The Sublimation of Humor in the Work of Meret Oppenheim:

a defense mechanism

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Fall 2017
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Proposed Thesis Statement

Meret Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936) and *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen* (1936) are most often analyzed through the lens of feminism, which omits the psychoanalytic aspects of humor. This research studies the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung as applied to Oppenheim’s life and work from the perspective of feminism to form an analysis of how humor was used as a defense mechanism. This paper argues that the use of humor evidences the contradictions and challenges Oppenheim faced as an artist and as muse.
Proposed Thesis Advisor

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Three interviews with Meret Oppenheim give critical insight into her thoughts and provide unequivocal information as to Oppenheim’s state of mind and feeling before, during and after her creation of *Object* and *My Nurse*. These interviews, equal in importance, are the primary repository of Meret Oppenheim’s thoughts and are therefore included as a whole. The interviews contain biographical information which elucidates Oppenheim’s despair as a woman in the male circle of Surrealists. In Margot Mifflin’s interview, Oppenheim speaks about the difficulty of being a woman in the male dominated Surrealist circle of which she was a part. Also in Mifflin’s interview, Oppenheim discusses her study of Carl Jung and his theory of animus and anima. In Robert Belton’s interview, Oppenheim extends her discussion of Jungian philosophy and her relationship with male Surrealists. Oppenheim’s interview with Alain Jouffery sheds light on her despair regarding her unequal treatment as a female within the patriarchy of Surrealism. Each of the three interviews give the reader critical insight into Oppenheim’s personal philosophy, personality and anger at the inequality and commodification of women.


Freud’s foundational psychoanalytic theory provides a lens through which to understand Oppenheim’s work. *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* is a translation of six of Freud’s works by Dr. A.A. Brill. The psychoanalysis of wit in book four, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, offers insight into the use of wit as a defense mechanism. In Freud’s analysis, “Rebellion Against Authority Through Wit,” humor is used to rebel against authority and release the pressure associated with oppression. Freud’s chapters on “The Pleasure Mechanism and the Psychogenesis of Wit” and “The Motives of Wit and Wit as a Social Process” lay the foundational theory of wit. Freud’s theory of “The Relation of Wit to Dreams and the Unconscious” elucidates the unconscious use of wit, and “Irony and Negativism,” in which the unconscious represses negative emotion and uses irony as a release of pain, is critical in understanding how Oppenheim repressed anger. “The Unconscious as the Psychic Stage of Wit Work” provides a foundational theory of the unconscious use of humor as a defense mechanism. In Freud’s chapter “Humor,” he argues that humor is considered the “highest of psychic functions” and describes humoristic displacement as a defense process. Freud writes, “The defense processes are the psychic correlates to the flight reflex and guard against pain.” Humor acts as a mechanism to release pain by converting pain to pleasure.

As a student of Carl Jung, Oppenheim studied and recorded her dreams. Oppenheim often spoke of Jung’s theory of the anima and animus and the collective unconscious in conjunction with her art. Jungian analysis of play as part of the creation process can also be applicable to Oppenheim’s work and her own philosophy of creating. Jung’s argument that art is an “unconscious activation of an archetypal image” offers another method by which to analyze Oppenheim’s work. Oppenheim’s regard for Jungian analytical psychology and the study of his texts allow the researcher to discern her conscious perception of the creative process. Understanding conscious perception also allows discernment of unconscious motivations.


Women and Surrealism

Women and Surrealism is a compilation of sixteen essays that revisit the Surrealist movement through the lens of feminism. The contradictions that Oppenheim felt both as an artist and as muse are illuminated in Gwen Raaberg’s essay “The Problematics of Women and Surrealism,” revealing the patriarchy inherent not only in bourgeois culture but in the avant-garde. “Surrealism and Misogyny” by Rudolf Kuenzli and “Seeing the Surrealist Woman: We are a Problem” by Mary Ann Caws give insight into the Surrealist objectification of women and the use of their bodies as muses. Analysis of Oppenheim’s poetry, art and position as muse in Renée Riese Hubert’s essay, “From Déjeuner en fourrure to Caroline: Meret Oppenheim’s Chronical of Surrealism,” offers an understanding of the contradictions Oppenheim faced in her dual role as artist and as muse.

Joanna Isaak’s book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* examines the theme of laughter in feminist contemporary art. Isaak’s analysis begins with Roland Barthes’s theory that the “death of the author” becomes a catalyst to level the playing field for women.¹ Once art was freed from the authority of authorship and its inherent patriarchy, Isaak contends that women began dismantling “the prison house of language” through play and laughter.² Isaak uses theory from Barthes, Kristeva’s notion of laughter as libidinal license, and Freud’s essays on narcissism and pleasure to show that women possess the most radical humor.³ Isaak argues that laughter is a “metaphor for transformation and thinking about cultural change,” offering inquiry into feminism and laughter using psychoanalytic theory.


