

‘Open sesame’: Dorothea Tanning’s critical writing

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Could I, a dreamer, argue that history and literature are bedfellows?¹

Dorothea Tanning

Alongside her better-known visual oeuvre as a painter and sculptor, Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012) also produced a smaller, although by no means less interesting, literary output. Indeed, her writings could be said to inform her visual art and vice versa. She worked on her one novel (or, more accurately, novella), *Chasm: A Weekend*, from 1947 to 2004, almost the span of her entire career.² Set in the desert of the South-West, it is tempting to read the novella as a fictive biography of its author who lived in Arizona sporadically between 1943 and 1957, as well as a micro-history of western women’s struggles since the Salem witch trials of 1692. The spectre of twentieth-century wartime fascism looms large, endowing her novella with historical authenticity, and representing a real-life patriarchal force which her protagonist, Destina, must overcome. Tanning’s fiction writing extended to short stories such as ‘Blind Date’ (1943) and ‘Dream It or Leave It’ (1947), a draft narrative for a ballet on the theme of William Wordsworth’s literary character Lucy Gray (c. 1947), as well as biographies of fellow artists Max Ernst (1949; 1983) and Bill Copley (1951).³ Her own autobiographies, *Birthday* (1986) and *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2001), occupy a gap between fiction and non-fiction; crammed with poetic language, anecdotes, and self-reflective inner monologues. As the cultural theorist Mieke Bal argues, all biographical writing is fiction to some extent, whilst Tanning herself reminds us that ‘everything we do is an autobiography’.⁴ These autobiographies have come to function as indispensable primary histories and memoirs of the avant-garde cultures she lived and worked through, and are often cited as sources for scholarship on other artists she was connected to. Indeed, given her longevity, Tanning became a reluctant spokesperson for several artistic and literary movements.

Yet Tanning’s writing does more, revealing a sharp critical thinker as well as an important contributor to experimental literary forms. For example,

through her niece Mimi Johnson, Tanning became a supporter of the conceptual writer and performer Constance DeJong who set up Standard Editions, financed by Tanning, in order to self-publish DeJong's *Modern Love* (1977) and an earlier version of Tanning's *Chasm* manuscript entitled *Abyss* (1977).⁵ Later, in the mid-1990s, Tanning was considered one of the 'oldest living, emerging poet[s]', attending readings and associating with literary circles around New York, ushered by a younger generation of writers such as Brenda Shaughnessy.⁶ Although Tanning was no stranger to poetry, having spent time collaborating with the surrealists in the 1940s and 1950s and having experimented with poetry herself since at least the 1970s, this medium gradually became her focus. As her physical investment in painting waned, poetry became her primary expressive vehicle, with some critics even referring to this late flowering as her 'second career'.⁷ Figures such as James Merrill, Richard Howard, and Harry Mathews supported this later practice, and by the millennium she was publishing in several high-profile poetry magazines.⁸ Tanning's commitment to this field is evidenced by her substantial donation to the Academy of American Poets, setting up what would become the annual Wallace Stevens Award (1994) which leading literary figures like Adrienne Rich would win (1996) and Susan Stewart would judge (2006–10). Tanning describes the poetry scene as an 'enchanted world ... like the stile in the fairy tale that Blunder did not recognize as the wishing gate he had sought all day'.⁹ This notion of her text/image intersection as a turnstile or gateway would become a recurrent metaphor, a portal that could yield and enable the artist to traverse her medial domains.

