A Fragmentary Illness

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Esra Plumer, *Unica Zürn: Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism*. I.B. Tauris, 2016. 192 pp. $120.00 hardback.

Esra Plumer's Unica Zürn: Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism *is the first sustained English language study of the writer and artist that attempts to situate her work as a significant body of its own, not merely an appendage of her better-known lover Hans Bellmer. Through a presentation of relevant, and previously scattered, historical background and reception history, this book reinterprets Zürn's work as functioning within the greater context of a distinct female Surrealism and, crucially, examines the relationship between the artist and mental illness.*

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German artist and writer Unica Zürn is known for novels and short stories marked by extreme beauty and shocking violence to the female body. Over the course of her short life, Zürn also composed scores of anagrammatic poems, produced hundreds of intricate automatic illustrations, moved within the inner circles of postwar European Surrealism, was diagnosed with schizophrenia in the 1960s, and killed herself in 1970 at the age of 54. Despite this intense and remarkable life, when she is remembered, it is more often than not as the wife of surrealist Hans Bellmer. The publication of Esra Plumer's *Unica Zürn: Art,*

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Writing and Postwar Surrealism not only marked the centenary of Zürn's birth, but is also the first significant and sustained English language study of the writer and artist that attempts to explicitly remove her from Bellmer's leaden shadow and show her as significant in her own right.

To a large degree, Plumer's reading of Zürn hinges on a reassessment of her compositional method in relation to mental illness. Yet even while interrogating the role that the artist's illness plays in the creation of her works, Plumer is cautious to not reduce Zürn to her psychic structure, as she had been often presented as a mere appendage of her better-known husband. To accomplish this, Plumer distinguishes between understanding works as the direct result of an illness, on the one hand, and as the products of an artist whose formal theories involved conscious experience of an illness on the other. This is a way of putting the formal concerns back into Zürn's hands, and not merely reading her careful compositional practice as the work of mental illness's pen. Resisting the critical habit of psycho-biography that would reinscribe Zürn's form as an expression of illness, not a response to it, Plumer's book is never a strict biography.

Those moments of the book that linger within the biographical do so only to show the role that specific events may have had in the construction of Zürn's mature artistic practice. For instance, the account of Zürn's postwar depression in Berlin, of her mental collapse and the subsequent divorce from her first husband, is used to posit inspirations for the strange and fantastic short stories that Zürn wrote for the radio and newspapers (17). Plumer argues that the dreamless sleep caused by her medication led Zürn to lend these early written works a magical and visionary quality that was missing in her life (25). For Plumer, these works demonstrate how, even at this early date, Zürn's artistic practice was a conscious appropriation of, and response to, her experiences with mental illness (33).

As a medium between psychic and artistic expression, Zürn's compositional method thus stands alongside the main body of Surrealism, but in important ways counter to it. Plumer foregrounds this relation through a history of Zürn's experience at the International Surrealist Exhibition (EROS) in 1959 in Paris. The exhibition, organized by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp, brought together many of the first generation of Surrealism with the newer postwar artists. Of particular note, Mimi Parent's curation of a "Fetishist Room" enabled the presence of female Surrealists to be felt in a way that they had not before. The works to which Zürn noted a particular attraction, Meret Oppenheim's "The Couple," (a pair of women's shoes, attached at the toe to form a single body which, if worn, would force the wearer's thighs together and prevent any sort of movement,) and Mimi Parent's "Masculine-Feminine" (a suit with a tie made out of a woman's ponytail) both foregrounded issues of gendered violence and bondage. Plumer argues that experiencing the near constant presence of violence against the female form in the work of the female Surrealists exhibiting at the EROS show impacted Zürn's work dramatically.

Crucial to Plumer's argument is that these works not only foregrounded the bondage of women, explored female desire and agency, especially in the form of homoerotic violence towards the female body (57). Plumer persuasively shows the manner in which the female surrealists made explicit their concerns with domination and potential masochism. In this light, she argues, these artists should be understood not exclusively within the realm of male dominated Surrealism, but, rather, as having a much more nuanced relationship to the representations of female power, violence, bondage, and subjection.

This account of gendered subjectivity and agency in female Surrealism enables Plumer to provide a re-reading of the issues of power and bodily control in the critical understanding of Zürn's relation to Bellmer. Plumer works through these issues by considering the series of photographs, *Unica Litogée*, that Bellmer took with Zürn. This photo series, published under Bellmer's name, features Zürn in various states of nudity, bound with string and rope. The critical commonplace, most forcefully argued by Caroline Rupprecht and Luce Irigaray, has been that these photographs foreground the male artist's sadistic manipulation of the submissive female form. Plumer, however, builds from the context of Zürn's involvement with female Surrealism's ongoing concern: how to represent and subvert the domination of the female body in art. She proposes a method of reading these photographs that would take into consideration that the wrapped body is experienced in "a system of domination from two perspectives; the participation of those who submit to power and the participation of those who exercise it" (85).

