionately as did Surrealism during the 1920s and 1930s. None has had as many female practitioners, and none has evolved a more complex role for the woman artist in a modern movement. André Breton's romantic vision of perfect union with the loved woman as the source for an art of convulsive disorientation that would resolve polarized states of experience and awareness into a new, revolutionary surreality was formulated in response to a culture shaken by war. He advanced his

image of the spontaneous, instinctive woman in a social context in which women were demanding the right to work and to vote, and the French government was promoting pronatalism as a strategy for repopulating the war-ravaged country. "The fate of France, its existence, depends on the family," declared a slogan of 1919, the same year that Breton, recently demobilized, returned to Paris. The following year a law was passed forbidding the mere advocacy of abortion or birth control; by 1924, when the First Surrealist Manifesto appeared, Breton had dedicated himself to liberating woman from such "bourgeois" considerations.

The image of ethereal and disruptive womanhood which enters Breton's poetry of the 1920s owes much to Apollinaire's imbrication of erotic and poetic emotion, his reliance on Symbolist polarities to express the duality of female nature, and his presentation of Laurencin as muse and eternal child. But the Surrealist woman was also born out of Freud's ambivalent and dualistic positioning of woman at the center of the creative and the subversive powers of the love instinct, in her incompatible roles as mother and bearer of life, and destroyer of man.

During the 1930s, women artists came to Surrealism in large numbers, attracted by the movement's anti-academic stance and by its sanctioning of an art in which personal reality dominates. But they found themselves struggling toward artistic maturity in the context of a movement that defined them as confirming and completing a male



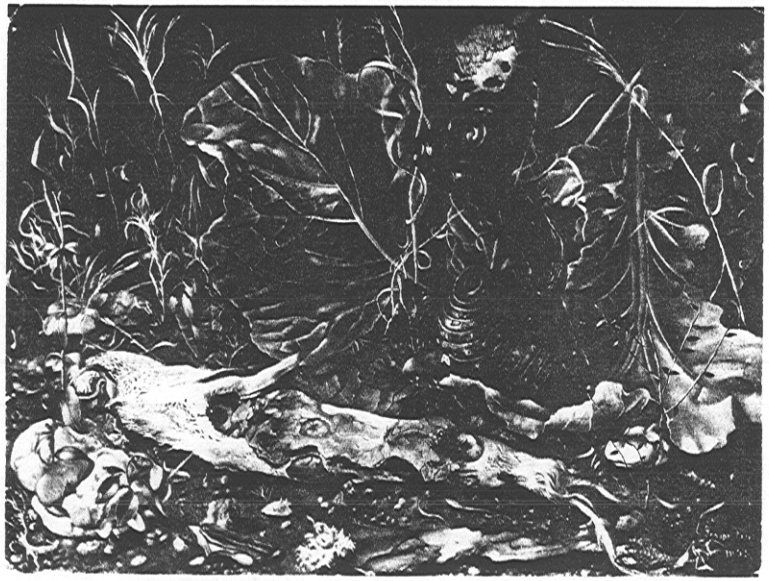
175 Eileen Agar
Ploumanach 1936

creative cycle and that metaphorically obliterated subject/object polarities through violent assaults on the female image. Not surprisingly, most women ended by asserting their independence from Surrealism.

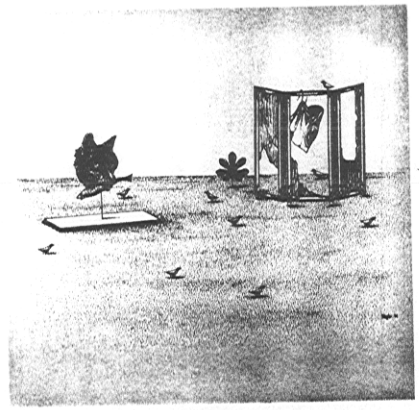
Almost without exception, women artists saw themselves as outside the inner circle of poets and painters which produced Surrealist manifestos and formulated Surrealist theory. Most of them were young women just embarking on artistic careers when they came to Paris; many of them did their mature work only after leaving the Surrealist circle. Often they came to Surrealism through personal relationships with men in the group rather than shared political or theoretical goals. Yet they made significant contributions to the language of Surrealism, replacing the male Surrealists' love of hallucination and erotic violence with an art of magical fantasy and narrative flow.

