

Meret Oppenheim Femme Fatale Is an Insult

In 1975, Meret Oppenheim's small painting *Würgeengel*, or *Angel of Death*, was included in a sprawling exhibition organized by famous curator Harald Szeemann. She had painted it over 40 years earlier, when she was only 16 years old. The only problem now was that the curator had totally misunderstood her artwork—and placed it in a sexist context in the show. Rather than meekly accept this, Oppenheim writes Szeemann a deeply personal letter. Across five pages, she details the challenges she faced as a young woman who didn't want children and was trying to make it as an artist in a heavily male sphere. Writing at age 63, Oppenheim speaks to burgeoning feminist ideals after decades of fighting back against sexist stereotypes.

In this episode of *Recording Artists: Intimate Addresses*, you'll hear Oppenheim's little-told story: an artist best known for lining a teacup in fur but who never stopped innovating, who socialized with the Surrealists as a teenager and kept a pistol in her studio to fight Nazis, and who took up the feminist cause towards the end of her career. Anna Deavere Smith reads the letter. Curator Bice Curiger, Oppenheim's biographer, shares stories of Oppenheim's life while artist Barbara T. Smith provides insight into the challenges facing women artists, particularly in the mid-20th century.

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Transcript

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Anna Deavere Smith: Only now can I allow myself to say: my work interested me the most. Only now. For you can imagine how they would have laughed in my face if I had dared to say that when I was a beautiful young girl!

Tess Taylor: What do you do when your work has been misinterpreted? When *you've* been misunderstood? How would you speak truth to power and reclaim your story?

Welcome to Season 2 of *Recording Artists*, a Getty podcast dedicated to exploring art and artists through its archives. I'm your host, poet Tess Taylor. In this season, called

Intimate Addresses, each episode examines one letter by one artist, looking deeply at what it means to make a life in art. Anna Deavere Smith performs each letter as we travel the globe and the twentieth century. You listen as artists collaborate, fight for justice, ask for money, work through pain, and affirm their resilience. What emerges is a sweeping panorama of artists in dialog with one another, and six distinct portraits in creativity.

Today's episode features Meret Oppenheim, a brilliant polymath who rose to early fame in the Paris of the 1930s among a circle of surrealists, including Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. Oppenheim is often remembered for one famous object—a fur covered teacup—which she made when she was only 23.

But today's letter is from four decades after that. It's 1975, and Oppenheim is 63 years old. She's been living in Switzerland for nearly forty years. She's been making art steadily, despite receiving far less recognition than her male peers. Now, with the rise of the feminist movement, she's getting international retrospectives and winning important awards. Influential curator Harald Szeemann has just included a piece of hers in a sprawling show in Bern, the town where both she and Szeemann are living. Yet when it opens, Oppenheim is dismayed: Szeemann has radically misunderstood her work. She decides to tell him so. From the villa inherited from her grandparents in Carona, Switzerland, Oppenheim sends Szeemann a five-page letter, written in firm sloping hand.

Here's Anna Deavere Smith reading the letter:

Deavere Smith:

Carona, July 6, 1975

Dear Harry,

Your exhibition is terrific. I will take another look at it at the beginning of August and in the meantime will study the catalogue in detail.

My Würgeengel is also very honored to be able to participate. It is because of it that I am writing to you.

Even though it is also not displeasing to me that you write explicitly that it is an "ex voto against having children," I do not agree that it is hanging in the "Femme Fatale" section. That is a big misunderstanding. We should have talked about it more.

A "femme fatale" is a woman who is totally oriented to men. Her greatest and only interest is to keep men in a relationship of dependence and "to play with them," as men would put it. This is something that never interested me at all. (For me it was very simple: if I was no longer in love, I left, and the other person was sad for some longer or shorter period of time. If it was the other party who left me first, it was I who was sad for some period.)

I want to tell you very precisely how it was with "not wanting to have children." When I was between sixteen and seventeen and the first young men became interested in me, I learned a lot very quickly. First, it was made clear to me that there cannot be any friendship between men and women. When I attempted to defend a friendship (without sleeping together), I was only ridiculed.