What is lesser known at present is Tanning's attention to non-fiction. Far from wishing to segregate her fictional writing (much of which, as I have suggested, contains illuminating material pertaining to the history of the twentieth century and the surrealist movement), the focus here will be on writing by Tanning which critiques intellectual history and/or comments directly on artists and movements. This chapter seeks to position such writing (especially her self-reflexive artist's statements) in the context of her broader oeuvre, as well as within the discursive framework of revisionary feminist perspectives on surrealism, and to explore how Tanning both shores up and splinters away from such thinking. Significantly, much of this material by Tanning was drafted and/or published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s concurrently with major shifts in revisionary scholarly pursuits. In what follows, I reconsider select writing through a historiographical approach. In particular, I focus on two texts by Tanning from the late twentieth century: 'Statement' (1991) and 'Some Parallels in Words and Pictures' (1989). I will also consider one example of her artist's books, *Ouvre-Toi (Open Sesame)* (1971), which I believe could hold the keys to understanding the intermedial overlap in her broader practice. My aim is to recontextualise Tanning within

a transitional late modernist and feminist milieu when surrealism was becoming historicised. Combining factors that delayed her receipt of wider critical acclaim were no doubt stylistic (as well as gender-orientated), namely her visual narratives coupled with her self-confessed penchant for purple prose, as ‘floral’ language is sometimes described, and the narrative excesses of the gothic, fantasy, and western genres. By realigning Tanning’s writings with her imagery, and by retrospectively drawing both parallels and contrasts with revisionary histories, I argue for a rereading of Tanning’s critical writings as an undisclosed manifestation of the feminist cause in surrealism studies and beyond.

Making a statement

It is often pointed out that Tanning did not personally consider herself a ‘feminist’ and found the term misleading.¹⁰ However, it is also true that her work has had a sizeable effect on subsequent generations, particularly in terms of clarifying an investment in surrealist techniques which also sought for gender equality.¹¹ Whitney Chadwick reflects on the discomfort faced by certain surrealists in her foundational, if, at times, problematic, *Women Artists and Surrealism* (1985): ‘[t]hat the very existence of such a book creates philosophical problems for some of the women involved’, she notes, ‘seems to me regrettable, if unavoidable’.¹² An intersection between living surrealist figures and revisionary perspectives is notable at this moment in history, and not without tension. On the one hand, work by surrealist-associated figures like Tanning was finally celebrated and brought to critical attention. On the other, these living and, by and large, still practising artists/writers were categorised and historicised. Tanning explicitly rejected such limitations. A second (or third) generation of feminist revisionary history is now attempting to nuance these position statements, map the genealogies, and reprise the vitality of these politics while acknowledging that historiographies are never neutral.¹³

Writing on Angela Carter’s intertextual appropriation of surrealist legacies, Anna Watz has explored the overlap that has occurred between the primary histories of surrealism and the secondary historiography of its feminist critiques: ‘Carter’s feminist-surrealist aesthetic can arguably be seen as contributing to a revisionary history of the avant-garde, one that considers certain strands of 1970s experimental feminist writing as a continuation and an elaboration of what we have come to think of as the historical avant-garde.’¹⁴ The founding of the Virago feminist publishing house by Carmen Callil in 1973 can be seen as symptomatic of this intersection (Virago would publish *Chasm* in 2004). Expanding with a political force

since the 1970s, an extensive history of revisionary scholarship now exists, much of which, in turn and for better or worse, would conversely fold back on to shaping the attitudes and viewpoints of surrealist-orientated figures like Tanning. Their coexistence is remarkable. Moreover, Patricia Allmer has recently critiqued 'the persistence of androcentric narratives' in surrealist scholarship, as well as the 'critical erasure' and supposed 'rediscovery' of surrealist works by women.¹⁵ The discourse of 'rediscovery' is particularly problematic for Allmer, because it suggests that such figures do not have a critical lineage and are thus little-known or devoid of intellectual appeal, both of which are, of course, now wholly untrue – Allmer goes on to note Peggy Guggenheim's exhibition *31 Women* (1943) as a primary example which contradicts the rediscovery narrative. (Work by Tanning was included in this show.) Allmer also demonstrates how waves of revisionary criticism continued to raise these profiles. Indeed, it must be noted that Tanning et al. are now considered iconic for a younger generation of creative practice, which suggests that revisionary histories have an intergenerational dimension and relevance.¹⁶ The recent death of the feminist art historian Linda Nochlin (1931–2017) makes this discussion all the more topical and timely – in the wake of such revisions and the mass diversification of art education, her famous essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971) is now receiving some equally 'great' responses.¹⁷