² Ibid., 2.
³ Ibid., 3.
Abstract

Meret Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936) and *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen* (1936) are most often analyzed through the lens of feminism, which omits the psychoanalytic aspects of humor. This research studies the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung as applied to Oppenheim’s life and work from the perspective of feminism to form an analysis of how humor was used as a defense mechanism. This paper argues that the use of humor evidences the contradictions and challenges Oppenheim faced as an artist and as muse.

During Oppenheim’s early years in Paris, her relationship with the predominantly male circle of Surrealists was as lover or muse, posing nude for artist Man Ray. Oppenheim’s interviews reveal her despair over being a woman in a patriarchal society. Study of her biography, poetry and letters gives insight into the growing conflict she felt as an artist. The cultural milieu which surrounded Oppenheim, when viewed through the lens of feminism, exposes a society that marginalized and objectified women. Freudian theories of wit and humor affirm the use of humor as a mechanism to cope with anger. The Jungian theory of archetypes and the concept of play, which Oppenheim studied, help to explain how her belief system and acted, as will be argued, as another basis for her conflict and anger.

Oppenheim’s biography affirms her challenge as a female Surrealist artist. Psychoanalytic theories reveal unconscious motivations for the use of humor in Oppenheim’s two objects, Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936) and *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen* (1936). Feminist analysis of Oppenheim’s objects in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory and biographical information evidence that humor as an unconscious defense mechanism was used in their creation.
Outline

I. Sublimation of Humor in the Art of Meret Oppenheim

II. Introduction and Thesis

A. Motivation for Topic Selection

1. Many critics have analyzed Meret Oppenheim’s early objects through the lens of feminism, but little has been written about the significance of humor in her work.

B. Main Objectives of Research

1. To establish that the use of humor in Oppenheim’s work reveals the conflict and challenges she faced as a female artist within the male dominated movement of Surrealism.

C. Organizational overview of paper

1. To analyze each of Oppenheim’s objects, *Object* (1936) and *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen* (1936) through the lenses of biography, psychoanalytic theory and feminism and to examine other critical texts to reveal the omission of the discussion of humor in conjunction with these objects.

   a. Establishing the biographical and cultural context will reveal conflict and challenge as a woman in the 1930s.

   b. Freud’s psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious give insight into the use of humor displacement as a mechanism to cope with pain. Carl Jung’s theory of creation and play, as well as his theories studied by Oppenheim, also give insight into the humor veiled in *Object* (1936) and *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen* (1936).

   c. Review and analysis of feminist literature leads to the conclusion that humor was used in Oppenheim’s two objects as a defense mechanism to cope with the patriarchal framework of Surrealism.

   d. Thesis Statement: This paper argues that the use of humor evidences the contradictions and challenges Oppenheim faced as an artist and as muse.
III. Review of Literature

A. Biographies, interviews and analysis of Oppenheim’s life and work.

1. *Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, Meret Oppenheim: Mirrors of the Mind, and Meret Oppenheim: Retrospective* are helpful in discerning the artist’s state of mind when she produced *Object* and *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen*.

2. Secondary analyses such as those included in *Women and Surrealism* also aid in concluding how the atmosphere surrounding Oppenheim would incite her anger and despair at the patriarchal society in which she lived.

3. *Meret Oppenheim: Book of Ideas* provides primary sourcing of Oppenheim’s conscious recognition of humor in art and the author’s personal relationship with Oppenheim integral in understanding her insecurity and poetry.

4. Meret Oppenheim’s poetry gives insight into her philosophy and the genesis of her creative thought, particularly in the poem *Sansibar*, in which she mentions the word “fur” three years before making *Object*.

B. Psychoanalytic Theory

1. Sigmund Freud’s analysis of humor, “The Unconscious as the Psychic Stage of Wit Work,” and “Humor,” in the *Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* substantiate the use of humor as a defense or coping mechanism.

2. Carl Jung’s theories of creation and play, as well as that of archetypes in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* and the “Androgyny Interview” highlight Oppenheim’s belief system.

C. Feminist Literature

1. Interviews of Oppenheim reveal a feminist perspective.

2. *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, a contemporary of Oppenheim, provides contextual feminist influence and examination of Xavière Gauthier’s *Surréalisme et Sexualité* contributes additional feminist critique of Surrealism.
3. *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* evaluates Andre Breton’s writing from a feminist point of view and offers an understanding of his influence and power over Oppenheim.


IV. Analysis

A. Scope of Analysis: Examining two works of art, *Object* and *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen*, using research of Oppenheim’s early years in Paris until the onset of her depression combined with study of psychoanalytic theories of humor and those she studied viewed through the lens of feminism. This analysis also includes critical reception of Oppenheim’s objects and other scholarly evaluations.

B. *Object*, (1936)

1. Methodology used for Analysis
   
   a. Biographical and cultural examination is used to discern Oppenheim’s motivation for independence, her move to Paris and subsequent inclusion within the circle of Surrealists as muse.

   b. Critical Reception and Review

   c. Psychoanalytic analysis and research into the use of humor as a coping mechanism.

   d. Feminist analysis of ramifications of Oppenheim as an artist in the 1930s.