In addition, attempts were made all around to persuade me of the inferiority of women. When I said I wanted to be a painter, they advised me, it's better for you to

learn to wash dishes—no woman has ever done anything. They also told me that there are two kinds of women: mothers and hetaerae. They also told me: any woman can be bought. (The only person who says such a thing is himself for sale, but I didn't know that yet.) They also quoted Nietzsche: everything about women is a riddle, and everything about women has a solution: pregnancy.

I really do not know what men are thinking when they spout such rubbish. But all of it had one result: I was deeply hurt.

It's a wonder that after all that I did not hate men. I said to my mother: I never want to have children. She answered: don't say that, you'll regret it someday. I thought, maybe she's right. But I have never regretted it.

At that time I also decided only to do what I feel to be right and never again to worry about "moral laws" (as compiled by men). To my good fortune, I also soon met smarter men who thought more independently, hence in a more modern way and not in categories inherited from past centuries.

The "femme fatale" belongs in one of these categories. She is the product of male fantasy (as witches once were). There are women who fit such projections better than others. Some even like this role. But I hope that after what I have said to you now you will understand that for me the designation "femme fatale" is an insult. Only now can I allow myself to say: my work interested me the most. Only now. For you can imagine how they would have laughed in my face if I had dared to say that when I was a beautiful young girl! I was quite well suited to receive their projections.

The Würgeengel, or its motivation, is an expression of rejection of the old image of women.

It is embarrassing to me that my name appears in the "femme fatale" section at this moment. Would it be at all possible for you to find another formulation for the text that appears beside the picture? (Surely it would be asking too much to put an insert to this effect in the catalogue— I am not asking that.)

Really the picture does not belong there. But where else? Apart from the motivation, it does have quite a lot to do with black magic and a time when the pill still didn't exist. Otherwise it would not have been necessary to make it.

Dear Harry—you do not need to answer me; you have done so much work. But if you read this "with an understanding eye" and maybe do something with regards to hanging or an insert, I would of course be very grateful.

Yours very truly, Meret

And greetings to Ingeborg.

Bice Curiger: Meret is so kind in this letter, which might amaze a bit, reading the letter today, because she makes her point very clearly and it is telling Harald very clearly that he is a macho and he didn't do the right thing.

Taylor: That's Bice Curiger, a Swiss curator and art historian who authored the first biography of Meret Oppenheim in 1982, and who knew both Oppenheim and Szeemann personally. She's now the artistic director of the Foundation Vincent van Gogh Arles.

Barbara T. Smith, a boundary-breaking artist who, like Oppenheim, navigated decades of sexism in the art world had this to say:

Barbara T. Smith: I think it's fantastic. It's fantastic. She's very articulate about what women have felt and experienced. I myself the same.

Taylor: When I read Meret Oppenheim's 1975 letter, I am struck by the courageous way it charts the difficult path of being an ambitious woman—not only in the arts, but in any field. It critiques the way a culture has imagined women's lives. It names the sharp pain of desiring physical and intellectual freedom while moving in a world of male peers who might prefer to ignore, sexualize, or sequester one's brilliance entirely. Oppenheim risks herself in the face of a world-renowned curator with the power to make careers. And yet, there's a clear-eyed generosity here. Somehow, despite writing through a situation that infuriates her, Oppenheim manages kindness, even grace.

Meret Oppenheim summons a deep wisdom to critique Harald Szeemann, pulled from her years of experience. At 63, Oppenheim had spent decades innovating in disciplines that ranged from assemblage to painting to poetry to sculpture. And she'd been working against the grain for over forty years.

But let's rewind a bit: Meret Oppenheim was born in 1913 in Berlin, to a progressive Swiss-German family. The family moved to Switzerland shortly after. Her grandmother, an early feminist and suffragette, was an illustrator of children's books. Her father, a physician, traveled regularly to Zurich to hear the newest lectures of psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Her aunt was briefly married to Herman Hesse, author of *Siddhartha*. The family, who loved art, regularly sketched together after dinner. Paintings and drawings Oppenheim made as a teenager were collected by the surrealists later, like the cheeky "Rabbit equals x" in which a cartoon rabbit became the baffling answer to something resembling a quadratic equation. Another sketch from this time features a languid, gently tendrilled carrot that looks as if it could be reclining on a chaise lounge.

But being a brilliant and beautiful young woman was not always easy.

