

15. Carrington, untitled statement, in *Leonora Carrington: A Retrospective Exhibition* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1976), unpaginated; Tanning, "Dorothea Her Lights and Shadows," *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: Gimpel-Weitzenhoffer Gallery, 16 October–15 November 1979), unpaginated.

16. Estella Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 20; Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists, 1550–1950* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 21 December 1976–13 March 1977), 67 and note 243.

17. Reproduced in Alain Bosquet, *Dorothea Tanning* (Paris: Pauvert, 1966), 34 and 72, respectively.

18. Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 133–60, 258, and elsewhere.

19. Reproduced in *La Femme surréaliste: Obliques*, 72.

20. See Colquhoun's *Pine Family* (1941) and Fini's *Chthonian Divinity Watching Over the Sleep of a Young Man* (1947), reproduced in Chadwick, figs. 106 and 107. An untitled and undated drawing by Oppenheim features a crucified penis; reproduced in *La Femme surréaliste: Obliques*, 192. Toyen's *Dessin érotique* (1936) is a drawing of a woman's gloved hands manipulating severed male genitals bleeding from the urethra; reproduced in *Styrsky, Toyen, Heisler* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1982), 65.

21. Marcel Brion, *Leonor Fini* (Paris: Pauvert, 1955), unpaginated.

22. With this final phrase, Chadwick, 237, leaves the reader with the impression that Surrealism was a harmless investigation of aesthetic originality and productivity. This is precisely the impression that we are here trying to avoid.

23. The sources are far too numerous to list here. A useful introduction with a comprehensive bibliography is Mary Ritchie Key, *Male/Female Language* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1975).

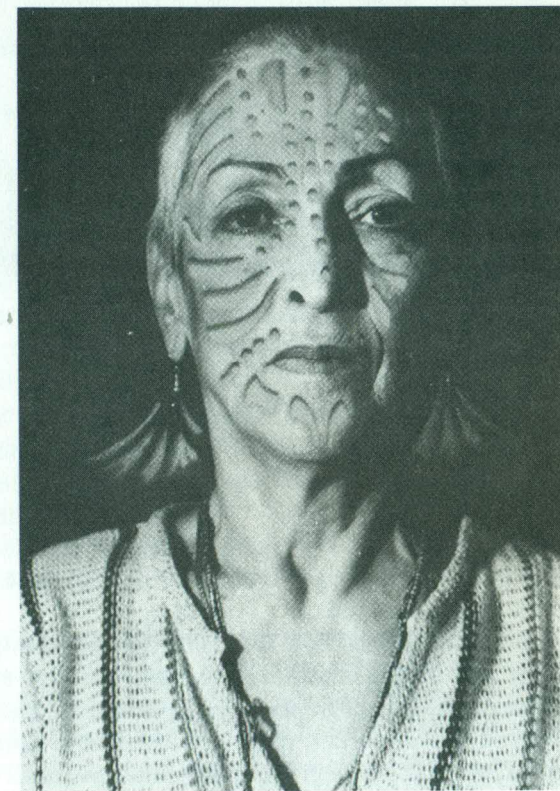
24. Jitendra N. Thakerar et al., "Psychological and Linguistic Parameters of Speech Accommodation Theory," in Colin Fraser and Klaus R. Scherer, eds., *Advances in the Social Psychology of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 218.

25. Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 1986), 215.

26. Howard Giles and Philip Smith, "Accommodation Theory: Optimal Levels of Convergence," in Howard Giles and Robert N. St. Clair, eds., *Language and Social Psychology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 64. The authors are speaking of the field of developmental psychology, but their words seem oddly appropriate here.

Androgyny: Interview with Meret Oppenheim

Robert J. Belton



Oppenheim, *Meret Oppenheim*, 1984. Hand-painted photograph. Courtesy Galerie Farideh Cadot, Paris.