C. *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen* (1936)

1. Methodology used for Analysis

13
a. Biographical and Cultural examination are used to discern Oppenheim’s motivation for independence, her move to Paris and subsequent inclusion within the circle of Surrealists as muse.

b. Critical Reception and Review

c. Psychoanalytic analysis and research into the use of humor as a coping mechanism.

d. Feminist analysis of ramifications of Oppenheim as an artist in the 1930s.

V. Results and Discussion

A. Outline of what was found: Oppenheim’s use of humor in the two objects was a coping mechanism used to navigate the conflict she felt during 1936.

B. Explanation of how results contribute to art historical studies: Critics have not focused on the importance of humor in her work and its deeper significance.

VI. Conclusion

A. Summary of objectives and approach taken in the paper: The biographical, psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives were used to determine the purpose humor served in Oppenheim’s objects.

B. Reword thesis and summary of major findings of the paper: Oppenheim unconsciously used humor as a defense mechanism to cope with the patriarchal society that surrounded her and the difficulty reconciling her two roles, as muse and as artist.

C. Implications of the conclusions made in the paper: Oppenheim used humor to cope with her anger and resentment as a woman in an unequal society.

D. Outline of the next steps for future research in topic: To study how other women have used humor to cope with inequality.
Bibliography


Watz, Anna; “Angela Carter and Xavière Gauthier's Surréalisme et Sexualité,” Contemporary Women's Writing, Volume 4, Issue 2, 1 July 2010, Pages 114–133.
Statement of Intent

Upon completion of a master’s degree in Art history at Academy of Art University, I would like to continue my research in a doctoral program to expand my knowledge of philosophy and psychoanalytic theory as mechanisms to understand the women artists of Surrealism. My hope is that my final thesis, “The Sublimation of Humor in the Work of Meret Oppenheim: a defense mechanism,” will be nuanced, original and of the caliber required to obtain admission into a doctoral program.
Final Paper

The Sublimation of Humor in the Work of Meret Oppenheim:

a defense mechanism

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AHS 634 OL1 Dada and Surrealism

Professor Anna Glaze

May 24, 2017
Abstract

Analysis of Meret Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936) and *Ma gouvernante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen* (1936), is most often done through the lens of feminism and omits the psychoanalytic aspects of humor. This research studies the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung as applied to Oppenheim’s life and work and the through the lens of feminism to form an analysis of how humor was used as a defense mechanism. This paper argues that the use of humor evidences the contradictions and challenges Oppenheim faced as an artist and as muse.

During Oppenheim’s early years in Paris her relationship with the predominately male circle of Surrealists was as lover or muse, posing nude for artist Man Ray. Oppenheim’s interviews reveal her despair over being a woman in a patriarchal society. Study of her biography and letters give insight as to the growing conflict she felt as an artist. The cultural milieu which surrounded Oppenheim, when viewed with the lens of feminism, exposes a society that marginalized and objectified women. Freudian theories of wit and humor affirm the use of humor as a mechanism to cope with anger. The Jungian theory of archetypes and the concept of play, which Oppenheim studied, can help explain how her belief system and acted, as will be argued, as another basis for her conflict and anger.

Oppenheim’s biography affirms her challenge as a woman Surrealist artist. Psychoanalytic theories reveal unconscious motivations for the use of humor in Oppenheim’s two objects, Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936) and *Ma gouvernante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen* (1936). Feminist analysis of Oppenheim’s objects in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory and biographical information evidence that humor as an unconscious defense mechanism was used in their creation.
Meret Oppenheim is best known for her Surrealist objects and for modeling in the nude for Man Ray. Oppenheim’s diverse roles as both artist and muse created an inner conflict that was expressed through her artwork. Analysis of Meret Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936) and *Magouvrante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen* (1936) is most often done through the lens of feminism and omits the psychoanalytic aspects of humor (figs. 1 and 2). This research studies the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung in relation to Oppenheim’s life and work through the lens of feminism to form an analysis of how she utilized humor as a defense mechanism. This paper argues that the use of humor evidences the contradictions and challenges Oppenheim faced as both artist and muse.

Meret Oppenheim’s use of humor in her two works, *Object* and *My Nurse*, was an unconscious defense mechanism used to release the pain she felt as a female artist and muse during the Surrealist movement of 1930s Paris. Oppenheim used humor as a coping mechanism as validated by Freudian theory. The anxiety of existing as a woman within a patriarchy is substantiated by biographical information and a study of the cultural milieu of the 1930s. Examination of her two works, *Object* and *My Nurse*, also affirms the conflict Oppenheim felt as an artist juxtaposed with her role as muse. Observations made through the lens of feminism combined with psychoanalytic theories validate an understanding of humor as a means of releasing anger in these works.

