

Wading into Battle: Frida Kahlo, Surrealism, and the Gradivian Myth

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Abstract

The author investigates Frida Kahlo's subversive response to the surrealist imaginary of the Woman-Child, brought to life in Wilhelm Jensen's novella *Gradiva* (1902/03). The author retraces the Freudian roots of Gradiva's popularity among the surrealists, and analyses Kahlo's painting *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) as a critical re-enactment of the childish, naïve femininity represented in the works of male surrealists. The author argues

that Kahlo's use of Gradivian motifs and her changing attitude towards the poetics of surrealism are traceable not only within her visual works, but in her intimate drawings and writings as well, exemplified by a letter to Jacqueline Lamba and other excerpts from Kahlo's diary. Underscoring the role Kahlo's friendship with Lamba played in the Mexican's career sheds new light on the ways she referenced surrealism in her art.

Introduction

[1] This essay demonstrates how Mexican avant-garde artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) critically engaged with surrealist discourse and psychoanalysis, most notably with the figure of Gradiva expounded in Wilhelm Jensen's novella *Gradiva* (1902/03).¹ I argue that the painting *What the Water Gave Me* (Fig. 1, 1938) registers and subverts the passive, idealised representations of femininity developed in the art of many male surrealists. As Margaret Lindauer put it, Kahlo's works offer "a binary definition of gendered social positions", using a double code of visual, narrative representation. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar see such codes as responsive to and representative of the dominant order, yet subversive in the camouflaged, deeper meanings they purvey.² *What the Water Gave Me* is unique in that it is the only work in Kahlo's output which presents an intimate bathroom setting – the subject is reclining in a bathtub – and features the subject's body, without including her face, painted from the perspective of the protagonist herself. Additionally, it is the only detailed representation of feet among Kahlo's paintings. All other autobiographic, corporeal renditions are portraits of the artist, most often set against lush, exotic backgrounds.

[2] Kahlo's biography and output have notoriously been narrowed down to such monolithic constructs as Mexican woman and/or childless wife to Diego Rivera, allegedly disengaged from the surrealist movement because of an ardently realistic style.³ I aim to counteract such popular readings of Kahlo's output by analysing *What the Water Gave Me* in the context of the Gradivian ideal, and by elaborating on two points: the role surrealism played in shaping Kahlo's style and gender politics, as well as the revolutionary relationship she shared with Jacqueline Lamba. Kahlo, whose fame quickly overtook her husband's popularity, and the surrealist painter, who happened to be married to André Breton, both shared the same ambitions and frustrations that silenced the voices of many women artists affiliated to the surrealist movement. I argue that *What the Water Gave Me* was created as a 'welcome card' for the Bretons, who stayed with Kahlo and Rivera in Coyoacán from April to August in 1938. Making use of Gradivian symbolism was a strategic move on the part of the Mexican artist, who hoped to establish international recognition by gaining the approval of the Pope of Surrealism, among others. Moreover, she quickly became smitten with and inspired by the wit and talent of Lamba. In the words of Whitney Chadwick,

*[b]y the time the Bretons returned to France in August 1938, André had 'claimed' Frida for surrealism – a characterisation she would consistently and furiously resist – and Jacqueline had found a new female ally and model for life as a woman artist.*⁴

¹ Wilhelm Jensen, *Gradiva: Ein pompejanisches Phantasiestück von Wilhelm Jensen*, Dresden 1903.

² Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo*, Hanover 1999, 18.

³ Nancy Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo: Challenging Visions in Modern Mexican Art*, Austin 2015, 70.

⁴ Whitney Chadwick, *The Militant Muse: Love, War and the Women of Surrealism*, London 2017, 107.

Kahlo proved to be successful and André Breton reproduced *What the Water Gave Me* in "Des tendances les plus récentes de la peinture surréaliste", published in 1939 in *Minotaure*, and later included it in *Surrealism and Painting* (1972), before the essay "Souvenir du Mexique".⁵ He alleged that Kahlo unknowingly visualised the words of his own literary protagonist, Nadja, who described herself as follows: "I am the thought on the bath in the room without mirrors"⁶ – ethereal, mystical, a walking phantasm.

[3] Critics have often presented Kahlo as a 'naïve' surrealist, endearingly unaware of how closely her style resembled that of the French avant-garde.⁷ Kahlo's output is generally believed to have been a kind of self-taught, independent phenomenon, and she is nowadays associated with radical feminism and emancipation.⁸ However, newer studies venture to prove how ambivalent Kahlo was towards the gender politics prevalent in her times,⁹ and how well she used some of her stereotypically feminine qualities to create a media-attractive persona, at home and abroad – which, arguably, may be seen as yet another manifestation of her feminist worldview. Kahlo's techniques, a combination of magical realism and pre-Columbian symbolism, have only recently been foregrounded in critical studies of her work, and this represents a move away from the older, narrow, autobiographical interpretations common in Eurocentric studies that focused solely on Kahlo's narcissism, chronic pain, multiple surgeries and abortions. The feminist, contemporary critical perspective, however, has led to the discussion of the artist's contacts with surrealism being pushed out of the scope of academic interest. Kahlo studies have a history of ideological about-faces and every decade or so researchers seem to focus on different facets of her output. This is important to note, since my essay confronts the sensitive topics of feminist

⁵ André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, New York 1972.

⁶ André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard, New York 1960, 101; Ilona Katzew, "Proselytizing Surrealism: André Breton and Mexico", in: *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 28 (1995), no. 51, 21-33: 23.

⁷ Alyce Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary", in: *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 5 (2011), 33-54: 33; Bertram D. Wolfe, "Rise of Another Rivera", in: *Vogue* (November 1, 1938), 64-65: 64; Breton (1972), 142-144; Andrea Kettenmann, *Frida Kahlo 1907–1954. Pain and Passion*, Cologne 2003, 41.

⁸ Joan Borsa, "Towards a Politics of Location. Rethinking Marginality", in: *Canadian Women Studies / Les cahiers de la femme* 11 (1990), no. 1, 36-39; Joan Borsa, "Frida Kahlo: Marginalization and the Critical Female Subject", in: *Third Text* 4 (1990), no. 12, 21-40: 38; Elizabeth Garber, "Art Critics on Frida Kahlo: A Comparison of Feminist and Non-Feminist Voice", in: *Art Education* 45 (1992), no. 2, 42-48.

⁹ For feminist, gender oriented interpretations of Kahlo's works, see Borsa, "Towards a Politics of Location", and Borsa, "Frida Kahlo: Marginalization and the Critical Female Subject"; Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*; Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*; Alba F. Aragón, "Uninhabited Dresses: Frida Kahlo, from Icon of Mexico to Fashion Muse", in: *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 18 (2014), no. 5, 517-549; Janice Helland, "Culture Politics and Identity in the Paintings of Frida Kahlo", in: *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, New York 1992, 397-408.

subversion and autobiography, while trying not to overshadow Kahlo's specifically Mexican jargon and experiential aesthetic.