In the spring of 1986, I received a telephone call informing me that Meret Oppenheim had died at the age of seventy-two. I felt a peculiar sense of loss, though I had only met the Swiss artist once.¹ When I communicated this emotion to a colleague, I was surprised to discover that he knew little of her aside from her most famous work, a fur-covered cup, saucer, and



Fig. 1 Oppenheim, *Object (Déjeuner en fourrure)*, 1936. Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

spoon in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.² Too many people know Oppenheim only through this object – known in France as the *Déjeuner en fourrure* of 1936 (Fig. 1) – yet the artist herself considered it one of her less important works. I resolved to publish a small portion of our meandering conversation, not originally intended as an interview, in the hopes that fewer people would see her only as the maker of the quintessential surrealist object.³

Oppenheim was born in Berlin-Charlottenburg in 1913 to a German father and a Swiss mother. She spent the war with her grandparents in Switzerland. Although she may have received some inspiration from her maternal grandmother, who had earlier been a printer and subsequently a writer, she did not begin to paint and draw until 1920 or 1921. Her exposure to modernism began with the onset of adolescence in the later 1920s. She collected reproductions of expressionist, fauve, and cubist works. By 1930, she had begun to think of herself as an artist with modernist leanings, and in a school notebook she made drawings with some collage elements. After leaving the school she attended a few weeks of classes in Basel's Ecole des Arts et Métiers. There she met two artists, obscure to us today, Walter Kurtwienkin and Irene Zurkinden, who inspired her to go to Paris.

Oppenheim arrived in the French capital in May of 1932. She took a

small hotel room in the rue d'Odessa, a very short walk from the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where she sporadically attended open drawing classes. Much more important to her development were her discovery of the work of Max Ernst and her acquaintance with Alberto Giacometti, then still in league with the Surrealists. In 1933, Giacometti brought Hans Arp to her studio, a visit which led to an invitation to exhibit with the surrealist group. This marked the beginning of a new phase of Surrealism, for the French movement had formerly restricted the participation of women to the subordinate role of the *femme-enfant*, a manipulable, fairylike muse, enchanting in her innocence, youth, and purity. Oppenheim was very much seen as a *femme-enfant* – she was just twenty years old – but the participation in the same exhibition of the older, much less fairylike Valentine Hugo⁴ may have helped the young Swiss woman's reputation as an artist. Nevertheless, Man Ray took delight in manipulating her image. He photographed her in the nude, standing beside a printing press so that the press's handle formed a false phallus.⁵

Oppenheim's greatest *succès de scandale*, however, was the *Déjeuner en fourrure*, which Alfred H. Barr, Jr., bought for the Museum of Modern Art in 1936. Despite this, the artist soon entered a prolonged period of artistic crisis and emotional despondency. She began to reexamine her life and her career in 1937. Although she maintained contact with artists' groups and participated in collective exhibitions nearly annually, she slipped into a period of total negativity which lasted seventeen years. She made little, destroying much of her output. Though she had visited Paris in 1939 and 1950, it was not until 1954 that she felt her self-exile come to a definitive end. This was marked by her decision to take a studio once again, this time in Bern, where she had moved in 1949 with her new husband, Wolfgang La Roche. In 1959 she achieved another *succès de scandale* with her famous inaugural feast served on the nude body of a woman at the EROS exhibition of surrealist art.⁶

The number of her exhibitions increased regularly, and in 1967 the Moderna Museet of Stockholm assembled a retrospective of her work. In 1972 she took a studio in Paris, while retaining her studio in Bern. In 1975 she was honored with the art prize of the city of Basel. In 1984–85 a final retrospective toured Paris, Bern, Frankfurt, and Berlin. She died in late 1985.