Many critics have analyzed Meret Oppenheim’s early objects through the lens of
feminism, but little has been written about the significance of humor in her work. The use of humor in a work of art, whether conscious or unconscious, could be considered a mechanism for coping with the frustration and pain derived from objectification and marginalization as a female artist and merits further study. Furthermore, understanding the motivations for the use of humor in Oppenheim’s work as a psychological defense mechanism reveals the conflict and challenges she faced as a female artist within the male-dominated movement of Surrealism.

Oppenheim’s objects, *Object* and *My Nurse*, analyzed from the perspective of biography, psychoanalytic theory, and feminism and examined in relation to other critical texts, reveal the omission of the discussion of humor in conjunction with these objects. Establishing the biographical and cultural context reveals conflicts and challenges Oppenheim faced as a woman in the 1930s. Freud’s psychoanalytic theories of wit and humor give insight into the use of humor displacement as a mechanism to cope with pain. Carl Jung’s theory of creation and play, as well as his theories of archetypes, which were studied by Oppenheim, also give insight into the humor veiled in *Object* and *My Nurse*. Review and analysis of feminist literature provokes a conclusion that humor was used in Oppenheim’s two objects as a defense mechanism to cope within the patriarchal framework of Surrealism.

Biographies, interviews and analysis of Oppenheim’s life and work included in the show catalogs *Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom*,4 *Meret Oppenheim: Mirrors of the Mind*,5 and *Meret Oppenheim: Retrospective*6 are helpful in discerning the artist’s state of mind.

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when she produced *Object* and *Ma gouvernante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen*. Secondary analyses such as *Surrealism and Women*\(^7\) and Robert Belton’s *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*\(^8\) also aid in understanding how the atmosphere surrounding Oppenheim instigated her anger and despair at the patriarchy of the Surrealist movement.

Sigmund Freud’s analyses of humor, “The Unconscious as the Psychic Stage of Wit Work,” and “Humor,” in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*,\(^9\) substantiate the use of humor as a defense or coping mechanism. Carl Jung’s theories of creation and play, as well as that of archetypes, in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*\(^10\) and the “Androgyny Interview,”\(^11\) highlight Oppenheim’s understanding of psychoanalytic texts and their influence on her work. Interviews with Oppenheim reveal a predisposition for feminist values and give insight into her despair over the inequality of women. *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* evaluates André Breton’s writing from a feminist point of view, and lends an understanding of his influence and power over Oppenheim.\(^12\) Feminist reviews of humor in art by Joann Isaak, in her


book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, give insight into the purpose of humor as a feminist mechanism.\(^{13}\) Though feminist analysis of Oppenheim’s work is crucial to the understanding of her challenges as a female artist, previous scholarship fails to analyze the psychoanalytic importance of humor in her work.

**Oppenheim’s Early Years**

By researching Oppenheim’s biography, critical information is revealed that shows her penchant for freedom and rebellion highlighting her tendency for feminist values. Oppenheim’s frustration at the inequality of women is substantiated by familial influence and her strong personality.

Born in 1913, Oppenheim grew up in Switzerland and was profoundly influenced by her mother and grandmother, a suffragette, who supported and encouraged her to grow into an independent, strong woman.\(^{14}\) While living at her grandmother’s home in Carona, Switzerland, Oppenheim met diverse intellectual artists such as Dadaist Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, as well as writer Hermann Hesse.\(^{15}\) As the daughter of a Swiss physician, Oppenheim came into contact with the theories of Carl Jung, which would come to influence her heavily. At the age of fifteen, Oppenheim began to write down her dreams and felt that it was “artists who do society’s dreaming.”\(^{16}\) Later in life, Oppenheim revealed that during rough times dreams acted as her counsel.\(^{17}\) Poetry and painting held much more fascination for Oppenheim than school, and from


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 10.


\(^{17}\) Oppenheim, “Interview by Alain Jouffery,” in *Meret Oppenheim: Mirrors of the Mind*, 11.
an early age she exhibited a black sense of humor within her work which was incited by the constraints of a patriarchal society that oppressed women who desired freedom. In an interview, Oppenheim stated, “At age 17, I understood that women have always been a commodity since the dawn of time, that they were kept dependent on men (in the patriarchal family), who refused them material means in order to force them into marriage, and that their only value was their virginity, I was scandalized.” In 1932, at the age of 18, Oppenheim moved to Paris to pursue an artist’s life. Oppenheim’s desire to be free led her to Paris and to the Surrealists, whose ideology was based in rebellion against societal norms.

Influence and Constraints: Paris, Surrealism, patriarchy

By 1933, Oppenheim was fully entrenched in the avant-garde circle of the Surrealists, who admired her beauty, independence, intelligence and sophistication. Alberto Giacometti and Hans Arp included Oppenheim’s work in exhibitions, she became Max Ernst’s lover, and she posed nude for Man Ray. As a result of her roles as a lover and a model, the perception of Oppenheim as muse somewhat subsumed her reputation as an artist. The conflict that Oppenheim felt was instigated by Breton and the male-dominated movement of Surrealism that viewed women not as independent and active artists, but as erotic source of unconscious desire.