Deavere Smith: When I was between sixteen and seventeen and the first young men became interested in me, I learned a lot very quickly.

Attempts were made all around to persuade me of the inferiority of women. When I said I wanted to be a painter, they advised me, it's better for you to learn to wash dishes—no woman has ever done anything. They also told me that there are two kinds of women: mothers and heterae.

Taylor: Men were constantly telling the young Oppenheim that women could only be mothers or heterae, meaning mistresses. It was around this time—1931 or 32, when she was 16 or 17—that Oppenheim made her *Würgeengel*, or Angel of Death. This is the painting that Harald Szeemann put on display over four decades later.

Here's Bice's description of the piece:

Curiger: This drawing shows legs coming out from the bottom. It's like there are persons in hell already. And it's women, because they have women's shoes sticking upwards. And you see this angel, but it's a woman who has long fingernails, makeup probably, hairdo. And she is strangling this baby she holds. And one sees mountains in the back, a little church, and it's called *Der Würgeengel* in German, which means the strangling angel.

Taylor: *Würgeengel* has all the dark zest of an Edward Gory or William Blake illustration. Oppenheim later called the painting an "ex-voto." An "ex-voto" is

something made as an offering or promise to fulfill a vow. You often see them hanging in churches and shrines. Many serve as prayers for children, fertility, or safe childbirth. Oppenheim's painting turned the trope on its head, praying instead to be spared the misery caused by an unwanted pregnancy, especially for a young woman who harbored dreams of becoming an artist.

Here's Bice:

Curiger: Of course, the pill didn't exist, and it was long before the pill came. And she's sixteen and already has perceived a really important aspect if, as a woman, she wants to be equal with men, live a certain free life, she thinks she doesn't want to have children.

Taylor: The wide acceptance of the idea that women can and should be artists is relatively recent. The idea that you can build an art practice and be a mother feels even more fragile than that. Even people who theoretically accepted that women could be artists were sometimes hostile to *mothers* as artists. Marcel Duchamp, with whom Oppenheim would become romantically involved, even went so far as to formulate that the making of art necessarily required the "negation of the woman-wife," as he put it. Duchamp theorized that art was a kind of "Bachelor Machine." To him, this meant that art partly emerged as a figure of unfulfillable desire and a refusal of procreation that needed release elsewhere. It was this idea that Harald Szeemann was expanding and exploring in his 1975 exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Bern, where he hung Oppenheim's artwork under the "Femme Fatale" banner.

In any case, in the 1930s, Oppenheim painted her "Angel of Death" in the face of a culture in which women's lives were commonly swallowed by childbirth and childrearing, and which took for granted that "mothering" and "art making" were incommensurate. That culture has been extremely slow to change. Here's Barbara T. Smith on advice she got in the early 1970s, as she was discovering her calling to become an artist while raising three kids of her own:

Smith: I was told by somebody during that process, when all those decisions were being made, she said, "You can have a career as an artist and be a mother. But you have to understand, you won't do a good job in either one of 'em."

Taylor: It was a world of stark gender roles, stark binaries, stark choices. And Oppenheim wanted freedom. At age 17, in 1932, having made her ex-voto, she told her parents that she wanted to move to Paris to study at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere.

Instead of attending classes, though, Oppenheim was drawn in by the life she found in Paris's cafes and artist's studios. Early on she connected with a fellow Swiss expatriate, the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, twelve years her senior. Giacometti was becoming known for his abstract and figural bronze sculptures. Oppenheim sketched while Giacometti sculpted. In 1933, she drew Giacometti's ear, which she eventually turned into a whimsical bronze sculpture that resembles a cross between a harp and gothic window. Other images from this time have the abstract quality of figures seen when waking from a dream. Oppenheim described her process this way "I carry out ideas in the way they enter my head. Where inspiration comes from is anybody's guess, but it comes with its form, like Athena who sprang from the head of Zeus in helmet and breastplate."