Paris, 7 November 1984

- RB I'll put my first question in terms of cartoonlike simplicity: André Breton believed women were like goddesses, whereas Xavière Gauthier says Woman is often trampled, destroyed for a perverse delight.⁷ Which is closer to the truth?
- MO Neither is right. The problem is that men have always *had* women. Women are not goddesses, not fairies, not sphinxes. All these are the projections of men. Neither are men the projections of women. They are not heroes, not brigands, soldiers, what-have-you. Love always leads to overestimations of others, in both directions, men to women, women to men. In fact, I discovered the wonderful poetesses Bettina Brentano and Karoline von Günderode very late in life, later than I should have, because all the men around me said you must read Rimbaud, you must read Novalis, and so on. The women were loved, but only as women. Now, I am not a feminist, but this situation does no justice to two writers of very high poetic quality.
- RB So gender identity plays no role in the character of art in your view?
- MO There is no difference between man and woman; there is only artist or poet. Sex plays no role whatsoever. That's why I refuse to participate in exhibitions of women only.
- RB What then is the role of love? What is the function, the effect of these overestimates? Has it anything to do with sensuality?
- MO Friendship is the most satisfying criterion for marriage and other relations between men and women. Pure sensuality is much less worthy of confidence.
- RB Especially where sensuality is a screen for some dominance or other.
- MO Yes.
- RB This is sometimes the case in the treatment of the *image* of women in surrealist art, is it not?
- MO Certainly Woman has been mistreated, which makes this Gauthier seem correct – I have the book but I confess I haven't read it. Bellmer and Molinier, for example, mistreated the bodies of their women.⁸ But they are cases, psychological cases, perverts. Crazies, you know.
- RB Patrick Waldberg told me the same thing, and Marcel Jean refused to talk about them at all.
- MO I am not surprised.
- RB Let's talk about *your* career a little. What was it that brought you to Paris? Surely it wasn't Surrealism?
- MO Not at all. One day when I was ill my father asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I said I wanted to be a painter. I was eighteen. He

said, "A painter? In Paris or Munich?" I chose Paris, because Irene Zurkinden, a Neo-Impressionist from Basel, could introduce me to the Montparnasse crowd. I didn't know Surrealism, but I had a collection of reproductions of expressionist work and some of the French school. It wasn't long before I met the Surrealists, though. I was very bored with my studies at the Grande Chaumière and I met Alberto Giacometti at the Café du Dôme just up the street. I drew his ear and made a little wax version too.⁹ I went to his studio and saw his sculptures of the surrealist period. I admired him and I invited him to my first studio in the fall of 1933. It was in the rue d'Alésia.

- RB Isn't that rather far to the south?
- MO Not at all. A few blocks only.
- RB And it was Giacometti who introduced you to the Surrealists?
- MO Yes. He came to see my work in the new studio and came back later with Hans Arp. They invited me to show with the Surrealists in the Salon des Surindépendants.
- RB That was in 1933. Do you think that the presence of Valentine Hugo in the exhibition helped your reception by the group? She was much older and, unlike the surrealist woman of the 1920s, she had been long recognized as an artist.
- MO I don't really remember. I don't even remember what was in the show, though I still have the catalogue. It's not important to me anymore. I was definitely the youngest person in Breton's circle.
- RB How did you become a member of the circle?
- MO André Breton asked me to come to the café in the Place Blanche. He asked me at the opening of the Salon. I was young and impressed. We met there nearly every day. Most of them were much older, as much as two decades.
- RB Did you find yourself alienated by this difference?
- MO I was not a *femme-enfant*, if that is what you mean. I was sexually active at the age of seventeen. No, any distance I may have felt was more a matter of language. I didn't have a good grasp of French then. Besides, I didn't really understand their political talk.
- RB They didn't specifically discuss political roles for women, by any chance?
- MO Politics in the abstract only.
- RB How were you understood by them? You say you were not a *femme-enfant*. What was your role?
- MO It was not political. In fact, when I returned to Paris in 1950 I saw little of the Surrealists precisely because of their dogmatism, politi-

cal and otherwise. Yet, there is a part of my nature which is, how could I put it, surreal or surrealistic. I was doing Surrealism before the letter. I have become known as a maker of surrealist objects, but they were the least of my endeavors. I thought of myself as a picture-maker.

RB It's ironic, then, that the *Déjeuner en fourrure* is considered your masterpiece.

MO That's the Museum of Modern Art for you! But to return to the dogmatism of Breton and others—it was he who named it *Déjeuner en fourrure*, playing on the associations with queer sexuality in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and Sacher-Masoch's *Vénus en fourrures*.¹⁰ The word-games of critics, the power struggles of men! So part of its scandalous appeal was not invented by me. It was a fluke. I had been making bits of fur-covered jewelry to make a little money in 1936. I showed a piece to Picasso and Dora Maar and they joked that anything could be covered with fur—the chairs, the door. I added the cups and saucers on the table. I was thinking only of the contrast of material textures. Later, Breton asked me to participate in the Ratton show.¹¹ I simply made up the object according to the idea. I didn't care about any title at all. I don't really care that it is now known by Breton's title.