The dichotomies inherent to the contradictory situation of being artist and muse caused Oppenheim a great deal of conflict and

18 Oppenheim, “Interview by Alain Jouffery,” 15.
19 Ibid., 12.
21 Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 17.
Oppenheim desired to live a life of freedom, reacting against the constraints of the bourgeoisie, and her primary desire was to be accepted and validated for the way she chose to live.\(^{24}\) Oppenheim’s anti-establishment attitude agreed with what Breton laid out in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism*, in which he called for “complete nonconformism,” and although women were included in Surrealism they were not regarded as equals.\(^{25}\) The continued subjugation of women perpetuated bourgeois ideals and undermined Breton’s *Manifesto*. The paradox of a movement which hoped to incite change against bourgeois traditional values yet included women as a source of desire was at conflict with Oppenheim’s own value system. Oppenheim’s rebellion placed her within the circle of the male Surrealists who were much older and who regarded her as *femme-enfant* and muse rather than artist.\(^{26}\) As Oppenheim developed as an artist, she realized that her relationship with Max Ernst was preventing her from developing her own work, and she ended their affair.\(^{27}\) The disconnection of being a creator and existing under the shadow of an older, established artist would have been cause for psychological stress.

The psychological stress Oppenheim experienced can be attributed to the cultural misogyny of Paris in the 1930s. Oppenheim chose to live a life without bearing children, purposely freeing herself from bourgeois societal norms.\(^{28}\) In 1934, Dr. Robert Teutsch from the


\(^{27}\) Simon Baur, “Journalist Ask Me About the Relationship’s with A, B and C, etc.: Meret Oppenheim and her Friends,” *in Meret Oppenheim: Mirrors of the Mind*, 69.

Parisian medical society published a compilation of opinions about women from a wide range of social commentators, journalists, and doctors in *Le Féminisme*, attempting to understand the ramifications of feminism on French morality and society. This group of opinions has been widely cited and criticized by contemporary scholars as indicative of the 1930s bourgeois attitudes toward feminism. Teutsch felt that women who did not adhere to traditional values and live as dutiful wives and mothers should be punished and imprisoned to save society from their immorality. Teutsch paints non-conforming women as insane or criminal. Bourgeois notions of female madness were similar to the Surrealist valorization of hysteria, the mentally unstable title character of Breton’s novel *Nadja* being a prime example. Surrealist artists’ representations of hysteria are exclusively female, and only further the common bourgeois notions of women. Ernst, Oppenheim’s lover, had also taken advantage of the perception of hysteria with his works *La Femme 100 têtes* by referring to the female hysteric’s penchant for non-reproductive sex.

The Surrealist notions of madness and insanity as applied to the concept of female hysteria marginalized the female Surrealist artists. Although the medical establishment and Surrealists would have been polar opposites they both perpetuated very similar denigrating views about women.

Belton aptly critiques the male Surrealists in his book *Beribboned Bomb*, arguing that

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bataille-lacan-and-the.


32 Ibid., 247.
Surrealism was indifferent toward women’s equality, refusing to mention women’s rights within Surrealist literature. Oppenheim left for Paris desiring freedom, joining the Surrealists for their promise of retaliation against bourgeois societal norms, but the inherent cultural patriarchy marginalized her and she received no support from male Surrealists. Perhaps Oppenheim’s role as muse undermined respect for her as an artist; however, other women Surrealist artists who exhibited with their male peers also failed to be esteemed in Surrealist publications. Female artists were included in Surrealist exhibitions merely for producing shock value and were regarded with ambivalence and as objects of curiosity for their perceived connection with hysteria. The contradiction of Surrealist ideology promoting freedom from the constraints of the moral code of the bourgeoisie while continuing to marginalize women would have caused conflicting emotional pain for Oppenheim.

Oppenheim’s Object: A furry icon

In 1936, Oppenheim created and exhibited Object, the work for which she is best known. (fig. 1) Oppenheim struggled with the fame and attention Object garnered when it was purchased by Alfred Barr, Jr. for the Museum of Modern Art. Rather than capitalizing on the popularity of Object, Oppenheim continued to work according to her own inner directive. This choice for freedom of expression, however, came at a financial cost. After this period of initial recognition of her work, Oppenheim fell into a long depression which she said was caused by “the psychological problem of being a woman.” Oppenheim’s later claim of the stress and

33 Ibid., 249.
34 Ibid., 255.
35 Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 40.
36 Ibid., 42.
ensuing depression attests to the disconnection she would have felt working as an artist and as a muse.