1 Frida Kahlo, *What the Water Gave Me*, 1938. Daniel Filipacchi Collection, Paris (photo: Wikiart, www.wikiart.org/en/frida-kahlo/what-the-water-gave-me-1938)

[4] Commenting Kahlo's works, Margaret Lindauer noted that "[t]o use is not necessarily to endorse" the dominant artistic canon of the times.¹⁰ Kahlo is known to have adapted the poetics of surrealism to her own needs, the Gradivian myth being an example of such a subversive 'quotation' in the case of *What the Water Gave Me*. Analysing the painting and learning more about Kahlo's attitude towards surrealism and its take on the subject of femininity is not a question of proving her many artistic affiliations, but rather of identifying the numerous ways in which she expropriated and subverted canonical images generated by male surrealists. The task is particularly difficult since Kahlo's statements concerning her engagement with surrealist discourse often appear to be mutually exclusive, since they depended heavily on the context in which they were pronounced. Thus, the analysis of *What the Water Gave Me* seems to mark an important step towards examining her art through the lens of Euro-American cultural transfers and feminist re-imaginings of traditional roles ascribed to women artists in the 1930s. Moreover, the artist's performative stance on surrealism becomes comprehensible once her conflicting statements concerning the movement are conflated with her art and her friendship with Lamba – continuously

¹⁰ Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 113.

bearing in mind both women's final detachment from Breton. I believe *What the Water Gave Me* constitutes an important 'piece' of evidence in understanding Kahlo's ties to surrealist modes of expression.

Meeting surrealism

[5] In one of the most recent and insightful monographs on Kahlo in the context of European and Latin American avant-garde movements, Nancy Deffebach stipulates that an important point of contact between Kahlo and the surrealist avant-garde was the *Los Contemporáneos* group, which popularised surrealism in Mexico in the 1920s¹¹. She also emphasises Lev Trotsky's yearlong presence in Coyoacán since 1937 – Breton was an open admirer of Trotsky's writings and alluded to Trotsky's politics multiple times in the second manifesto of surrealism.¹² Moreover, it is less known that Kahlo drew exquisite corpses while staying in New York in 1933 and was familiar with the concept of automatic writing as early as 1932.¹³ Both techniques of producing art were famously associated with Parisian surrealists since the 1920s. Other possible crossroads with surrealism include Diego Rivera's poster for Breton's *Communicating Vessels*.¹⁴ The book was published in 1932 and draws a continuum between dream and waking life, which seems to be the leading theme of both Rivera's poster and Kahlo's painting – both executed during Breton's visit in 1938. The political context for Rivera's print is the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art", written by Breton and Trotsky in the same year. The work was later exhibited at the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, held in Paris at the Wildenstein Gallery in 1938 (with a special collection of so-called "Mexican surrealist paintings"). Kahlo participated as well, chiefly thanks to Lamba's invitation.¹⁵

[6] Kahlo's ties to surrealist rhetoric are particularly interesting since following the publication of Herrera's biography, she is popularly believed to have shunned the surrealist fascination with psychoanalysis.¹⁶ On the other hand, feminist critics rightly point to the fact that psychoanalytic, biographical readings of her output have prevailed over more nuanced interpretations, oriented towards

¹¹ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 12-15.

¹² Ruben Gallo, *Freud's Mexico: Into the Wilds of Psychoanalysis*, Cambridge MA 2010, 13f.; Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership*, Lincoln 1994, 349.

¹³ Kettenmann, *Frida Kahlo*, 34.

¹⁴ Starr Figura, "Diego Rivera's *The Communicating Vessels*", in: *Print Quarterly* 13 (1996), no. 4, 413-415: 413.

¹⁵ Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo. An Intimate Self-Portrait*, introduction by Carlos Fuentes, essay and commentaries by Sarah M. Lowe, New York 2005, 208.

¹⁶ Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 14-18; Hayden Herrera, *Frida: the Biography of Frida Kahlo*, London 2018, 225-227.

the themes of constructivism and performativity.¹⁷ It is highly probable Kahlo became acquainted with Freud's ideas through contact with American and Mexican refractions of surrealism much earlier than 1943, when she painted the large *Moses* after reading Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*.¹⁸ Similarly, the works that tackle the motifs of femininity and feet as markers of graceful movement suggest that the artist referenced the Freudian and, by extension, surrealist figure of Gradiva in her output. Bearing in mind that the reception of Freud's writings in the works of surrealists and their satellites was already far gone in those years¹⁹ and focusing on Kahlo's stays in San Francisco, New York and Detroit in the early 1930s, the possibility of Gradivian refractions in Kahlo's works is confirmed, a case in point being the analysed painting.

[7] Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of interpretations of *What the Water Gave Me*, most probably because it remained hidden in a private collection for many years before attracting critics' attention. Thus, I do not give a detailed analysis of the painting.²⁰ Instead, I suggest that focusing on the motif of eroticised feet shows Kahlo's evolution towards an increasingly symbolic mode of representing her identity as etched into and revolving around her lower limbs. Numerous sketches and drawings executed in the 1930s – *Accident* (1926), nude study for *My Cousin Ady Weber* (1930), *Self-Portrait, Sitting* (1931), *Frida and the Miscarriage* (1932), *Memory, the Heart* (1937), *Study for Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938) – as well as diary sketches prove that depictions of feet in Kahlo's visual narratives were closely connected not only to self-portraiture, but to redefining beauty and prowess as well. Thus, raising the question of Gradiva as a doubtful picture of fulfilled femininity and emancipation for the proactive, strong-minded Frida seems particularly pertinent in light of her personal politics and physical disabilities – both seemingly excluded her from the Gradivian ideal of a perfect muse for the male artist.

Femininity in the surrealist canon

[8] The development of surrealism's transatlantic influence, even in circles that disclaimed the discourse of psychoanalysis or automatic writing, was possible due to the globalising impact of consumerism and

¹⁷ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 70.

¹⁸ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 5; Gannit Ankori, "Moses, Freud and Frida Kahlo," in: *New Perspectives on Freud's Moses and Monotheism*, ed. Ruth Ginsburg and Ilana Pardes, Tübingen 2006, 135-148: 136.

¹⁹ Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Loving Freud Madly: Surrealism between Hysterical and Paranoid Modernism", in: *Journal of Modern Literature* 25 (2002), no. 3-4, 58-74: 65f.; Chadwick, *The Militant Muse*, 20.

²⁰ See Jeffrey Bellnap, "Disentangling the Strangled Tehuana: The Nationalist Antinomy in Frida Kahlo's *What the Water Has Given Me*", in: *Genders* 33 (2001), URL: <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2001/06/01/disentangling-strangled-tehuana-nationalist-antinomy-frida-kahlos-what-water-has-given-me> (accessed May 5, 2021); Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors*; Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*; Helga Prignitz-Poda, *Hidden Frida Kahlo: Lost, Destroyed or Little-Known Works*, New York 2017, 99-103; Gerry Souter, *Kahlo*, New York 2011.

avant-garde internationalism, combined with the popularity of Freudian research on dreams, hysteria, repressed female sexuality and fetishism. Privileging the Freudian Pleasure Principle in surrealist art called for a depository of male desire – thus, femininity was endowed with mediative power, and fitted into a new imaginary that spurred the French avant-garde's goal of unleashing the unconscious between the worlds of waking and sleeping.²¹ Drawing on modernist and decadent tropes of the *femme fatale*, surrealism popularised mythical depictions of Woman as child, praying mantis or *vagina dentata* and contributed to the fetishisation and spectacularisation of the female body in mass culture.²² The surrealists' cooperation with museums, galleries, fashion designers and chain stores largely depended upon depictions of femininity as a mystical, sexually and metaphysically liberating force. The philosophy of love so ferociously advocated by Breton was based on its redemptory, inspirational role, accompanied by the unconditional veneration of a mythical, child-like femininity, the so-called Eternal Woman. By the end of the decade, following two major exhibitions, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (MoMA New York, 1936) and *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* (Galérie Beaux-Arts, Paris, Jan. – Feb. 1938), the surrealist Dream Woman became a tenet of popular culture.