RB So there wasn't any sense of being exploited by Breton?

MO No.

RB And it wasn't due to this that you left Paris a year later?

MO Well, no. I ran out of money and my parents couldn't send any. My father was in Switzerland, where he couldn't work.

RB There was also your crisis of conscience. Depression?

MO It is difficult to talk about.

RB You worked very sporadically.

MO I did no work at all for eighteen months. Then I went back to the Ecole des Arts et Métiers in Basel. I always had something in the works, though it was years before I felt anything positive or optimistic about it. It was mechanical, like the academic drawing I did at the Ecole.

RB It didn't bore you like at the Grande Chaumière?

MO Yes. Terribly boring. But it was very useful.

RB How so? (Oppenheim then waved her hand through the air and made no reply.) How did your crisis period end?

MO Suddenly. I recovered my pleasure in making pictures very suddenly in late 1954. I just walked out the door and rented a studio.

RB In Basel?

MO In Bern.

RB Yes, of course. With your husband. Did he help you out of your crisis?

MO Let's not talk about this any longer. Just remember what I said about friendship.

RB Yes, of course. You said that sexuality is less important than friendship.

MO More or less. But sometimes I find it difficult to put into words. It took me a month to write my little speech accepting the artistic prize at Basel in 1975.¹² I was still rewriting it three years later.

RB You take quite a strong position in that text, especially concerning the female artist.

MO Yes. I thanked the city for the award and went on to say how difficult it is for a woman to receive such attention.

RB And yet you say you are not a feminist.

MO Not in the usual sense. You see, any great artist expresses the whole being. In a man, a feminine part helps in the creation of this expression. In a woman, there is a corresponding masculine component. I added a note to my speech which clears this up.

RB Your terminology sounds Jungian.

MO Terminology? We don't yet have proper terms for these ideas. But Jungian, yes. I started to read him in the crisis period. My father brought him to my attention. Jung went far beyond Freud's obsession with sexuality. Woman's problem is not her sexuality but her relations with society.

RB This sounds like conventional feminism.

MO There is a difference. I don't believe that women should become like men or adopt a male lifestyle. I believe that women *are* like men. Man is a genius who needs a muse. Woman is a muse who needs a genius. It's a kind of androgyny.

RB Speaking of androgyny, how do you feel about the photograph that Man Ray made of you? The one with the printing press handle mimicking a phallus.

MO I don't know. That was Man Ray's work.

RB You don't recognize this as your work in any way?

MO Not at all. He was the boss.

RB Then *your* nudity was *his* statement?

MO Yes, except insofar as I was of a rebellious nature.

RB Then your notion of a mental androgyny of sorts has little to do with Man Ray's physical androgyny?

MO It happens that way. The feast at the EROS exhibition in 1960 started out as a spring festival for friends in Bern. Breton heard that I had served a meal on a nude woman and asked that I recreate it for the EROS show. But the original intention was misunderstood. Instead of a simple spring festival, it was yet another woman taken as a source of male pleasure. There's always a gap between aims and public comprehension.

RB It's like dreams. A different interpretation for every person.

MO Perhaps the only one of value is that of the dreamer.

RB So only you can interpret your dreams and your work?

MO Perhaps dreams. But they are analyzed in a Jungian way, not a Freudian one. Jung placed more emphasis on the collective unconscious and on archetypal images. Jung taught me that some people just need someone else to talk to. But my father didn't understand what Jung had to say about the feminine part of a man. None of the men understood women.



Fig. 2 Oppenheim, *Femme-pierre*, 1938. Oil on cardboard. Private collection, Switzerland.



Fig. 3 Oppenheim, *Geneviève*, 1971, after a drawing of 1942. Wood and oil-based paint.

RB So your works are not analogous to dreams?