Oppenheim was inspired to create Object during a chance encounter at a café. It began with a casual discussion: Pablo Picasso remarked upon the fur-covered bracelet Oppenheim was wearing, and the ensuing banter resulted in laughter at the irony that they could cover anything in fur.³⁸ Later, at the request of André Breton to make an object for an upcoming exhibition, Oppenheim purchased a teacup, saucer, and spoon at a local store and covered them in gazelle fur.³⁹ As a result of her chance encounter with Picasso, characterized by frivolity and fun, Oppenheim’s creation of a fur-covered teacup, saucer, and spoon became one of the most famous of all Surrealist objects.⁴⁰ Breton renamed Oppenheim’s Object, Le déjeuner en fourrure, (Object, The Luncheon in Fur) as a reference to Manet’s Luncheon On the Grass, purposefully implicating fetishism and sexual content that were not consciously meant by the artist.⁴¹ When asked about Breton changing the name of her work, she commented, “the word-games of critics, the power struggles of men! Part of its scandalous appeal was not invented by me. It was a fluke.”⁴² By renaming Object, Breton asserted his power over Oppenheim and changed the meaning of her work. Breton’s metaphorical associations subsumed the literal aspects of Oppenheim’s creation and because of this subjugation this paper uses the title Object in

³⁸ Oppenheim, “Interview by Alain Jouffery,” 15.
³⁹ Ibid., 15.
⁴¹ Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 39.
⁴² Belton, “Androgyny: Interview with Meret Oppenheim,” 68.
deference to Oppenheim’s original intent. Would Object have been famous if it hadn’t been for Breton’s attention and redirection of its purpose? A similar question, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” in an essay written by Linda Nochlin, argues that artist and art do not live in a vacuum but are influenced by the social institutions and cultural milieu which surround them. Breton’s fetishizing of Object into Le déjeuner en fourrure must be reversed and reanalyzed with the lens of feminism.

Art historians, critics and scholars predominately focus on the fetishism and erotic aspects of Object by interpreting the concave fur-lined cup as vaginal and the fur-covered spoon as phallic, thus reinforcing Breton’s exploitation of Oppenheim’s work. The insinuation of eroticism, as proposed by Breton’s title, consumes most of the discussion regarding Object, whereas humor as a coping mechanism for Oppenheim is not addressed. In his book Beribboned Bomb, Robert Belton argues convincingly that male Surrealists thought of women in terms of “otherness” as in Breton’s Nadja, in which the title character’s madness is a central theme. Furthermore, Belton’s argument that there is no way to be objective about the context of a woman living as a Surrealist artist highlights the difficulty of interpreting Oppenheim’s work. Maureen Sherlock argues in her essay “Mistaken Identities: Meret Oppenheim” that Oppenheim’s conflict began with Object and My Nurse due to both men and women analyzing


45 Belton, The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist, 255.

46 Ibid., 256.
them with the same phallocentric lens.\footnote{Maureen P. Sherlock, “Mistaken Identities: Meret Oppenheim,” in \textit{The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture}, ed. Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 282.} The overriding critical analysis of \textit{Object} is from a male perspective, fetishized and sexualized and without mention of humor. The paradox of women understanding her work through a male lens would have isolated Oppenheim. The fame Oppenheim achieved due to the male understanding of \textit{Object} would have felt inauthentic and false.

Psychoanalytic theory: Carl Jung and Oppenheim

A longtime student of Carl Jung’s theories, Oppenheim would have been aware of Jung’s claim that “the creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect, but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the object it loves.”\footnote{Jung, \textit{The Collected Works of C. G. Jung}, vol. 6, 123.} Oppenheim was creating art in her own playful and instinctual way. Oppenheim, rather than being concerned with the psychological aspects of her creation, was creating objects with freedom, openness and a sense of fun.\footnote{Curiger, \textit{Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom}, 34.} Oppenheim also believed in the androgy nous nature of Jung’s theory of animus/anima and the equality it offers.\footnote{Christian Walda, “The Utopia of the Androgyne: Meret Oppenheim’s Aesthetic Metaphysics,” in \textit{Meret Oppenheim: Mirrors of the Mind}, ed. Simon Baur, Belinda Gardner, Christian Walda and Thomas Levy (Berlin: Kerber Verlag, 2014), 47.} The anima and animus, Jung taught, were the primary archetypes of the collective unconscious which represent the male and female aspects inside each human.\footnote{Jung, \textit{The Collected Works of C. G. Jung}, vol. 9, Pt. 1, 284.} Oppenheim’s \textit{Object} is androgy nous, imbued with both male and female qualities. While the Surrealists’ conception of the unconscious was founded in Freudian repression, Oppenheim adhered to the Jungian concept that her creations were borne out of the
collective unconscious, not intellect.\textsuperscript{52} Since Oppenheim relinquished her creation to the unconscious, she created without the burden of having to micro-analyze her work. Revealing her own sense of humor, Oppenheim said, “I made the teacup to amuse myself, not to shock the bourgeoisie. It was a joke. In the same year, I made an object which I think is just as important: \textit{Ma gouvernante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen}.”\textsuperscript{53} Beyond Surrealist ideologies, Oppenheim was influenced by Dadaists like Ball and Hennings, and the Jungian concept of play can be considered foundational aspects of these two works. The Dada influence of Ball is best illuminated in his \textit{Dada Fragments}, in which he writes of the importance of the absurd, laughter, and revolution as the basis of an art which rejects the status quo.\textsuperscript{54} Ball’s ideology instigated the theory of conceptual over mastery, which is evidenced in the creation of the art objects like Marcel Duchamp’s \textit{Fountain}.\textsuperscript{55} The Jungian concept of play argues that creation comes from laughter and fun rather than seriousness.\textsuperscript{56} These Dada and Jungian concepts, which greatly influenced Oppenheim, also contradicted the seriousness of the Surrealists and their Freudian ideologies. The Surrealists used Freudian theory to tap into the unconscious mind for ego driven self-actualization whereas the Dadaists strove to negate meaning and like the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious erase the self. The contradictions of Dadaism and Surrealism and Jung and Freud would have possibly ignited Oppenheim’s own contradictions. The creation of the fur