[9] The canonical woman in Salvador Dali's famous Bonwit Teller *mise-en-scène* (entitled *She was a surrealist woman. She was a figure in a dream*), comes from a turn-of-the-century novella by German author Wilhelm Jensen, entitled *Gradiva. A Pompeian Fantasy* (first published in installments from June 1 to July 20, 1902 in the Viennese newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*, then the following year as a book). In 1907 Sigmund Freud wrote an essay that popularised the book's eponymous character: *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva*.²³ The heroine of the novella cures the male protagonist of repressed desires and teaches him true love. Freud's analysis of Gradiva's redemptory role eternalised her as a symbol of sacrificial, passive, yet all-knowing femininity. Due to Andre Breton's extraordinary interest in psychoanalysis and the Gradivian heroine, the novella, unsurprisingly, came to occupy a special place in the philosophy of love of the surrealist movement.²⁴ Freud's essay served to theorise the sexual politics of surrealism and provided many themes characteristic of the second decade of surrealism, such as the

²¹ Mary Ann Caws, "Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art", in: *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, Cambridge MA 1986, 262-287: 262f. See also Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, Cambridge MA 2001.

²² David Lomas, *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity*, New Haven CT 2000, 10.

²³ Zvi Lothane, "The Lessons of a Classic Revisited: Freud on Jensen's Gradiva", in: *Psychoanalytic Review* 97 (2010), no. 5, 789-817: 792-795.

²⁴ Whitney Chadwick, "Masson's Gradiva: The Metamorphosis of a Surrealist Myth", in: *The Art Bulletin* 52 (1970), no. 4, 415-422: 416; Robert Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*, Calgary 1995, 53.

mythic power of a woman's love (homosexuality was frowned upon by many surrealists) and the analysis of the repressed through scientific method.²⁵

Feminist critique of the canon

[10] Surrealists are remembered for advocating radical notions of sexual and moral emancipation from bourgeois virtues. However, these revolutionary practices seemed to stop short when it came to gender and sexuality, even though one of the main postulates of the second surrealist manifesto was to overturn gender roles and sexual passivity, which, according to surrealists, marred European bourgeois societies.²⁶ These postulates seemingly privileged the figure of an independent woman artist, yet it was the Woman-Child that dominated in surrealist discourse. Xavière Gauthier called this construct *une forgerie de mâles* – a male fabrication.²⁷ Indeed, women artists associated with the movement were caught in a crippling paradox: on the one hand, they enjoyed unprecedented freedom as "radical outsiders", and on the other – most of them were not considered to be independent artists and members of the surrealist movement.²⁸ As Robert Belton puts it, "surrealism rendered Woman doubly marginal: excluded, confined, and defined first by popular culture and second by its presumed antithesis".²⁹

[11] It is well-known that despite being ensconced in such intimidating categories, the Women of Surrealism (a term coined by Gloria Orenstein in 1975)³⁰ established their own radical modes of gender expression by implicitly subverting the Woman-Child ideal and the passivity attributed to the Female Muse in the works of male Surrealists.³¹ Following this train of thought, many authors observe that the gender politics of surrealism were beneficial to the Muses themselves as well, a case in point being

²⁵ Mary Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*, Cambridge MA 1998, 4-7.

²⁶ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor 1969, 128f., 302f.

²⁷ Xavière Gauthier, *Surréalisme et Sexualité*, Paris 1979, 190.

²⁸ Penelope Rosemont (ed. and introductions), *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, Austin 1998, 6.

²⁹ Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb*, 273.

³⁰ Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Art History and the Case for The Women of Surrealism", in: *The Journal of General Education* 27 (1975), no. 1, 31-54.

³¹ Whitney Chadwick, "Mythic Woman / Real Women. Embodying Desire in 1938", in: *Twilight Visions. Surrealism in Paris*, ed. Therese Lichtenstein et al., Berkeley 2009, 145-182: 156. For more on Gradiva and fetishised femininity in surrealist art see Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors*, 347; Ruth Markus, "Surrealism's Praying Mantis and Castrating Woman", in: *Woman's Art Journal* 21 (2000), no. 1, 33-39: 33-35; Sabina Daniela Stent, *Women Surrealists: Sexuality, Fetish, Femininity and Female Surrealism*, PhD Dissertation 2011, University of Birmingham Research Archive E-theses Repository, URL: <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/3718/> (accessed Oct. 27, 2019).

Penelope Rosemont's much needed, encyclopaedic compilation of the multitude of women identifying as surrealists. The author asserts that in spite of the difficulty these women had in combining their roles as muses and active artists, the overall influence of surrealism on the social role of women artists was liberating.³²

[12] In the second half of the century, surrealism and its ties to mass culture phantasms were reassessed from a feminist standpoint. This new perspective generated groundbreaking studies on the identity crisis caused by the popularity of the surrealist Muse and her role in effacing the 'real' Women of Surrealism from the history of art.³³ In 1971 Xavière Gauthier wrote the first scathing feminist critique of the objectification women succumbed to in surrealist art. She compiled quotes by male artists such as Paul Eluard or Louis Aragon to exemplify how incarnations of the mythic Woman as innocent child or praying mantis remained implicitly aligned with conventional gender roles: "in this unequally divided world, the woman has beauty, innocence; the man has action and work. He has a past; she lives in the moment. She transmits life; he creates the world... She sees for me and I choose for her."³⁴

In her groundbreaking article on the Women of Surrealism, published two years later, Gloria Orenstein described the surrealist Muse as

*a splendid example of that being who incarnated a purity, an innocence, a spontaneity, and a naiveté that put her more easily in touch with the world of the dream, the unconscious, and the realm of imagination. The Woman-Child, it was maintained, was uncorrupted by logic or abstract thought...*³⁵

Both authors formulated the same conclusions: this paradigm excluded women's art from the canon and even conflicted the most prominent couples of the movement. For instance, sexual freedom and artistic independence were an issue even for the Riveras, although Diego was much more supportive and encouraging of Kahlo's autonomous artistic expression than Breton was of his wife.

[13] Alongside Gauthier and Orenstein, Whitney Chadwick was one of the first to outline the role surrealism played in essentialising the female body in art as a way of bridging over to mass culture.³⁶ Chadwick highlighted Gradiva's psychoanalytic grounding and explained how the Gradivian myth led,

³² Tirza True Latimer, "Equivocal Gender. Dada/ Surrealism and Sexual Politics between the Wars", in: *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins, Chichester 2016, 352-365: 353-355.

³³ For a detailed discussion of canonical texts on the activity of women in the Surrealist movement, see Patricia Allmer et al., *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, Munich, New York 2009.

³⁴ Gauthier, *Surréalisme et Sexualité*, 193; my translation. The unpublished typescript of Angela Carter's translation of Gauthier's work is part of the British Library Manuscript Collections.

³⁵ Orenstein, "Art History and the Case for The Women of Surrealism", 32.

³⁶ Chadwick, "Masson's Gradiva", 415-422. See also Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, London 2002; Latimer, "Equivocal Gender", 355.

albeit indirectly, to the marginalisation of art created by the Women of Surrealism. Even though there were over 50 of them and despite the fact that their works were often strongly feminist, these women artists remained overlooked in most historical overviews of the movement for decades. Although the dialogue of psychoanalysis, surrealism and Gradivian imagery is well-documented, the joint impact of these three discourses on the artistic output of the Muses in question remains underestimated in many individual, satellite cases – such as Kahlo herself.