Tanning had her own views on her scholarly 'revival'. In an essay collection, *Surrealism and Women*, co-edited by Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli, and Gwen Raaberg (1991), a short one-page statement by Tanning appears (dated 3 December 1989) – a response, or, more precisely, a retort, to being invited to contribute to an academic compilation on a topic which, for her, was profoundly controversial. Given the lyricism of her other writings and the characteristic poetics of her titles, 'Statement' is surprisingly succinct yet fits with this small but potent, nonconformist contribution.¹⁸ (The short-lived imprint Standard Editions was similarly pragmatic in its titling, a conceptual move, DeJong tells us, to avoid 'fancy baroque names'.¹⁹ This was an interesting redirection for Tanning, whose writing to this point tended towards the baroque and feminine gothic).²⁰ As noted earlier, Tanning did not appreciate being referred to as a feminist and certainly did not consider herself a 'woman artist' (nor, one imagines, a 'woman writer'), and she makes her objection to this category clear in this particular statement, arguing succinctly: 'If you lose a loved one does it matter if it is a brother or a sister? If you become a parent does it matter if it is to a boy or girl? If you fall in love does it matter (to that love) if it is for a man or a woman? And if you pray does it matter, God or Goddess?'²¹ As Tanning had already argued elsewhere, the seldom challenged category of the 'woman surrealist' had unnecessarily perpetuated the separateness from her male peers, and I

am inclined to agree with her that, whilst offering a necessary context for their articulation, such canonical divorcings of female surrealists from their male counterparts ‘unnecessarily isolate and perpetuate their “exile”’.²² This is true too, I would suggest, of the perpetual ‘overshadowing’ narrative and ‘significant other’ model – repeated so often in scholarly debate since the 1990s that they have become the accepted truth. Unfortunately, the unrelenting emphasis on Tanning’s marginalisation left her unsympathetic to the true aims and values of the feminist project, for it seems she did in fact strongly believe in equality and liberation, and actively sought recognition for her labour.

Further down in her ‘Statement’, Tanning confronts her general critics, drawing an analogy between their practice and acts of villainy: ‘Like the phalanxes of an enemy, myriad assailants converge to bedevil your purpose and bewilder your vision.’²³ The deliberate melodrama of this comment mimics another complaint from her autobiography relating what she perceived as the prevailing lack of understanding surrounding her work: ‘Oddest of all, the sad little procession of analyzers, trudging toward the altar of libido ... For example, some paintings of mine that I had believed to be a testimony to the premise that we are waging a desperate battle with unknown forces are in reality dainty feminine fantasies bristling with sex symbols.’²⁴ For Tanning, reviewers and, more broadly, the historiography of surrealism, seem to have been suspect in their theoretical approach, taxonomical imperative, and heavy reliance on Freudian analytical techniques. In her view, the majority of critical engagements with her work were myopic and did not pay due diligence to her larger themes. She concludes her ‘Statement’ by shoring up the point that she has ‘utterly failed to understand the pigeonholing (or dove-coterie) of gender, convinced that it has nothing to do with qualifications or goals’, again suggesting more universalising hopes for humanity. Her discourse on love and loss and gender categories presented here are weighty themes for a relatively short position piece. As with her visual narratives, we find a multifaceted array of themes and the writing is always highly visual; a gender politics located at the intersection of text and image. For instance, her poignant yet comical figurative painting *Woman Artist, Nude, Standing* (1985–87) was painted just prior to ‘Statement’, offering an eloquent visual commentary on this debate by way of irony and a subversion of the art-historical tradition of the nude genre. Here, a fleshy body, undeniably ‘female’, attempts to disguise herself, though somewhat conspicuously, with a hat pulled down over her eyes. Her portrayal pokes fun at the predicament of women in the arts and literary scenes in the mid- to late 1980s. Thus, for ‘Statement,’ drafted in 1989, it is interesting to note how Tanning’s writings already appear to merge with her concurrent visual



10.1 Dorothea Tanning, *Woman Artist, Nude, Standing*, 1985–87. Oil on canvas

statements. Such parallels between media become even more apparent in an essay published the same year.