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Walda, “The Utopia of the Androgyne: Meret Oppenheim’s Aesthetic Metaphysics,” 54.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Mifflin, “An Interview with Meret Oppenheim,” 30.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Jung, \textit{The Collected Works of C. G. Jung}, vol. 6, 122.
\end{itemize}
cup was mischievous and fun, and perhaps by anchoring her work in play Oppenheim subverted the chauvinism of the male Surrealists who would not take her seriously as an artist.

Oppenheim’s My Nurse: a subversive platter

Oppenheim’s object My Nurse consists of two white heeled pumps upturned on a silver platter, bound in twine with two frills capping the heels, evocative of those used on a meat platter. Oppenheim noted that the decorations were “like ones used to decorated geese or lamb,” and that what it “invokes in me is the association of thighs squeezed together in pleasure and of my nursemaid, dressed in white who exuded a sensuality of which I was unconsciously aware.”

Sherlock feels that Oppenheim relinquished her own meaning for that of the dominant male view because she may have thought no one would listen anyway. Rene Hubert’s analysis that the frills and string evoke “cannibalization and feminization” are valid, but there is also an underlying humor in My Nurse. The shoes, trussed up and tied, belonged to Max Ernst’s wife, Marie-Berthe Aurenche, who later destroyed My Nurse after seeing it in an exhibition.

Oppenheim later recalled in an interview that Aurenche had destroyed her artwork out of jealousy over Oppenheim’s tumultuous affair with Ernst. Poking fun at her lover’s wife in an intentional yet subversive way reveals the use of black humor by Oppenheim. Conscious use of humor could reveal the pain at being marginalized as a mistress without the validity of being known as Ernst’s wife. Alternately, the Freudian theory of the use of wit to rebel against authority could be implied because of the powerlessness that Oppenheim may have felt as a

59 Dick, “You Shall Go to the Ball: Meret Oppenheim,” 61.
60 Oppenheim, “Interview by Alain Jouffery,” 18.
woman artist dominated by the male gaze.  

Perhaps Oppenheim felt both she and Aurenche were bound and handed over on a silver platter to Ernst.

**Freudian Notions of Humor in Oppenheim’s Objects**

While Oppenheim was not as familiar with Freud’s work as she was with Jung’s, Freud’s theory of wit and humor nonetheless offer another lens through which to analyze the use of humor in her work. The foundation of Surrealist ideology was largely based on Freud’s psychoanalytic theories; these ideas are thus important in the critical analysis of all Surrealist art. The purpose of humor in Oppenheim’s *Object* and *My Nurse* can be explained by Freud’s theories. Oppenheim would have been influenced by the Surrealist attachment to Freudian theory due to her relationships with the leaders of Surrealist thought. The Surrealists were enamored with Freud’s concept of the unconscious and to release creativity not bound by the intellect.  

Freud contends that dreams act as a mechanism to guard against pain, and that wit serves the purpose of releasing pleasure. Oppenheim’s intellectual analysis of her dreams intersects with the use of wit in her artwork to perhaps guard against the pain of marginalization. Oppenheim’s use of humor as a possible tool to displace pain is evidenced by Freud’s determination that displacement of humor, used as a defense mechanism, acts as taskmaster to help guard against pain and to transform the pain into pleasure. Freud argued that humor liberated pleasure from sources of repression. Repression, Freud concludes, is a “stage intermediate between the

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63 Freud, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, 761.

64 Ibid., 801-802.

65 Ibid., 723.
defense reflex and condemnation.”66 Was humor used to liberate Oppenheim from the repressed anger she felt? Humor may have given Oppenheim the opportunity to release the contradiction of her belief in equality while living in an unequal world.

According to Oppenheim, her creative ideas came from her unconscious.67 Critics address a variety of ideas and themes from different viewpoints when discussing Object and My Nurse, but the use of humor as a defense mechanism has been omitted. Oppenheim’s need for a defense mechanism was instigated by her fierce independence of character in a patriarchal society. Humor acted as a psychic defense against the ramifications of marginalization and objectification.