2 "Gradiva", photograph of a cast of the Gradiva relief in a private collection of the photographer (*Wikimedia Commons*, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gradiva-p1030638.jpg>)

Jensen's *Gradiva* as theorised by Freud and the surrealists

[14] In order to discuss the magnitude of Gradiva's impact on surrealist art, it must be noted that Surrealist adaptations of the Gradivian woman were developed in multiple poems and paintings, most notably by Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, Giorgio Chirico, Salvador Dalí or André Masson.³⁷ The most

³⁷ Well-known paintings referring to Gradiva: A. Masson, *Woman* (Collection Larivière, Montréal, 1925), *Gradiva* (Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, 1939), as a follow-up to *Pygmalion* (Private collection, 1938). Salvador Dalí, *Andromeda* (Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1930), *Gradiva* (The Dalí Museum, 1930), *Gradiva* (Private collection, 1931), *William Tell and Gradiva* (Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, 1932), *Dream of Venus* (World Fair Pavilion Site, 1939). Dalí nicknamed his wife Gala Gradiva, and she in turn inspired the works of Jean Cocteau (*La Difficulté d'être*, Paris 1957) or Giorgio de Chirico, *Piazza d'Italia* (Galleria d'Arte Maggiore G.A.M, c. 1940). See Chadwick,

popular male artists of the movement all used Freudianism and implicitly conservative paradigms of femininity to develop their avant-garde art. Breton was an admirer of Freud's works, especially *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the psychoanalyst was even listed as a 'collaborator' in the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1924.³⁸ Breton's medical education spurred his interest in psychoanalysis and led to the canonization of psychoanalysis as a tool and frame of reference for automatic and oniric art.

[15] In his essay *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's "Gradiva"*, Freud focuses on the influence repressed desire and dreams have on the sexual and emotional maturity of Jensen's young protagonist, archeologist Norbert Hanold. The German scientist in the novella becomes obsessed with the figure of a lithe-footed woman he notices in a bas-relief while staying in Rome (Fig. 2), mostly because of her beautiful gait:

*her head bent forward a little, she held slightly raised in her left hand, so that her sandalled feet became visible, her garment which fell in exceedingly voluminous folds from her throat to her ankles. The left foot had advanced, and the right, about to follow, touched the ground only lightly with the tips of the toes, while the sole and heel were raised almost vertically. This movement produced a double impression of exceptional agility and of confident composure, and the flight-like poise, combined with a firm step, lent her the peculiar grace.*³⁹

The name was derived by Jensen from Latin and signified "walking woman", "she who walks". It is the feminine counterpart of Mars Gradivus, the Roman god of war, often depicted as rushing into battle in full stride. Norbert identifies the heroine of the relief as follows, without using her real name: "that is Gradiva ..., the daughter of –, she walks more beautifully than any other girl in our city".⁴⁰ Afterwards, while staying in Pompeii, city of ashes, the archeologist discovers his long-repressed attraction towards childhood friend Zoë Bertgang, whom he encounters, tellingly, near an excavation site, and whom he takes for the Roman figure. However, he realises with time that she is a woman of flesh and blood and must be addressed in German instead of Greek and Latin in order to be communicated with and truly loved.⁴¹

[16] Freud argues in his essay that Norbert Hanold's obsession with Zoë-Gradiva and the characteristic foot fetish he develops counteract the prototypical fear of castration encoded in Zoë's femininity – the real woman's sexuality. The foot, in the words of Freud, "is an age-old sexual symbol which occurs even

"Masson's Gradiva", 415; Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, London 2019, 21.

³⁸ Rosemont, *Surrealist Women*, 6.

³⁹ Wilhelm Jensen and Sigmund Freud, *Gradiva: Delusion and Dream in Wilhelm Jensen's Gradiva*, trans. Helen M. Downey, Copenhagen/ Los Angeles/ Saint Paul 2003, 8.

⁴⁰ Jensen, *Gradiva*, 10.

⁴¹ Jensen, *Gradiva*, 66f.

in mythology"⁴² – the shoe or slipper as symbols of female genitals are not an 18th-century discovery. In 1907, when the essay on Jensen's *Gradiva* was published, Freud had not yet theorised the notion of fetishism. He later argued that the fetish is a form of substitution that allows the male subject to keep the fear of castration at bay, either by learning to perceive the feminine lack of phallus as object of desire or by substituting it for a fetish: a "token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it".⁴³ In short, the fetish serves to domesticate the Other by symbolising the transformation of horror into desire.

[17] Just as the fetish both counters and confirms the 'incompleteness' of the woman, the veneration of femininity in surrealist art precluded women artists from performing the same type of independent, creative acts as men. Breton's philosophy of the *objet trouvé* mirrors woman's redemptory role in Jensen's novel,⁴⁴ which also hinges on the fetishisation of material findings. It presents a woman who internalises her role as the sole cure to Hanold's repression, and becomes a symbol of the feminine Other, fetishised and familiarised just like the fetish. As Whitney Chadwick puts it, the "presence of the woman is proof of man's redemption and it is she who gives life meaning by her power to 'mediate between man and the marvellous'".⁴⁵

Analysis of the painting – a Gradivian re-vision

[18] Emily Apter discerns a range of traits to be found in literary renditions of fetishism that also characterise visual representations of fetishes in surrealist art:

*Inanimate objects registered as erogenous zones in the narrator's eye, bodily extremities tintured with redness or "split" in a mock-staging of castration, repulsive details, miming the fetishist's putative tendency to wallow in disgust, and physical mutilation, these are among the signs of a metonymic poetics encoded as fetishistic.*⁴⁶

These features, including redness and a split limb, mark the latent eroticism of *What the Water Gave Me*. Both feet seem injured – the split flesh of the right foot gives the impression of the left foot being wounded in the reflection. It is the only explicitly shown foot wound in Kahlo's output and shows the big

⁴² Sigmund Freud, "The Sexual Aberrations", in: *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, transl. and newly edited by James Strachey, with an introductory essay by Steven Marcus, New York 1975, 1-37: 21.

⁴³ Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism", in: *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, trans. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey, New York 1959, 198-204: 200.

⁴⁴ Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism", in: *October 19* (1981), 3-34: 28.

⁴⁵ Chadwick, "Masson's *Gradiva*", 419.

⁴⁶ Emily S. Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish. Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France*, Ithaca/London 1991, 29.

toe almost cleaved off by a deep fissure. Its profound edges and smooth cut give the foot a marble-like quality, reminiscent of the Gradiva relief. However, repulsiveness or mutilation do not hamper the dreamy aesthetics of the painting, since here, the traditional means of purveying fetishistic fascination are reclaimed in a positive way by the female subject-artist. Even the *topoi* of memory and self-narration, crucial to the discourses of fetishism, are referenced in the floating objects that experientially identify the heroine. These objects do not negate the wholesomeness of her identity or commodify her – as fetishes normally would. Instead, they work to create a uniquely Kahlo-esque environment, tailored so as to fit *her* biography, *her* sexual and racial experiences.