In Paris, Oppenheim also met painter Hans Arp, surrealist ringleader Andre Breton, and photographer Man Ray. As she later put it "the rest of my life unrolled in its

entirety from finding that band of comrades.” Oppenheim thrived among this circle. She was also in a delicate position. On the one hand, unlike the men she’d known at home, the surrealists encouraged her art, and invited her to display her work. She also moved among male colleagues who were 20-30 years older than she was. During this time, she posed nude for Man Ray, who called her the most uninhibited woman he’d ever met. In a famous sequence of photos, Oppenheim stands naked, wrapped around the flywheel of a printing press, her own skin darkly inked.

Curiger: She was a dashing beauty. She was like the dream of this Surrealist woman who is worshipped in many texts of Surrealist writers. And with her antibourgeois attitude, her free spirit, she immediately had all doors open.

Taylor: It was true that the surrealists, who wanted to remake much of the world in the wake of World War I, were open to new ideas about gender, sexuality, and the position of women. But they also imagined inspiration itself to be a “femme-enfant,” or a “child woman,” a role that Oppenheim seemed to fulfil for them. The surrealists admired, advanced, fetishized, and trivialized women artists all at once. Oppenheim’s position was complicated. Here’s Bice:

Curiger: She was twenty years old and learning. And I don’t think she was directly just influenced in a superficial way, to take forms or styles, copy. It was much more internal.

Meret Oppenheim has passionate relationships with for instance, Max Ernst; it was a very important relationship. But she breaks it up, even as she said, without thinking too much. She says she knew that it was necessary to keep her creative as an artist, and not to be somehow smashed under the power of this important artist.

Taylor: Oppenheim was clearheaded about power and relationships.

Deavere Smith: For me it was very simple: if I was no longer in love, I left, and the other person was sad for some longer or shorter period of time. If it was the other party who left me first, it was I who was sad for some period.

Taylor: By 1935, Oppenheim had begun a romantic relationship with famed Surrealist Marcel Duchamp. She was 22. He was nearly 50. Soon their work fell into a witty repartee. Duchamp had coined the art term “readymade” by taking a series of industrial objects like bicycle wheels, urinals, and bottle racks and displaying them as art. In response, Oppenheim offered readymades of her own: she took a pair of high heeled shoes, turned them upside down, and trussed them like a chicken. It was a wry play on bondage, on costume, on the place of women—and a new and gendered take on the readymade. She called this piece *Ma Gouvernante*, My Governess. The title hangs in challenging, indeterminate relationship with the work. That same year, 1936, Oppenheim made the piece that would catapult her to fame: the fur-lined teacup, which she titled *Object*.

Bice shared Oppenheim’s inspiration:

Curiger: She always told the story behind the fur-lined teacup, which was to sort of make it a funny anecdote, but not an important work of art: we were sitting in a café, and Picasso was sitting there with Dora Maar. And I was wearing this bracelet I did for Schiaparelli, which was metal with a piece of fur glued on it. And Picasso said, “Oh, one could put fur on everything. On this teacup, for instance.”

And when she left the café, she met André Breton, and Breton said, “Will you also participate in this wonderful exhibition with the Surrealists?” And here she goes to

Monoprix department store, buys the biggest cup and spoon, and covers it with fur.

Taylor: Oppenheim's readymades might have been crafted at the spur of the moment, but they are more than passing jokes. They critique Duchamp with sly wit. Duchamp's pieces claim ordinary objects as art. Oppenheim's remind us that objects are never really neutral, but always sticky with association. The question of which objects we claim, and which claim us, is always charged.

MoMA curator Alfred J. Barr bought Oppenheim's fur teacup the year she made it and put it on display. It quickly became a Surrealist icon. This was at once incredible and confusing for Oppenheim. She was 23. Her joke was now famous. But nobody knew who *she* was.

Curiger: For decades, people thought, is it a man or a woman who created it? Because Meret is not obviously a well-known female name. And did the artist maybe drop dead after she or he did it?

Taylor: Meret Oppenheim didn't drop dead, but she was soon forced to change her life. In the fall of 1936, on the way to New York on the ship *Normandie*, Duchamp had sent her a postcard that seemed like a readymade for a disaster. "Here" he wrote "is an object manufactured for a possible exhibition at the bottom of the sea." Duchamp's foreboding tone makes sense: World War II was on the horizon. It would send the entire surrealist circle into exile. But Oppenheim's exile began sooner than others.