Irigaray and Rupprecht's readings ignore the possibility that Zürn's desire could be present in the images at all, simply because she is bound. To Plumer's mind, Irigaray reads Zürn as having "failed as an artist as well as a person, claiming that the fragmentation of herself and work has led her to succumb to a void without having developed an artistic entity" (87). Against this, Plumer argues for a dynamic reading of the *Litogée* series, and inscribes it in Zürn's work as a whole. One should understand the works as posing questions and problems. Indeed, the work posits a dynamic of control and bondage, agency and desire, and therefore cannot be read in a closed system of interpretation (89). What Plumer emphasizes most is the tension present in the work: the woman is holding the ropes that bind her; the body is simultaneously cut by the fabric, and smoothed in its stretching; the photographer is both present and not; the subject becomes object but then returns to subject. Plumer does not limit this analysis to the *Litogée* series, but sees it as a process that develops throughout the artist's career. This development can be seen most clearly in Zürn's transition from a more traditional form of Surrealist automatism as an attempt to explore hidden aspects of a coherent self, to the later more dissociative form of anagrammatic composition.

Typical Surrealist practice involved the use of free association and "automatic" writing as strategies that attempt to root out and explore the secret

meanings hidden within the individual's unconscious. In Plumer's eyes, Zürn's compositional strategies resist this framework by foregrounding an understanding of artistic meaning as multiple and unstable, decentered and proliferative, rather than the stable and individual, merely hidden. Plumer's reading of Zürn as an author playing on tensions rather than unitary meanings focuses on Zürn's production of fragmentary anagrammatic poetry where "this quality, misread by early critics as a failure to form a unified self, is a deliberate fragmentation that encompasses and further builds on the automatic strategy of disengaging the conscious self from the unconscious self" (105).

Rather than attempt to shear away the conscious mind to arrive at hidden significance, Zürn's anagrammatic work plays on the multiple meanings that can be created with the various syntactic and semiotic structures at play in any given piece of writing. By focusing on the meanings produced through a decomposition of the words already on the page, Zürn produces fragments rather than a whole, and thus emphasizes the lack of unity of the artistic object as well as the individual mind (105). Here again we perceive the interplay between the consciousness of the composer, Zürn, and the structure of the work itself. In this way, Zürn's anagrammatic writing ceases to be concerned exclusively with the artist as controlling figure, the figure whose unconscious contains the "meaning" of the work. By focusing on the fragmentariness of Zürn's mature work, Plumer is able to not only distinguish the artist's production from the main body of male Surrealism, but also demonstrate the ways in which Zürn's non-psychoanalytic conception of the mind's production of meaning is actively involved in her compositional method.

While Plumer's final chapter "Notes on Unica Zürn's *The Man of Jasmine and Other Narratives*" promises something of a tying-together of the various strands built throughout the book, the result is somewhat disjointed. Plumer attempts to focus on Zürn's *Man of Jasmine,* as well as other lesser known works in order to demonstrate the artist's construction of a model of subjectivity befitting her fractured compositional method. This section, while putting some refreshingly heterodox readings of Zürn's work in dialogue with the well curated body of criticism that Plumer engages, does not yield the results that had been announced. Had Plumer pressed this alternative theory of Surrealist composition farther, her argument would have had significantly more impact. However, because the study is episodic in form, the theory of subjectivity that begins to form around Plumer's readings of Zürn's method remains somewhat inchoate. While Plumer is careful to note in the introduction that the chapters can be read in any order, this leads to minor repetitions and a sense that the work is more of an essay collection than a single cohesive monograph building to a coherent theory.

Despite these minor drawbacks, the cumulative effect of Plumer's work grows from the crucial overview of Zürn's place within the German and French postwar avant garde, particularly in the context of female Surrealism. The result

of Plumer's careful and exhaustive scholarship is an image both of Zürn as an individual separate from the better known Bellmer, as well as of her body of work as a distinct and unique contribution to postwar arts and literature. Plumer's book is itself a superb and groundbreaking contribution to scholarship on Zürn and postwar Surrealism generally. In particular, Plumer provides great insight and methodological clarity into how to examine the relationship between mental illness and artistic creation without reducing one to the other, an activity that has, unfortunately, been the standard approach for so long.