[19] Sidonie Smith observes that "there is no coherent autobiographical self" before the act of self-narration.⁴⁷ In the case of Kahlo's painting, this self-narration is collage-like and immersed in water, which connotes the acts of remembering and creating a patchwork, self-told identity rooted in memory. Studies usually present *What the Water Gave Me* as the only work by Kahlo that is reminiscent of surrealism, if only because Breton extolled it as an innately surrealist scene. It has been analysed in context of Dali's paranoiac-critical techniques and surrealist filmography which influenced the 'psychological innuendo' of the work.⁴⁸ Possible ties to Dali's method are also visible in the earlier *Portrait of Luther Burbank* (1931): a painting that testifies to Kahlo transitioning from her usual realistic portrayals of the 1920s to more surreal renditions in the 1930s, created during her numerous stays in the United States.⁴⁹ Dali was the first to incorporate the Gradivian myth into his paintings while joining the surrealist movement between 1929 and 1930, just like Kahlo did in 1938.

[20] Another strongly surrealist element of the painting is the mirror image of the feet: the *dédoublement*, central to the composition of the painting, reinforces the visionary, dreamlike quality of the elements submerged. Rosalind Krauss sees doubling and the so-called spacing it generates as principal modes of surrealist photography:

*it is doubling that produces the formal rhythm of spacing—the two-step that banishes the unitary condition of the moment, that creates within the moment an experience of fission. For it is doubling that elicits the notion that to an original has been added its copy. The double is the simulacrum, the second, the representative of the original.*⁵⁰

In the case of Kahlo's painting, I would argue the doubled feet are markers of individual feminine identity being disrupted by and enclosed in the imaginary of the Woman-Child, since Gradiva herself is Zoë

⁴⁷ Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance" [1995], in: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, Ann Arbor 2017. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9739969> (accessed May 5, 2021).

⁴⁸ Herrera, *Frida*, 223; Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors*, 350.

⁴⁹ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo*, 186; Herrera, *Frida*, 110.

⁵⁰ Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism", 25f.

Bertgang's petrified, ideal and meta-physical double. The autobiographical motif of gangrenous feet, floating memory and fragment scenes also present and quoted in other Kahlo paintings are no evidence against a surrealist context. To the contrary, they may be understood as a clever reversal of canonical modes of automatic writing (based on the fractured self) and feminine self-portrayal.

[21] *What the Water Gave Me* is the only painting in Kahlo's oeuvre which includes an intimate, bathroom environment and, most important, a central, anonymous figure, which we may only guess is actually Frida. The bathtub devises an area of conflict and dissection. In it, the oniric clashes with the real. The bather's anonymity, counteracted by the wounded foot and signature red nails, becomes a crucial element of the autobiographic, anti-Gradivian narrative. The female object of desire in surrealist art is most often represented as faceless or masked in male-produced paintings: the face is either not represented at all, or shaded and obscured by means of veils and blindfolds.⁵¹ However, in Kahlo's painting, the body is rooted in genealogy, history and eroticism, as represented by three fragments taken from different paintings. Even though the woman remains faceless, her body is written into her surroundings in a mode of visual narrative that brings to mind the principles of *écriture féminine*. If the painting included the model's face, it would no longer mirror surrealist modes of portraying women and would resemble other, now-canonical, paintings by Kahlo, thus losing its unique and disquieting qualities.

[22] The socio-historical and erotic aspects of these auto-citations prepare the beholder for an in-depth analysis of what at first glance appears to be a typically surrealist scene. Interestingly, Carlos Fuentes highlights the pertinence of identity assessed "at face value" in the introduction to Kahlo's diary: "[t]he body is the temple of the soul. The face is the temple of the body. And when the body breaks, the soul has no other shrine except the face".⁵² This metaphorical explanation of Kahlo's focus on self-portraiture offers yet another reason for which the artist may have felt the Gradivian idiom objectifies and commodifies the female body: presented from profile, idealised and stripped of identity. The fragments from other works include *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* (1936), which is referenced by the couple hidden behind the plants near the bed included in the lower right corner of *What the Water Gave Me*. They seem to be looking down on the two women lovers lying on the bed, who closely resemble the figures in the painting *Two Nudes in a Forest* (1939), while the skeleton behind them features in another painting executed in the same year: *Four Inhabitants of Mexico City* (1938). The floating dress is of the same Tehuana design as the one included in *My Dress Hangs There* (1933) or *Memory, the Heart* (1937). Both works deal with the themes of cultural transfer, intertextuality and fragmented personalities. These intertextual references demonstrate that *What The Water Gave Me* focuses on the same issues of transnational identity and autobiographical presentation that are included in those famous paintings, and while avoiding direct references to the identity of the bather, Kahlo creates a visual catalogue of her

⁵¹ Gauthier, *Surréalisme et Sexualité*, 193.

⁵² Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 12.

own works. Could this be read as a two-fold attempt to universalise the meaning of the painting in order to present Being a Woman as its subject – and not only Kahlo's identity?

[23] What's more, the painting includes a male, literally faceless figure, reclining on the beach in a relaxed pose. The man is holding a rope which is wrapped around the throat of the bloated, floating corpse of a woman. The stark contrast between the two bodies, perpetrator and victim, one relaxed and clothed, the other strangled and naked, upholds all feminist, gender-oriented interpretations of the painting. The taut rope keeps the woman afloat between two continents and two worlds, with the man, interestingly, sitting on Mexican land. Behind him, the Empire State Building is consumed in the flames of a volcano. Its phallic shape brings to mind a rape scene gone awry, which may symbolize the vitality of Mexican nature and culture endangered by colonialism (*La Llorona, La Chingada*), especially in contrast with the colonial ship on the other side of the painting, behind a ragged cliff. The corpse of the woman is caught between the legs – it occupies the middle ground between the right foot, injured and atrophied, and the left, shapely and perfectly feminine. However, it is the right foot that is 'lined' with power – genealogy (the parents), sexual emancipation, sisterhood and eroticism (the two nudes), as well as Mexican flora. The badly crippled leg emerges as a new sign of power, and its reflection in the water seems to point out that in fact both feet are injured to the same extent – the supposedly imperfect femininity is nothing but a metaphor for a new, highly self-aware identity, rooted in history and personal politics. The rope that connects the woman's corpse to the lying man, the cliff, and the drain of the tub itself adds narrative structure to the entire painting, as if reconnecting the fragments of hybrid identity, splintered by colonial violence and biculturalism. It serves as a tightrope for diverse insects – worms, caterpillars, spiders, and a ballerina, the embodiment of grace. This way, the painting acquires a geometrical structure that mirrors the process of building a coherent identity using visual narrative, as described by Smith.⁵³ Both abject and aesthetically pleasing elements coexist as part of its frame.

Diary and painting

[24] In a study for the portrait of her cousin Ada, Kahlo drew the girl's feet separately, to the left of the body itself, although the proportions of the body suggest it was not because of lack of space on the sheet of paper. The feet suspended mid-air bring to mind a later drawing of feet resting on a dais, included in Kahlo's *Diary*.⁵⁴ The right covers half of the left, cut off at shin level and exuding ivy-like strands that resemble barbed wire. Under the sketch Kahlo wrote "Feet what do I need them for/ if I have wings to fly". Another drawing of the outline of a foot, mid-page between a woman's torso, the sun, and the moon, features an interrogative "yo?" above it. The right half of the drawing features the words "colour

⁵³ Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance".