Surrealism's multiple and ambivalent visions of woman converge in its identification of her with the mysterious forces and regenerative powers of nature. Women artists were quick to draw on this identification, but they did it with an analytic mind and an ironic stance. Artists like Leonora Carrington (b. 1917), Leonor Fini (b. 1918), the American painters Kay Sage (1898–1963) and Dorothea

176 Leonor Fini *Sphinx Regina* 1946



177 Toyen *The Rifle-Range* 1940



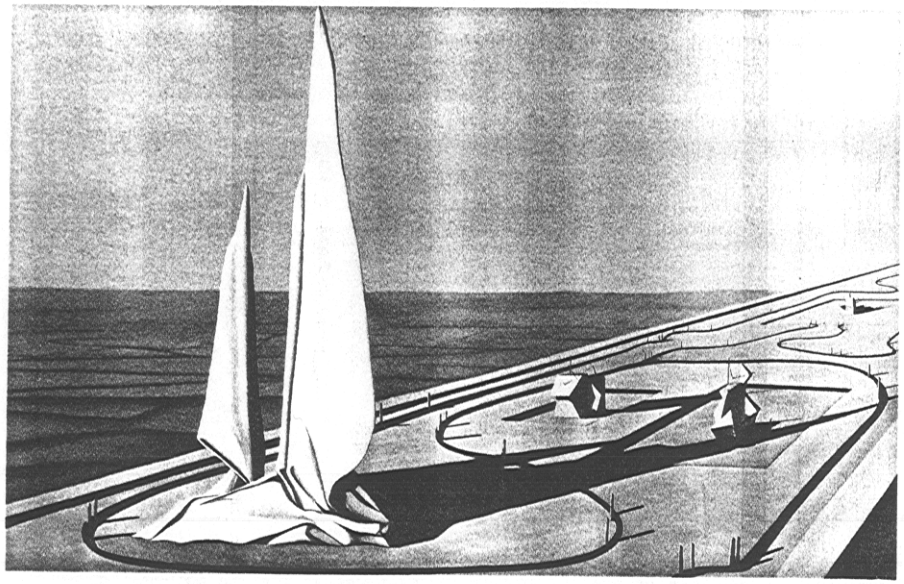
Tanning (b. 1912), and the Spanish-Mexican artist Remedios Varo (b. 1908) received varying degrees of formal training. Yet they meticulously built up tight surfaces with layers of small and carefully modulated brushstrokes. However fantastic their imagery, they often worked with the precision and care of illustrators, as if their creative model was scientific investigation rather than Surrealist explosiveness. Fini's many paintings of bones and rotting vegetation—like *Sphinx Regina* (1946)—and Varo's carefully crafted scientific fantasies—like *Harmony* (1956) and *Unsubmissive Plant* (1961)—resituate the woman artist in the worlds of science and art. 176

Women artists dismissed male romanticizing of nature as female and nurturing (or female and destructive) and replaced it with a more austere and ironic vision. Bizarre and unusual natural forms attracted the photographic eye of Eileen Agar (b. 1899) and Lee Miller (1908–77), while the Czech painter Marie Čerminova, called Toyen (1902–80), in a series of paintings and drawings executed during and after the Second World War presents nature as a potent metaphor for inhumanity. 177

Toyen's use of nature as a metaphor for political reality finds an echo in the work of Kay Sage, who met the Surrealists in Paris in 1937 and who spent the War years in New York with the Surrealist painter Yves Tanguy. Her paintings are among the most abstract produced within a Surrealism that embraced symbolic figuration as the key to the language of the dream and the unconscious. A predilection for sharp, spiny forms, slaty surfaces, and subdued melancholy light infuses her landscapes with an air of emptiness and abandonment; she herself identified strongly with these barren vistas stripped of human habitation. 178

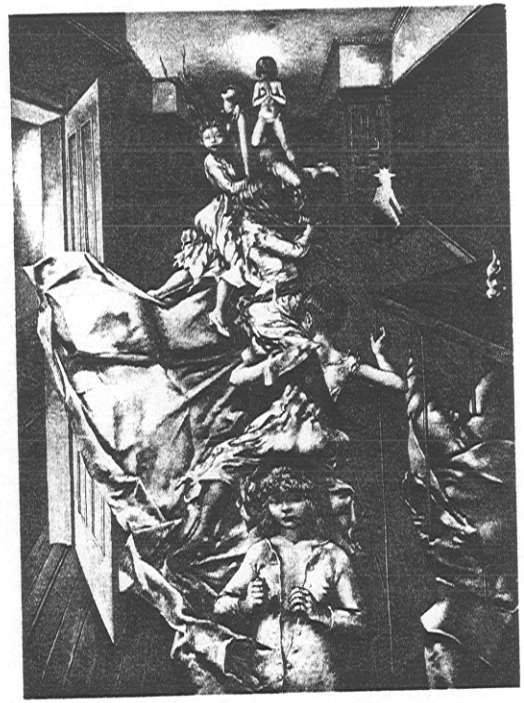
Alienated from Surrealist theorizing about women, and from the search for a female muse, women turned instead to their own reality. Surrealism constructed women as magic objects and sites on which to project male erotic desire. They recreated themselves as beguiling personalities, poised uneasily between the worlds of artifice (art) and nature, or the instinctual life. The duality of the Mexican Frida Kahlo's life (1907–54)—an exterior persona constantly reinvented with costume and ornament, and an interior image nourished on the pain of a body crippled in a trolley-bus accident when she was an adolescent—invests her painting with a haunting complexity and a narrative quality which disturbs in its ambiguity. This is also characteristic of much of the work of another contemporary Mexican artist, Maria Izquierdo (1902–55).