MO As a matter of principle, I absolutely did not illustrate my dreams in my work. They were strictly part of my interior development. Now, as analogies . . . , I don't know.

RB Your *Femme-pierre* of 1938 (Fig. 2), which shows a sleeping woman lying by a stream—on closer examination, she becomes a pile of stones. Is this an archetypal woman?

MO Yes and no. A stone woman is prevented from action but her legs are immersed in the stream. Which is to say it is a picture of contraries: sleeping stone and living waters. But she is not some ideal woman. It's the same for my *Geneviève* (Fig. 3). Neither represents Woman in general. They are both very . . .

RB Specific?

MO Specific to my case. Both were made during my crisis period. The stone is my inability to do any work, and the only really positive thing is the feet, which represent a connection with the unconscious.

RB Is this related to Joan Miró's *The Farmer's Wife*,¹³ in which her large feet put her fertile nature in contact with the fertile ground?

MO Not at all. A man could make exactly the same statement using identical plastic elements. It's the same with *Geneviève*. My arms were broken like the sculpture's oars. I could do nothing. My arms weren't actually broken, you understand, but the point I am making is that the idea is not Woman but me, myself. It could just as easily have been a man.

RB And so we return to the Jungian androgyny.

MO Let's put it this way: I am ready to believe now that men and women are absolutely equal in their brains. Of course, women are generally less strong, slower than men in physical terms. Still, it's like dogs that are bred in a certain way. So too are women. Now this is just a crazy idea of my own but suppose that in primitive societies, the slower women were the ones who were caught by men, then raped and impregnated. The fast ones never had any children, so the slow were effectively "bred" by men so they would be subordinate. So that men could wield the power, whether it be the power of the arm, the tool, the weapon, the bomb, money, whatever.

RB But now we live in an enlightened era and things are beginning to change.

MO Slowly. The French Revolution occurred during an enlightened era and look what happened then. During, they signed equal rights amendments; after, they annulled them with the guillotine.

RB Must women take power?

MO It is always a question of taking, as I said in my speech at Basel. But don't ever forget that women can be as evil as men. We must see behind our projections, you know. Woman as an abstract thing is no more perfect than Man.

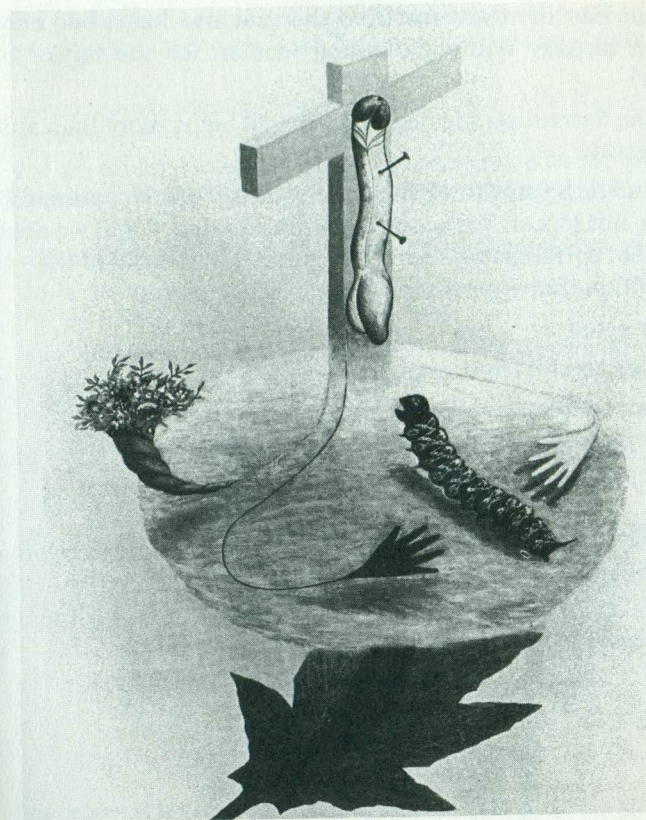


Fig. 4 Oppenheim, Untitled painting, after an exquisite corpse by the artist with Robert Lupo and Anna Boetti. Whereabouts unknown.