⁵⁴ Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 274.

of poison/everything upside down/ME? Sun/and/moon/feet/and/Frida".⁵⁵ These works expose the foot as the foundation of the artist's identity, split in two by verbal references to advancing and going backwards, to celestial and earthly movement. Kahlo's *Diario* includes the motif of broken feet multiple times. Even though it is undoubtedly a result of Frida's deteriorating health, both earlier works and diary drawings hinge on metaphorical, symbolic values ascribed to both feet, instead of simply referring to pain or physical trauma.⁵⁶

[25] The presentation of the painting itself has served to lay ground for its analysis in the context of Jensen's novella. In the text, Gradiva-Zoë differs from other women in the perpendicular placement of her right foot at the apex of each step, and in Kahlo's painting it is possible to see the mirror image of the toes in the water as a clever adaptation of this motif. The surface of the water and the doubling of the half-submerged toes give the viewer a sense of spatial disorientation since, along with the drops of blood dripping as if from outside of the bathtub into the water, these elements suggest the possibility of a vertical reading of the painting. Thus, the subject can be reimagined as standing in the bathtub, wearing an ornamented, life-inscribed robe. A 'vertical reading' of the painting becomes significant when Kahlo's affinity for masquerade and trompe-l'œil elements is recalled once again. In this new, standing context, the feet could be seen as simultaneously advancing and retracing their steps, immersing themselves in the folds of the water cascade-cum-robe, or leaving the tub altogether, dressed in Kahlo's rendition of Gradiva's "garment which fell in exceedingly voluminous folds from her throat to her ankles" (Jensen, 4).⁵⁷ While Freud underlines the final unification of Gradiva-Zoë's doubled identity for the purpose of nurturing Hanold's love, Kahlo makes fragmentation the pivot of her painting. Jensen's heroine reenacts the passive Pygmalion myth when she fulfills Hanold's wish in the novella's final scene and recreates the perfect Gradivian gait.⁵⁸ Thus, Gradiva *rediviva* is, indeed, reborn into immobility, and does not pose any risk of representing a potentially castrating sexuality to the man.⁵⁹ Jensen's tale of perfect femininity concludes in Gradiva's reassuring passivity, whilst both 'reality' and mirror image in Kahlo's painting bear the mark of an overtly sexualised wound. The revolutionary quality it exudes falls in accordance with yet another sketch featured in Kahlo's diary: a left foot, cracked by multiple black brush strokes, is shown from above against a fiery background, with the words "Walker, dancer, healthy, Peace, Revolutionary, intelligent" inscribed over it (Fig. 3).⁶⁰ Underneath appears the Aztec symbol of unity, alongside the ying-yang symbol, once again an allusion to harmonious fragmentation.

⁵⁵ Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 271.

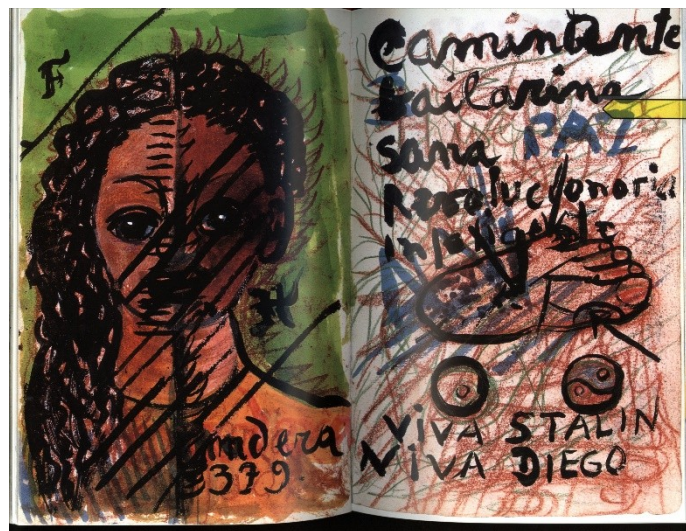
⁵⁶ Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 259.

⁵⁷ Jensen, *Gradiva*, 4.

⁵⁸ Mary Jacobus, "Is there a Woman in this Text", in: *New Literary History* 14 (1962), no. 1, 117-141: 137f.

⁵⁹ Sarah Kofman, *Quatres romans analytiques*, Paris 1974, 124, quoted in Mary Jacobus, "Is there a Woman in this Text", 126f.

⁶⁰ Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 259.



3 Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo. An Intimate Self-Portrait*, introduction by Carlos Fuentes, essay and commentaries by Sarah M. Lowe, New York 2005, 110-111

[26] The result is an imperfect foot associated with positive, yet contrasting notions of subversion and aesthetically pleasing movement. It brings to mind the tightrope walker/ballerina in *What the Water Gave Me*, thus further entrenching the painting in terms of emancipatory femininity and intellectual prowess, all inscribed on top of the outline of a fissured foot. A male fantasy is thus replaced by the experience of pain, rebirth, and self-assertion. The composition is set against a startling background that makes an unambiguous reading of the sketch impossible: the foot hovers above the inscription "Viva Stalin/Viva Diego" that appears to disturb feminist interpretations of the work. However, this dichotomy is understandable once Frida's fascination with communism is taken into account: after WW II, she would often create *retablos* presenting Stalin as her saviour, while Karl Marx featured in *Moses* (1945) alongside other figures (Gandhi, Hitler, Meso-American deities) that had a strong impact on the history of human civilisation. A parallel reading of *What The Water Gave Me* and Kahlo's diary suggests that the ways in which she expressed her identity often drew from political and ideological contexts and expanded far into the public sphere. Kahlo's political activism remains to be competently described in academic scholarship.

Why Gradiva? Autobiography meets critical discourse

[27] The Gradivian context is particularly daunting in Kahlo's works that depict lower limbs because of the multiple representations of feet she included in her art since the late 1920s. Shapely, injured, aflame, or severed on plinths, they recur in large-scale works and diary sketches, often recalling the woes she suffered due to childhood polio and an atrophied left leg, as well as an almost-fatal bus accident at the

age of 18.⁶¹ Combined with the aftermath of polio, the accident led to over thirty spine and leg operations, gangrenous toes and extensive periods of immobilisation. Due to bone deterioration in the last decade of her life, Kahlo's right leg was amputated at the knee in 1953.⁶² Even if read autobiographically, as outcomes of very different injuries, the wounds in Kahlo's paintings are always pictured in close correlation with partial nakedness and the subject's non-canonical femininity.

[28] The medicalised discourses of foot fetishism and psychoanalysis,⁶³ as well as surrealism's veneration of the perfect gait as metaphor of ideal femininity are contexts that are crucial to understanding Kahlo's largely self-representational art,⁶⁴ yet the diversity of limbs in her works leads to believe she conceived the motif as much more than a solely autobiographical image of physical disability. Fetishism and its grounding in indigeneity, medical discourse and unimpeded physical movement as a symbol of ideal femininity must have strongly affected Kahlo's interest in surrealism. Liza Bakewell points out that the female models for the muralist movement in Mexico also largely retained their conservative social roles in the imagery of *mexicanidad*:

*despite the central location their images often occupied (as artisans, farmers, schoolteachers, and revolutionaries, or as such allegorical figures as Chastity, Purity, and Mother Earth), they were anonymous participants in the forward march of Mexican society.*⁶⁵

The keywords she uses – allegory, anonymous, march – connote all the basic meanings ascribed to the Woman-Child as presented in surrealist texts, visual and literary.