Her paternal grandparents had converted from Judaism to Protestantism. Nevertheless, because Oppenheim was a Jewish surname, in 1936, Meret's father, the physician, was barred from practicing medicine in Germany. He could no longer help support her career. That year, Oppenheim spent more and more time near her family in Basel. By 1939 she was in Switzerland for good.

The transition was not easy. Despite having a solo exhibition there in 1937, Oppenheim's hometown felt provincial. Here's Bice:

Curiger: She comes back to Basel and there was this rumor that she had posed naked in a magazine in Paris. Can you imagine? It's the thirties in a small town. Basel still pretty puritanical. It was the photograph that Man Ray took of her in front of the printing machine, where she has a hand put over her head, with a black printing ink on the inside of the hand. It has, of course, a very important status in the history of photography and of art.

So she had to face a lot of prejudice and jealousy, also, I think.

Taylor: Meanwhile the state of Europe and Hitler's grim rise to power just across the border in Germany hung heavily over Oppenheim's spirit.

Curiger: She defended also Jewish cause very ferociously. Meret had this backpack in her studio, with I think some rice and a pistol, for the case that she had to defend when the Germans, the Nazis would come. You know Basel is close to the border, really directly. In the city you can step over to Germany.

Taylor: The world was at war. The border was closed. Oppenheim's friends were scattered. Her family faced financial trouble. The sense of disappointment must have been tremendous.

For Oppenheim, returning to Basel reactivated feelings of being confined along

gender lines. "I felt as if millenia of discrimination against women were resting on my shoulders, embodied in my feeling of inferiority," she said.

Here's Bice:

Curiger: She has doubts. "Am I really an artist?" So she takes classes to restore paintings. She says that, "In my heart, I still doubted the ability of women to achieve something." And she reads a lot of Carl Gustav Jung.

Taylor: Finally, in 1954, for reasons not even Oppenheim understood, her sense of depression and self-doubt lifted. She felt able to work again. Perhaps reading Jung had helped.

The war was over and Oppenheim was able to return to Paris. She was invited to make costumes and masks for a play by Picasso. And some of her new work began to talk back, in clever ways, to the surrealist crowd she'd hung out with in her youth.

In the 1930s, Man Ray had photographed Oppenheim nude. Now, Oppenheim stripped away even more with her 1964 work *X-Ray, of My Skull*. This x-ray photograph shows both skull and jewelry. The piece asks how the self, invisible between bone and decoration, might navigate the world.

Oppenheim's work in this period danced across disciplinary boundaries.

Curiger: She is always changing, mutating. She can do a drawing with very fast, energetic strokes, and at the same moment, she can do a very subtle, fine-lined drawing with almost nothing. You feel that her body is related to the surrounding, but also it has almost this idea that she has antennas which go up to the astral elements in, you know, the sky, and back also. Her body's related to eons of time.

Taylor: By 1975, the year Harald Szeemann invited Meret Oppenheim to participate in his exhibition, she had lived a full, rich, imaginative life. She had been collected by MoMA at 23 and had romantic relationships with Marcel Duchamp and other important artists. She had spent a World War ready to defend her country with a pistol in her backpack. She had fought off the demons of depression and the small minds of a puritanical city. She had stood by her youthful decision to not have children. And, in a culture and time which would find myriad ways to trivialize her, she continued to make innovative multidisciplinary art. She was a feminist by practice, even if the language of feminism was still nascent. Now Oppenheim's *Würgeengel*, which she made when she was 16, was being used to demonstrate Szeemann's visions of the "Femme Fatale" in his exhibition on "Bachelor Machines."

Szeemann had borrowed this idea of "Bachelor Machines" from the Surrealists, who had expanded it from Marcel Duchamp's 1913 notes in preparation for his piece *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. This was the huge work on glass in which some allegorical "bachelor" figures move below a floating abstract bride. Other Surrealists had seen in this piece a figure of unfulfillable desire and a wider allegory for how art is made. In their reading, it wasn't just that a bride was near some bachelors, or that Duchamp had rejected matrimony or parenthood, but that art itself *must*, by its very nature, rely on a refusal of procreation, especially of mothering.