RB Is that why one of your paintings shows a crucified phallus (Fig. 4)?

MO That started as an exquisite corpse.¹⁴ It's not supposed to be any sort of feminist revenge.

RB It makes me think of the serpent lifted up by Moses, like a prophecy of the crucifixion.¹⁵ And the serpent is like a phallus.

MO People say I make a lot of serpents. (She opens a copy of Bice Curiger's monograph,¹⁶ counting reproductions.) Seven or eight. Some say the serpent equals the male. Breton was fascinated by this kind of thing. That recalls paradise and the fall of man. The woman is always blamed. But what is actually happening is not a fall but an ascent, away from the world of animals. One sees these serpents in representations of the goddesses of Crete. The serpent means a spiri-

tual ascent into the universe. And the universe has a bad enough reputation already without blaming women for the fall of man. (Laughter)

RB Some of the Surrealists seemed to think that being more than animal is not so good.

MO Humankind is the only thing that gives value to life. Not animals, not television, not soccer. We are part of a grand spiral,¹⁷ and we are on a point on that spiral that is seeing a beginning to the end of the – Jewish? – tradition that women are second-class citizens.

RB Possessions, too.

MO We must be good friends, men and women.

RB Finally, can art play a role in a social revolution for women?

MO Well, yes, inasmuch as art can produce a spiritual state. After everything else is destroyed, art and philosophy remain.

Madame Oppenheim escorted me back down the stairs and stepped outside with me to mail some letters. "It's so tranquil," she said, "but the light is not good." As we shook hands, she invited me to call again anytime. I had hoped to do so before that light finally failed.

Notes

1. This was during a lengthy stay in Paris funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am indebted to the Council for its support.
2. See *The Museum of Modern Art, New York: The History and the Collection* (New York: Abrams, 1984), catalogue no. 191, pp. 146–47.
3. Unfortunately, this is very much the impression of the obituary in *Art in America* 74:1 (January, 1986), 166, 168, as well as in the entries of most general reference works.
4. Hugo was then forty-six years old. She had first exhibited in 1909. See Anne de Margerie, *Valentine Hugo, 1887–1968* (Paris: Damase, 1983).
5. Entitled *Erotique-voilée*, the photograph was reproduced with the phallic portion cropped out in *Minotaure* 5 (February 1934), 15. The full version is available in Mary Ann Caws, "Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art," in Susan Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1986), 262–87.
6. So called because of the central theme. The usual orthography is *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* (Paris: Galerie Daniel Cordier, 1959–60).
7. The reference is to Xavière Gauthier's *Surréalisme et sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). Breton's position is outlined therein.
8. Hans Bellmer (1902–75), German-born but associated with Surrealism from 1934, when his famous distorted *Doll* first appeared in *Minotaure* 6 (5 December 1934), 30–31. Pierre Molinier (1900–76), obscure French painter and maker of nar-

cissistic photographs of himself as a woman. Both artists were given to extreme manipulations of the female form. Both are discussed by Gauthier, *Surréalisme et sexualité*.

9. See the reproduction in *Meret Oppenheim* (Paris: ARC Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 27 October–10 December 1984), 11.

10. The reference is to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836–95), whose *Venus in Furs* led Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902) to describe sexual submission as masochism.

11. *L'Exposition d'objets surréalistes* (Paris: Galerie Ratton, 22–29 May 1936).

12. This is the "Allocution à Bâle" reprinted with revisions of 1978 in the ARC catalogue (n. 9), 32–33.

13. Reproduced and discussed in James Thrall Soby, *Joan Miró* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 34–36.

14. The famous Surrealist game in which each person draws a portion of a figure without seeing what others have done. Oppenheim practiced it with Roberto Lupo and Anna Boetti.

15. John 3:14–15.

16. Bice Curiger, *Meret Oppenheim*, second edition (Zürich: ABC-Verlag, 1984).

17. A large tower-fountain has been erected by Oppenheim in Bern with a spiral motif. Unfortunately, the work did not come up in conversation. See the reproduction in the ARC catalogue (n. 9), 70.