[29] The female foot as marker of eroticism and feminine artistic guidance has been extolled both by Breton and Rivera. What's more, in *Souvenir du Mexique*, Breton makes a connection between his admiration for the revolutionary spirit of Mexico and the female protagonist in Gabriel Ferry's *Costal the Indian Zapotec. A Tale of Mexico During the War of Independence* – Gertrudis' attributes include small, dainty feet. The same fetishism pervades Diego's representations of his lovers, a notable example being the inclusion of Kahlo's sister Christina (Diego's lover) in one of his murals, since, as Herrera notes, Rivera "has made Christina's dainty feet in their high-heeled sandals a pivot for his whole composition".⁶⁶ All in all, feet clearly bore cultural connotations to femininity in both surrealist and Mexican avant-garde contexts.

⁶¹ Herrera, *Frida*, 46-48, 19-21.

⁶² Herrera, *Frida*, 331.

⁶³ Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish*, 29.

⁶⁴ For a psychoanalytical approach to Kahlo's work, see Teresa del Conde, *Frida Kahlo: la pintora y el mito*, Medellín 1992.

⁶⁵ Liza Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading", in: *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13 (1993), no. 3, 165-189: 168.

⁶⁶ Herrera, *Frida*, 221.

Kahlo's surrealisms: the meeting behind the painting (1938)

[30] *What the Water Gave Me* maps out what Susan Friedman calls a narrative of encounter.⁶⁷ As I have mentioned in the introductory section of this essay, it was presented to the Bretons in 1938, when Jacqueline and André arrived in Coyoacán, Mexico, to meet Lev Trotsky in the house of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. The work became a welcome card for the Bretons and the object of Breton's high praise.⁶⁸ He then officially declared Kahlo was a surrealist, which subsequently pushed her career into international waters. This encounter had a lasting effect on Kahlo's art. Critics often fail to mention that the Breton visit was also important for another reason: for Kahlo, who disliked the husband from the start, more relevant than meeting the Pope of Surrealism was the wonderful relationship she established with Jacqueline Lamba. The women's friendship has been left unaccounted for in most studies of Kahlo's artistic development, and only recently did Whitney Chadwick reveal its biographical significance.⁶⁹ Both women were ensconced in hierarchical relationships with two of the most powerful artists of Europe and Latin America. Both relationships were troubled and riddled with separation and divorce. Moreover, it was Breton's wife who initiated Kahlo's voyage to Paris a year later, in 1939, for her solo exhibition at the famous Renou & Cole Gallery. The women grew even closer in Paris, and willingly scoured flea markets in search of supposedly meaningless paraphernalia, to keep as philosophically interesting objects.⁷⁰ Upon returning home, Kahlo wrote a touching letter to Lamba, and later copied it into her diary. Thus, it may be said the poetical letter and the painting *What the Water Gave Me* frame Kahlo's encounter with surrealism, as well as her rising fame and forthcoming international recognition. These two texts bear witness to her emotional and artistic fulfilment of the late 1930s, and seem particularly pertinent to the analysis of Gradivian femininity in her works.

[31] In April 1938, Kahlo was preparing the works destined to hang in Julien Levy's famed New York gallery in October. She was already envisaging a serious career. In a letter to Ella Wolfe written in 1937, Kahlo openly said:

*as you notice, I've also been painting. That is saying a good deal since up to now I've been spending my time loving Diego and, as far as painting is concerned, have done nothing worth showing; nevertheless, now I'm seriously painting apes.*⁷¹

The first public exhibition of four of her paintings had taken place in 1937 at the group show organised by the *Galería de Arte* of the National Autonomous University in Mexico City, which Frida called a "small

⁶⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Princeton NJ 1998, 9.

⁶⁸ Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 143f.

⁶⁹ Chadwick, *The Militant Muse*, chapter 3.

⁷⁰ Chadwick, "Mythic Woman / Real Women", 182; Herrera, *Frida*, 270.

⁷¹ Isabel Alcántara and Sandra Egnolff, *Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera*, Munich / New York 2011, 55.

and rotten place".⁷² Levy's institution, however, was known as "the gateway to America for European and Latin American Surrealists"⁷³ and Levy himself had contacted Kahlo in February upon hearing that her paintings had been exhibited at the University of Mexico.⁷⁴ Kahlo most certainly developed her *Water* project in anticipation of both the exhibition and the Bretons' visit. To understand Kahlo's views on surrealism, it is important to note the way in which Lamba recalled seeing Kahlo for the first time in Coyoacán: in an interview with Solomon Grimberg, she explicitly stated that Kahlo presented herself as a surrealist. Lamba described Kahlo standing on the threshold of her house,

*dressed in the fashion of the women of Tehuantepec region. And, as unexpected things were revealed, she told us that she was a surrealist painter. Her canvases surrounded, tragic and sparkling like her.*⁷⁵

Not only did Jacqueline immediately recognise Kahlo's worldly aspirations and the quality of her art, she also assisted the Mexican on her way to a global career by inviting her to Europe and maintained a close friendship that allowed both women to flourish in the following years. Although she and her husband both saw Kahlo as a representative of the same movement they belonged to, it was the partnership with Lamba that elicited a strong emotional reaction from Kahlo and opened the right doors.

Auto-performance: "I use surrealism"

[32] In his reading of *What the Water Gave Me*, Jeffrey Bellnap comments on the many paradigms of femininity included in the painting, but rules out the possibility of connecting them with the painting's surrealist contexts. Instead, he critically states that "Kahlo's self-representation as a bathing viewer ... is a highly lucid schematization of her own objectified inscription within the national and transnational cultural politics of post-revolutionary Mexico".⁷⁶ Bellnap emphasizes the "highly lucid" character of the work, implying that surrealist art does not function within the category of lucidity at all. Such has often been the argumentation of studies that aimed to seclude Kahlo's works from the historical context of its development in an artificial manner, most often to prove the artist's allegedly pure, independently Latin American vision. However, the artist herself declared "I use Surrealism as a means of poking fun at others without their realizing it, and of making friends with those who do realize it",⁷⁷ thus confirming that using surrealist techniques and emulating surrealist artists in her works were strategic practices

⁷² Herrera, *Frida*, 196.

⁷³ Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary", 33.

⁷⁴ Souter, *Kahlo*, 196.

⁷⁵ Salomon Grimberg, "Jacqueline Lamba: From Darkness, with Light", in: *Woman's Art Journal* 22 (2001), no. 1, 1-13: 9.

⁷⁶ Bellnap, "Disentangling the Strangled Tehuana", par. 1-2.

⁷⁷ Herrera, *Frida*, 43.

(following Michel de Certeau's notions of tactics and strategies), and not expressions of straightforward admiration or ignorance.