Szeemann's exhibition further suggested that the "bachelor machine" underpinned *all* creative pursuits. In his catalog, he quotes the grandiose, inscrutable language of surrealist author Michel Carrouges. He writes:

"In their wonderful ambiguity, the bachelor machines stand at once for the

omnipotence of the erotic and for its negation, for death and immortality, for torture and Disneyland, for the fall and the resurrection....What becomes evident from the Bachelor Machines is the denial of women and even more of procreation as a break with cosmic law..."

Szeemann invited many of the most prolific French theorists of the day—including Jean-Francois Lyotard and Michel de Certeau—to contribute to the catalog, which consisted almost entirely of interwoven theoretical texts. The theorists are enthusiastic. They are sometimes bombastic. They are also all men.

There are only a dozen installation images in the catalogue, none of which contain Oppenheim's *Würgeengel*. So it's hard to know what the exhibition really looked like. And it's equally hard to know what Oppenheim really thought about it. Beyond her five, very clearly inked pages to Szeemann, we don't have a record of her inner dialog.

Deavere Smith: Your exhibition is terrific.

Taylor: Did she really think the exhibit was "terrific?" With Barbara T. Smith, I asked about the inscrutability of the tone:

Can you talk about the kind of tactics that maybe a woman would have to use in a letter like this?

Smith: Well, she's doing it, just being obsequious. Not terribly obsequious, but just like a friend and saying, you know, "I wonder if you've noticed," or something almost like that. She's not trying to get him angry, but just see if he can do something to help her.

Taylor: And how angry do you think she is, really?

Smith: She could be very, very angry. It's hard to know.

Taylor: I find it impossible not to read gender politics into Oppenheim's tone. Because Bice Curiger knew both Szeemann and Oppenheim in Basel, I asked what effect a letter like this might have had on Szeemann—and on Oppenheim afterwards.

Curiger: I think that still, she had the respect for him as a curator. But, I worked next door with him, because we were at the Kunsthaus at the same time. And I sometimes was angry at him because he was a macho. He was not, you know— He was not interested in Meret Oppenheim's work.

Taylor: Do you feel that he took much interest in the work of women at all?

Curiger: No. In all the years he was doing exhibitions in— at the Kunsthaus Zurich, he did not one exhibition of a woman, as far as I remember.

Taylor: Did Meret Oppenheim expect Harald Szeemann to change his mind? Szeemann probably didn't give much thought to Oppenheim's opinions of her own work. But as I read this letter, it felt like it spoke beyond Szeemann, beyond his exhibition. The letter is an occasion for Oppenheim to set her own record straight. It reaches out to the feminists around her, to every woman who might need clear language of rebuttal, and to the women artists of the future. The letter models what it is to own one's own story, one's power, one's truth.

Even years after sending this letter, Oppenheim was still puzzling over how to

reframe the way gender shapes how we imagine how art comes into being. In a 1985 book about woman and Surrealism, Oppenheim says she is uneasy about the designation “Surrealist” at all. She’d long since broken with a set who’d imagined the figure of inspiration as the nubile female muse and art as a “bachelor machine.” Oppenheim now had her own definition of inspiration. For her, both inspiration and genius were male *and* female, and art was a conversation between them. In her definition there is something imaginary, androgynous, and allegorical about the way inspiration moves through the mind and spirit of the artist.

I love that Oppenheim found ways to persevere as an artist, to reframe models that excluded her, and to show those who follow her how to persevere, too. I end with Bice, reading excerpts of a speech that Oppenheim gave while accepting the Art Award of the City of Basel in 1975. Like her letter that same year, shines its light beyond its moment, towards our own:

Curiger: “It is the duty of a woman to lead a life that expresses her disbelief in the validity of the taboos that have been imposed upon her kind for thousands of years. Nobody will give you freedom; you have to take it.

“After all, we mustn’t forget that it was Eve who took the first bite of the apple from the tree of knowledge. Or rather, the tree of conscious thought. There were a few voices in the wilderness as early as eighteenth century. Now women from all corners of the earth are raising their voices and rebelling against their despised position, an indication, perhaps, that feelings which have been suppressed for so long are coming to the surface again to take their rightful place in our hearts, on equal footing with reason.

“And who knows? Maybe wisdom will also be released from its dungeon someday.”

Tess Taylor: This podcast is sponsored by the Getty Patron Program.

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