166 Like Kahlo's *Broken Column* (1944), Leonora Carrington's *Self-*
167 *Portrait* (1938) reinforces the woman artist's use of the mirror to assert the duality of being, the self as observer and observed. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir holds up the image of the mirror as the key to the feminine condition. Women concern themselves with their own images, she asserts, men with the enlarged self-images provided



178 Kay Sage *In the Third Sleep* 1944

179 Remedios Varo *Celestial Pablum* 1958



180 Dorothea Tanning *Palaestra* 1947

by their reflection in a woman. Kahlo used painting as a means of exploring the reality of her own body and her consciousness of that reality; in many cases the reality dissolves into a duality, exterior reality versus interior perception of that reality. The self-image in the work of women artists in the Surrealist movement becomes the focus for a dialogue between the constructed social being and the powerful forces of the instinctual life, which Surrealism celebrated as the revolutionary tool that would overthrow the control exerted by the conscious mind.

When it came to taking a position vis-à-vis Surrealism's inflammatory erotic language, women artists vacillated. More often than not they approached the issue of eroticism obliquely, focusing attention on aspects of the erotic other than woman's sexual desires. Carrington rejected Freud and turned to alchemy and magic for subjects; Tanning transferred sexuality from the world of adults to that of children. Paintings like *Palaestra* (1947) and *Children's Games* (1942) reveal 180

nubile young girls caught in moments of ecstatic transformation. Their bodies respond to unseen forces which sweep through the room, animating drapery and whipping the children's hair and garments into the air.

Unmoved by Surrealist theorizing on the subject of erotic desire, and by Freud's writings, women appear to have found little theoretical support for the more liberated understanding of sexuality which Surrealism pursued so avidly. Turning to their own sexual reality as source and subject, they were unable to escape the conflicts engendered by their flight from conventional female roles. The imagery of the sexually mature, sometimes maternal, woman has almost no place in the work of women Surrealists. Their conflicts about this aspect of female sexuality reflect the difficult choices forced upon women of their generation who attempted to reconcile traditional female roles with lives as artists in a movement that prized the innocence of the child-woman and violently attacked the institutions of marriage and the family.

Less than positive views of maternity carry over into their work. The most disturbing images of maternal reality in twentieth-century art are to be found in Tanning's *Maternity* (1946), Varo's *Celestial Pablum* (1958), and Kahlo's *My Birth* (1932), *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), and other paintings on this theme. In Varo's *Celestial Pablum*, an isolated woman sits in a lonely tower, a blank expression on her exhausted face, and mechanically grinds up stars which she feeds to an insatiable moon. The somber palette and matt surface cast their own pall over the work. These paintings are remarkable for their powerful imaging of the conflicts inherent in maternity: the physical changes initiated by pregnancy and lactation, the mother's exhaustion and feared loss of autonomy. The element of erotic violence so prevalent in the work of male Surrealist artists makes its first appearance here in the works of Tanning, Meret Oppenheim (b.1913), and Kahlo that deal with childbirth and motherhood. Now it is violence directed against the self, not projected onto another, violence inseparable from the physiological reality of woman's sexuality and the social construction of her feminine role.

179

For Kahlo, as for other women artists associated with the Surrealists, painting became a means of sustaining a dialogue with inner reality. Surrealism sanctioned personal exploration for both men and women; in doing so, it legitimized a path familiar to many women and gave new artistic form to some of the conflicts confronting women in early twentieth-century artistic movements.

In and Out of the Mainstream

The emergence of an American avant-garde, along with a body of formalist criticism centered in the writings of Clement Greenberg and his followers, dominates art historical accounts of the period after the Second World War. Nevertheless, abstract and figurative art coexisted despite the increasing critical and curatorial attention directed toward the Abstract Expressionists and their successors after 1948. The ways that the meanings of this Modernist art have been produced, reinforced, and challenged can be observed in the shifting relationship of women's art to broader social formulations and mainstream art during this period. The origins of these shifts lie in the 1930s, the period when American artists began to self-consciously formulate a social role for the visual arts.

During the Depression, American artists under government patronage became an integral part of the workforce and evolved a socially conscious visual language. Working outside the dealer/critic/museum system, male and female artists identified themselves with the labor force. Federal arts projects, like the Works Progress (later Projects) Administration (WPA, 1934–39), supported women's struggles for professional recognition; a 1935 survey of professional and technical workers on relief revealed that among artists receiving aid, approximately forty-one percent were women. The federal section of Fine Arts, a non-relief program which funded murals for public buildings, awarded its commissions on the basis of anonymous competitions in which artists submitted unsigned sketches. Louise Nevelson, Lee Krasner, Isabel Bishop, and Alice Neel were first supported by such programs.

The New Deal's non-discriminatory policies, and the number of women active professionally in the arts, form only part of a larger picture. A backlash against women wage earners during the 1930s took a devastating toll. Caroline Bird has dated the origin of the move to return women from work back into the home to the 1930s, rather than after the Second World War, as is commonly believed, and labor statistics confirm her contention. Mass-market publications, as well as