Research into Oppenheim’s biography and the cultural milieu that surrounded her reveals that her strong, independent personality and the anti-feminist culture of the 1930s framed her as a muse rather than an artist. Oppenheim’s interviews bring to light her conflicted emotions and her anger at the inequality she experienced.

Critical analyses of Oppenheim’s Object and My Nurse are predisposed to interpret them based on their sexualized meaning given by the patriarchy of Surrealism, which are both limiting and limited. Not only did Oppenheim have influence from the world of Dada, but she also adhered to a different psychoanalytic framework than the Surrealists, which provided her with an alternative narrative for her work. Oppenheim was creating out of rebellion and pursuing freedom before she was shut down by misogyny. Prevailing attitudes towards women who did not assume traditional roles portraying them as insane or criminal, undermined Oppenheim’s freedom. Historians and critics analyze Oppenheim’s work with Breton’s narrative overriding

66 Ibid., 757.
any initial intention. Most of the feminist views of her work are based on the male descriptors which renders them invalid. Other feminist critiques of Surrealism expose the contradictions between their ideology of freedom and their actual practice of chauvinism. Humor was perhaps the only tool with which Oppenheim could defend her sanity while staying ensconced in the Surrealist circle of men. Oppenheim believed that men and women are equal, proclaiming that “Women have never been accepted in spirit by men, but we all have the same brains, principle and love. Spirituality is the only real value in the world and it has no sex.” Study of Freud’s theories of wit and humor as a mechanism for releasing pain substantiates that Oppenheim’s use of humor in Object and My Nurse could have served as a defense mechanism and offered her psychological relief. Oppenheim may have unconsciously used humor as a defense mechanism to cope with the patriarchal society that surrounded her and the difficulty of reconciling her two roles as muse and artist.

Artists, scholars and historians continue to study early twentieth-century avant-garde movements considering new feminist dialogue and insight. Oppenheim’s work deserves further study particularly through the lens of humor because it offers a depth of understanding which compliments feminist art history.

Epilogue

The study of the psychoanalytic aspect of humor as it is applied to the work of female artists provides another layer of comprehension. Oppenheim’s use of humor to defend against marginalization can be associated with other female artists who have used humor in their work either as a defense mechanism or as a tool for rebellion. Although, these female artists use

68 Mifflin, “An Interview with Meret Oppenheim,” 32.
diverse mediums and different approaches, perhaps by linking Oppenheim to these other female artists we can recognize a possible paradigm shift.

Artist Barbara Kruger uses satirical humor in her work to confront the male gaze in works like *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, which illuminates the victimization of women (fig. 3). As a humorous parody of Man Ray’s *Le Violon d'Ingres* (*The Violin of Ingres*), Kathy Grove’s *The Other Series (After Man Ray)*, removes the image of model Kiki de Montparnasse, subverting the meaning and seemingly implying that Ray’s fame was carried on a woman’s back. Furthermore, by erasing Montparnasse from the image, Grove could have also intended to highlight the negative aspects of the objectification of women. To confront her battle with cancer, Hannah Wilke created a self-portrait, *June 15, 1992/January 30, 1992: #1 from INTRA-VENUS*, which has been analyzed by critics using the Freudian theory of humor, associating her clowning with plastic flowers as an example of humor liberating and elevating the trauma of reality (fig. 4).69 *Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party*, a life-size banquet table with place settings representing major women figures throughout world history, recognizes the absence of women within the discourse of art history (fig. 5). Chicago’s *Dinner Party* is also a reflection of how these institutions have changed since early twentieth century avant-garde movements, as it is on permanent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Chicago uses humor to politicize the importance of the institutional recognition of women.

New vocabulary and descriptions must be sought out to explain Oppenheim’s work and those of other female artists. Connecting the use of humor as a feminist mechanism by women artists gives new insight to art historical methods. The study of humor as a mechanism to release pain and rebel against the injustice of inequality could reveal new tools for critical interpretation.

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69 Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, 223.
Humor, whether satire or parody, conscious or unconscious, offers an important tool for artists working against and subverting many of the patriarchal and institutional structures that women still face in the art world and beyond.
Illustrations

Figure 1
Meret Oppenheim
*Object*
1936
Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon
Modern Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 2
Meret Oppenheim

1936/1967
Metal plate, shoes, string, paper
Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Figure 3
Barbara Kruger
*Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*
1981
Photograph and type on paperboard
Collection: Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland
Figure 4
Hannah Wilke
*June 15, 1992/January 30, 1992, #1 from INTRA-VENUS” Series*
1992-93
Performalist self-portrait with Donald Goddard chromogenic supergloss prints with overlaminate
Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York
Figure 5
Judy Chicago
_Dinner Party_
1974-1979
Ceramic, Porcelain, and Textiles
Brooklyn Museum of Art
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