[33] On the other hand, in 1938 Kahlo told *Vogue's* Bertram Wolfe that she never knew she was a surrealist until Breton came to Mexico and told her so, which may be understood as an ironic remark about Breton's paternalistic behaviour.⁷⁸ However, the *Vogue* interview seems to contradict Jacqueline Lamba's account of meeting Kahlo, who, as I have mentioned before, according to Lamba introduced herself as a surrealist when meeting the Bretons.⁷⁹ Such conflicting statements bring to mind Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's arguments that purveying marginalised, peripheral experiences to an outsider, through letter or image, is possible, but "[t]he dominant groups' way of handling the three-part ontology of language has to be learned as well – if the subordinate ways of rusing with rhetoric are to be disclosed".⁸⁰ The phenomenon of the dominated entity 'rusing' its way into domination through skilful use of logic, silence and rhetoric, a sort of double code as described by Gubar and Gilbert, proves the importance of contextualising Kahlo's work within the surrealist aura of the 1930s. The key to understanding the outlined dissonances may lie in the well-known concept of female masquerade, coined by Joan Rivière in 1929. Alba Aragón emphasises the theatricality that transpires throughout Kahlo's *œuvre*, framing it as intimate, familiar yet subversively costumed at the same time:

*Frida Kahlo's appeal seems to rest largely on a sense of identification, the illusion that her image reveals an innermost truth to the viewer. Even the theatricality with which Kahlo represented herself is construed as a sign of intimacy, as a prelude to Kahlo's surrendering to the viewer.*⁸¹

Such modes of 'sparkling' self-presentation, in the words of Lamba, seem to be at work during her first meeting with Kahlo. The 'sense of identification' that underlies popular reception of Kahlo's work most probably rests on the difference between Kahlo's poetics and surrealism that Raul Flores Guerrero described as a "communicative subjectivism" opposed to the hermetic, "closed" subjectivism of Breton's followers.⁸²

[34] Frida's trip to Paris in 1939 resulted in her first vehement disavowal of surrealism – correspondence with her lover Nickolas Muray indicates an extremely loathsome attitude towards the surrealists and their lifestyle, with a few exceptions.⁸³ In Herrera's biography, Europe is repeatedly described as "rotten"

⁷⁸ Wolfe, "Rise of Another Rivera", 64.

⁷⁹ Grimberg, "Jacqueline Lamba", 5.

⁸⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation", in: idem, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York 1993, 179-200: 187.

⁸¹ Aragón, "Uninhabited Dresses", 521.

⁸² See footnote 7; Teresa del Conde, "Lo popular en la pintura de Frida Kahlo", in: *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 13 (1976), no. 45, 195-203: 202.

⁸³ Salomon Grimberg, *I Will Never Forget You...: Frida Kahlo to Nickolas Muray*, London 2005.

by Kahlo. Even though the Mexican would refer to surrealist artists as "sons of bitches" and "coocoo lunatics" after her Parisian stay,⁸⁴ a year later both Frida and Diego participated in the fourth International Surrealist Exhibition in Mexico City, organised by Breton – yet more evidence to the fact that Kahlo revelled in the publicity that came with working alongside those 'lunatics'.

[35] In countering any possibility of interpreting *What the Water Gave Me* within the framework of surrealism, Bellnap seems to be defensively echoing Alejo Carpentier's much contested distinction between the Latin American notion of the marvelous real as essentially different from surrealism's fantastical.⁸⁵ However, even Herrera notices Frida's performative stance on the issue of indigenous art and originality, and argues that she was too well-versed in the history of art "to have been a perfectly pure, self-generated artist".⁸⁶ She indicates that Kahlo's definition of the automatic creating process uncannily resembled that of Breton, with Kahlo describing it as

*[p]ure psychic automatism by which one intends to express verbally, in writing or by other method, the real functioning of the mind. Dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and beyond any esthetic or moral preoccupation.*⁸⁷

[36] The artists' corresponding views on the benefits of Surrealist techniques are evident in many other conflicting statements she made on the subject of her own art, an example of which was quoted to Herrera by art historian Antonio Rodríguez:

*I adore surprise and the unexpected. I like to go beyond realism... And it is doubtless true that in many ways my painting is related to that of the surrealists. But I never had the intention of creating a work that could be considered to fit in that classification.*⁸⁸

Rodríguez interviewed Kahlo around 1952, and this quote aptly demonstrates the self-conscious attitude she had developed towards surrealism by then. She was no longer a young painter trying to introduce herself into an international context, for whom enmity and adoration were one step apart, but an experienced, influential figure, ready to discuss with ease the many traditions her art had stemmed from.

⁸⁴ Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary", 45.

⁸⁵ Dawn Adès, "Surrealism and its Legacies in Latin America", in: *Proceedings of the British Academy* 167 (2011), 393-422: 412.

⁸⁶ Herrera, *Frida*, 221.

⁸⁷ Herrera, *Frida*, 221. The definition quoted by Herrera comes from the first manifesto of surrealism published in 1924, see Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 26. For more information on Kahlo's European heritage, see Nadia Ugalde Gómez and Juan Coronel Rivera, *Frida Kahlo*, Mexico City 2005.

⁸⁸ Herrera, *Frida*, 221.

Conclusion

[37] Although even the most recent critiques of Kahlo's art imply that she did not use surrealism, since she never 'frees herself from reality',⁸⁹ Kahlo's statements prove she assumed her own style surpassed realism, with surrealism being an important stop on the way. The widely disseminated statements critical of surrealism were pronounced in the years following her Paris exhibition, yet they have consequently overshadowed the ideological changes Kahlo underwent between 1932, when she drew exquisite corpses in New York, to 1952, when she described surrealism as based on bourgeois aesthetics.⁹⁰ What is more, critics often see Kahlo's relation to Breton as the key factor determining her open enmity towards and lack of interest in French surrealism, without taking into account the influence Lamba's growing artistic independence may have had on Kahlo's understanding of gender representations promulgated by the movement. The debate surrounding Kahlo's disengagement from surrealism continues to be centred around the binary opposition of reverence and disavowal, instead of including all 'middle-ground', performative possibilities. Studying this issue would be facilitated if only her relationship to Jacqueline Lamba were given wider scholarly attention.

[38] Compiling Kahlo's conflicting statements concerning the poetics of surrealism and comparing them with other women's evolution within the movement has allowed me to notice the various refractions of the surrealist femme-enfant phantasm present in Kahlo's works, as well as the artist's ambivalent and performative stance on the issue of surrealism itself. It appears that not only did Kahlo make use of surrealist rhetoric and Gradivian images to gain influence within the movement, she also introduced herself as surrealist when the need arose, especially in order to establish artistic recognition. Such autobiographical, performative moments in Kahlo's life had far-reaching consequences and became the cornerstone of her appeal to mass culture. These statements prove that quoting the Gradivian ideal in her works was a complex and politically meaningful strategy. Frida Kahlo's art undoubtedly shares surrealism's aim to bridge dualities and boundaries. The iconisation and fetishisation of her image in mass culture has resulted in her works being enclosed in a set of petrified, geographically limited categories, with no regard for the artist's interest in psychoanalysis or surrealist techniques. Kahlo undoubtedly strived for popularity and revelled in attention, and knew how to make use of the wider political and artistic conjuncture to further her own career.

[39] Not just Kahlo, but Mexico itself was claimed by surrealism as an idealised cartography. This in turn led to the marginalisation of anti-Gradivian, emancipatory motifs in critical studies of Kahlo's art, as was the case with her ties to Jacqueline Lamba. The encounter between these women in 1938 finalises a decade of Kahlo's transnational experiences and coincides with the creation of *What the Water Gave Me*—a radical portrait of hybrid femininity, unique in Kahlo's oeuvre because of its bathroom intimacy and

⁸⁹ Kettenmann, *Frida Kahlo*, 48.

⁹⁰ Herrera, *Frida*, 228.

the bather's act of self-narration presented from the authorial perspective. A detailed analysis of the painting shows the artist to step well beyond the Gradivian canon of ideal femininity and enter a new space, a heterotopic universe enclosed in a sterile, yet intimate setting. The heroine of the painting is re-enacted in a fissured, broken, and physically demystified paradigm, nonetheless she connotes activity and genealogical awareness, in stark contrast to Jensen's 'parentless' female protagonist, Gradiva.

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