Some parallels

I ran into Jorge Luis Borges and asked him if it was Ok to quote him in my book.²⁵

Constance DeJong

Another piece of non-fiction writing which Tanning prepared around this time was the longer and more self-evaluative seven-page essay on the word/image relationship through the lens of her own artistic experience, again modestly titled 'Some Parallels in Words and Pictures' (1989), for a special issue of *Pequod: A Journal of Contemporary Literature and Literary Criticism*, edited by Mark Rudman. She uses the space of her essay to defend the literary underpinning of art-making. Tanning's writing appears alongside contributions

by John Berger and J.D. McClatchy, and edited translations of Boris Pasternak among others, thus placing Tanning directly at the heart of the American literary avant-garde scene to which she was now aspiring. 'Some Parallels' can be read as a retrospective artist's statement outlining her dual artistic and literary practice, while articulating the importance of surrealism for her creative development. Tanning begins by explaining that she is a collector of quotations, and we later learn that these are gleaned from numerous sources. As with much of the subsequent scholarly literature on Tanning, her essay is at first organised biographically and chronologically, with particular focus on her early art and literary education in the Galesburg Public Library in 1927, where she made 'extravagant' discoveries, followed by a stint at Knox College in 1930 where she tells us literature was a 'COURSE' and 'art was the *history* of Art' notably Gainsborough and Reynolds.²⁶ She writes openly about how her attraction to fantasy images and literature meant that her early works and emergence as an artist was 'a very private matter', with gothic literature being temporarily shelved due to the modernist tastes of the 1930s and 1940s. She expresses a kind of embarrassment around fantasy literature – noting the secretive activity of reading, the shelving of guilty pleasures, and questioning what it might mean for interpretations of her work to confess that aged sixteen she read the horror fiction and ghost stories of the Welsh writer Arthur Machen. In doing so, she owns up to a preference for a counter- or anti-modernism. She goes on to stress how she found a more conducive environment and like-minded crowd in the surrealist movement:

How can I convey the sense of recognition I felt in seeing a new kind of visual art – pictures, objects, even sculptures – all sparkling with reference to their textual counterparts, all talking with new words. For the first time it was borne upon me that art and literature were inextricably fused. Since forever. Poet and artist bursting the seams of their categories. Art as a metaphor for language.²⁷

Such were Tanning's thoughts concerning her initial encounter with surrealism at the Museum of Modern Art's *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* exhibition in 1936–37. Ubiquitous surrealist artworks such as Meret Oppenheim's assisted readymade *Object (Breakfast in Fur)* (1936) and Max Ernst's narrative box assemblage *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale* (1924) demonstrated to Tanning the potential 'fusion' which could be achieved between art and literature. For example, we know that Ernst used Freudian literature and that Oppenheim's gesture might be read as the physical manifestation of literary imagery, as, for example, in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870). Tanning continues her essay with reflection on her francophile imagination and by confirming some of the key sources



