INTERVIEW WITH SUSANA WALD

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Susana Wald is a painter, ceramicist, writer, publisher, and literary translator who lives in Oaxaca, Mexico. Born in Budapest in 1937, Wald emigrated with her family to Buenos Aires, where she studied ceramics at the Escuela Nacional de Cerámica before moving to Santiago de Chile in 1957. While continuing her work as a ceramicist, Wald began studying medicine at the Universidad de Chile in 1962. The following year, she met Chilean poet and artist Ludwig Zeller (1927-2019), director of the Gallery of the Ministry of Education, who would become Wald’s collaborator and life partner. Together they participated actively in surrealist groups in Chile and throughout the world, including the Paris-based Phases movement.

Wald’s lifelong dedication to surrealism has been unwavering. Her understanding of surrealism, however, is capacious rather than bounded or dogmatic; for Wald, surrealism names a state of imaginative defiance rather than a historical movement alone. As she explains:

I find that surrealism, especially in young people, is a natural impulse. It is something that happens to the very young before they get thoroughly “educated,” so to speak. In this sense it is pretty much immortal. It has been with us for a long time without having a name, and it will not die. It is a necessity; it is something humanity needs. It is not a mannerism; it is not a luxury. It is something natural, in the way that human minds work. I love to think about surrealism that way; it encourages me.1

“I have always been a violator of the concept,” Wald notes. Describing her own artistic process, she emphasizes how the physical act of making precedes the

formation of concepts, analysis, and questions. “I never question what I do. I just do it, and I never analyze it until it is done. I’m an analytic person, but I never analyze anything I’m doing while I’m doing it.” To create, in this regard, is thus also to experiment: it is to seek the transformation of reality through process, through the very practice of making.

All my life I have been experimenting. I’m unable to do anything straightforward and repetitious. There are some people who take hold of an image and never let go. There was this painter who started drawing hearts, and then he did hearts for years and years. I’m not capable of doing that. I’m experimenting not just with the materials, but also with the imagery. Otherwise, I don’t see the use of it. It’s a creative process. When you are creating something, you are always coming to something new, different from what you did before.²

This restlessness describes Wald’s work as a publisher and translator as well as her artistic process. Together with Zeller, Wald founded two publishing houses that circulated surrealist poetry and art from around the world, often in multilingual formats and featuring images and designs created by Wald and Zeller. The first, la Casa de la Luna, was founded in Santiago de Chile in 1968 and ended with Wald’s and Zeller’s exile two years later. La Casa de la Luna was more than just a publishing house; it was a hub of intellectual activity that contained an art gallery, a coffee house, and a gathering-place. After emigrating to Canada in 1970, Wald and Zeller founded Oasis Publications in Toronto, which published surrealist and surrealism-adjacent books from 1974 until Wald and her family moved to Oaxaca, Mexico, in 1994.

Wherever she has lived, Wald has dedicated her life to sustaining the conditions of possibility for experimental writing and art. Though she has exhibited her art internationally in solo and group exhibitions for nearly seventy years, her artistic work—not to mention her accomplishments as a translator, illustrator, editor, and publisher—has until recently been all but invisible to contemporary scholars and practitioners of surrealism.

Over the past several years, however, Wald has steadily gained recognition internationally for the imaginative force of her artwork. The curator and art historian Macarena Bravo Cox mounted a career retrospective of Wald’s art in Santiago de Chile in 2021, and other exhibitions have followed. A recent exhibition of Wald’s drawings at the Marissa Newman Projects gallery in New York City, titled *Alchemical Exercises*, featured a selection of Wald’s erotic drawings and paintings informed by the alchemical tradition. The titular *exercises* refer to the union of male and female elements in alchemical allegories: the marriage of sulfur and mercury, spirit and soul, in the transformative creation of the "great

2. Susana Wald, conversation with the authors, July 18, 2023. All further quotations from the artist are drawn from this conversation, which was conducted and recorded via Zoom.
Entrevista. Interview with Susana Wald

work.” In alchemy as in sexual intercourse, exercises refer to the concrete operations of an experiment, indicating the action rather than the outcome. The erotic entanglements of Wald’s male and female figures are emphatically procedural; they bristle with a kinetic energy that extends from the physicality of artistic creation itself.

Discussing her transdisciplinary artistic practice, Wald likens her own creative process to these other kinetic acts of transformation, whether erotic or alchemical. As she explains:

An exercise, such as when we do gymnastics, involves testing and improving the body. You can extrapolate that, and it can also be understood in a metaphorical manner: to test and improve yourself, your reality. I say “alchemical” because it applies a change that modifies reality, which is what I think the
alchemists were doing: that was the aim of the work. It was less a manipulation of matter itself than a transformation achieved through the manipulation of matter.

The visual arts are a physical thing. You even need to be in good shape physically to do it. You’re constantly lifting and pushing stuff that is really heavy and cumbersome and unyielding. You are constantly manipulating matter. The end result is, of course, an image, but the means to arrive at that image is physically demanding. It requires the strength of your biceps, your balance, your capability on your feet; things like that.

Trained formally in ceramics (1951-1956) and in medicine (1962-1963), Wald has experimented with the possibilities and resistances of matter throughout her long career as a visual artist, editor, publisher, translator, writer, and creative partner. Her work proceeds, one might say, from the possibilities of transformation achieved through the manipulation of matter. For Wald, moreover, such transformations refer as much to the reality of social relations—political freedom, gender equity—as to the creation of images. A Holocaust survivor who later fled Chile in 1970 with Zeller and their children, Wald describes herself as an “incorrigible optimist” who refuses to relinquish her commitment to the transformation of power itself.

In preparing this special issue of H-ART, we invited Wald to reflect on a series of questions pertaining to her experiences in the tiempos para el asombro of the Cold War-era Americas. What follows is drawn from our email correspondence with the artist.

—Jonathan P. Eburne

Jonathan P. Eburne and María Clara Bernal: You have been a major, if underrepresented, figure in global surrealism for over sixty years—dating from your first solo exhibition in 1963. In addition to your own painting, drawing, ceramic work, and writing you’ve run publishing houses, edited or co-edited countless books, curated numerous exhibitions, and translated poetry. Could you speak to the significance of this multifarious and sometimes thankless work to the imaginative life of surrealism? Put otherwise: is the work of surrealism limited to the creation of poetry and art, or does it also extend into the practical aspects of culture work?

Susana Wald: My understanding is that surrealism is a way of life. I have never found it to be thankless work. On the contrary, it is a joyous experience.
**JPE and MCB:** In 1970, together with Ludwig Zeller, you curated the exhibition *Surrealismo en Chile* at the Universidad Católica in Santiago, shortly before emigrating to Canada. Could you describe the political atmosphere around this exhibition, given Allende’s narrow margin of victory in the election that year? What did it mean for you to represent Chilean surrealism at this juncture?

**SW:** The *Surrealismo en Chile* show happened before the election that brought Allende’s victory. We were approached by students of a friend of ours who taught art history to help them to organize a show about surrealism. Most of the work was done by them. It was a wonderful experience for all concerned to be able to produce a really big and interesting show in only two weeks’ time.

**JPE and MCB:** Regarding your role as an editor and as a curator of exhibitions, could you describe your relationship with so-called “mainstream” surrealism and, perhaps more specifically, could you explain what this term even suggests to you?

**SW:** I think this concept of a “mainstream” comes from academics who are not involved in surrealism and want to classify it. There is no such thing in my view. Surrealism existed before it got a name, it is a way of focusing on reality and inducing creativity.

**JPE and MCB:** Two of the novelists most closely associated with the so-called “Latin American boom” in Cold War-era fiction, José Donoso and Isabel Allende, were (or are) Chilean. For all that has been said about the relationship—or non-relationship—between surrealism and “magical realism” in fiction and art, do you have thoughts about the notion of “magical realism” (or “lo real maravilloso,” as Alejo Carpentier described the cultural *mestizaje* that he claimed was distinctive to the Americas)?

**SW:** Magical realism and surrealism are different. They both look for the wonderful, the “maravilloso,” but in different ways. Surrealism is not tied to geographical concerns, it is not classifiable by countries, it is a state of mind that exists mostly among the young and is constantly renewed. Magical realism, in my view, is a style, a mannerism.

**JPE and MCB:** Much of your work engages with the iconography and conceptual history of alchemy. Could you speak about your interest in metamorphosis as represented in the alchemical tradition, and, in particular, your interpretation of this tradition from the perspective of Jung?

**SW:** This is a huge question, very complex in nature and hard to answer. Basically, Jung discovered in the alchemical texts that he examined that there was a thread running through them that refers to the inner, psychological development of the practitioners. He proposes that while doing alchemical work and
manipulating matter the practitioner is actually helping his/her own inner life’s progress.

**JPE and MCB:** What are your thoughts about humor as a form or means of resistance? Your *Ultramuebles* series has a distinctive conceptual and formal genealogy—you’ve mentioned elsewhere that the term comes from Kurt Seligmann—but there’s still something deftly humorous about paintings that depict women as pieces of furniture, for instance.

**SW:** I’m a survivor of the Second World War. During the most terrible events people survived emotionally by inventing jokes. I have never before or after heard so many. Humor is a way of reacting to something in an oblique way, when a frontal approach is not possible. Women have been treated like furniture for several millennia. My “ultrafurniture” drawings and paintings express this idea.

**JPE and MCB:** Given your movements around the world, what differences have you witnessed in the way Surrealism operates in the countries where you have lived: Argentina, Chile, Canada, Mexico? For instance: What did it mean to be a surrealist in Chile in the 1960s and 70s? How did it differ from surrealism in Mexico?

**SW:** I knew about the concept of surrealism through the books and concepts that Ludwig Zeller brought into my world. Before that I didn’t know that I was a surrealist; I worked from my inner need—my instinct, if you will. I had no contact with the people who were engaged with the surrealist movement in Argentina. I did see their work and met some of them later, when I was already living in Chile. Surrealism arrived in Mexico when artists and writers fled for their lives at the time of Nazi persecutions. There is an element of instinctive and not conscious surrealism in the work of Native Mexicans, and in this respect I feel close to them. To establish “differences” is a means to classify and examine things. If there are differences in the work of surrealists in one place or another, it is only due to environmental conditions. By this I mean that there may be more stimulus for artistic creation or possibilities—or to publish one’s work—in some places than others. The essence is what matters, in my view.