10.2 Dorothea Tanning, *De quel amour (By What Love)*, 1969. Tweed, metal, wool, chain, and plush.

for her artworks – such as the modernist novels of James Joyce and realism of Gustave Flaubert: ‘What would Molly Bloom think of Emma Bovary? (My cloth sculpture of 1970, “Emma”?).’²⁸ Indeed, Tanning’s soft sculpture *Emma* is the only illustration reproduced to accompany her writing in this instance. However, towards the end of her essay she also mentions a second example from this soft sculptural output: ‘Racine’s Ariane turned into a cloth sculpture *de quel amour*’, meaning that the absent classical figure from Jean-Baptiste Racine’s seventeenth-century French play *Phèdre* (1677) had, for Tanning, become manifest as a soft sculpture with tweedy buttocks chained to a post, *By What Love?* (1969) (Figure 10.2). Her source text becomes an active participant when translated into a literary sculpture. One might note that her soft sculptural output is roughly equivalent in terms of their limited ‘edition’ to her non-fiction writing – the point being that Tanning was willing to experiment with both soft sculpture and non-fiction writing beyond her better-known practices in painting and poetry. For Tanning, ‘Some Parallels’ is indicative of the fact that she was fluent in both

text and image, her words and pictures being expressed through a range of medial branches.

Tanning's visual narrative *A Mrs. Radcliffe Called Today* (1944) is another artwork highlighted, by way of conclusion to her essay, for its literary referent, namely the gothic writer Ann Radcliffe whose novels enraptured Tanning (save for some temporary self-confessed shelving) from her childhood well into the 1980s. Almost immediately prior to commencing the essay, Tanning had made two collages featuring photocopies of the artist's hands: *Mrs Radcliffe Called Again*, *Left No Message* and perhaps the most poignant, *Still Calling*, *Still Hoping* (both 1988). The word 'calling' is significant here, suggesting a séance or evocation of literary inspiration through the lighter-hearted and/or experimental use of 1980s communicative technologies (photocopiers and answerphone machines). 'Hoping' is even more poignant, suggesting that the wisdom she seeks from Radcliffe's literary example has not yet been received. And yet Tanning attempts to 'speak' to Radcliffe by way of intertextuality.

'Some Parallels' reveals much about Tanning's reading lists and perspectives on her artistic career to date. However, it is worth being cautious of such self-analysis. Mieke Bal is critical of artists' views on their own intentionality, concerned that it places too much emphasis on biography and not enough onus on the reader or viewer's interpretation of the writing or artwork in the present tense.²⁹ As in 'Statement,' Tanning may query the labels that critics admonish on her – feminist-surrealist – but, as Bal points out, artists are not the masters of their own legacies. Tanning herself was suspicious of literary theory, although she was certainly an avid reader of cultural news and art criticism. For example, in a letter to the editor of *The New York Review of Books* (1980), Tanning praised Denis Donoghue for his criticism of deconstruction but chastised him simultaneously for his misguided view of surrealism:

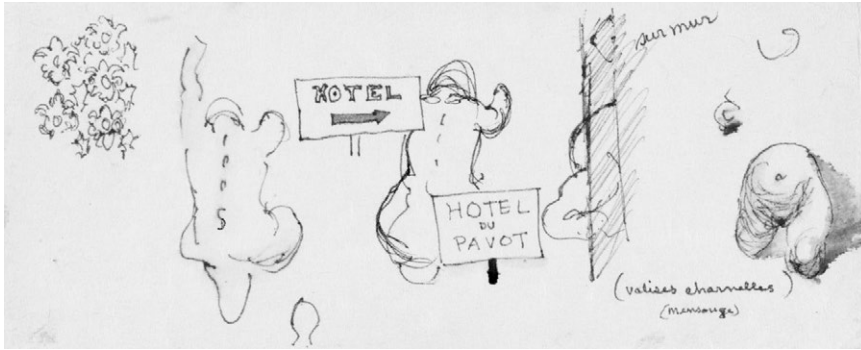
Denis Donoghue's patient explanation of the deconstruction fever [N.Y.R., June 12] so rife not only in universities but also in Soho lofts and midtown cocktail parties, really makes it easier for us all, at least for me, to close the dossier and file it away among earlier forgettable fads. I would not, however, be inclined to include the surrealism of the Thirties in this list. In fact I find it grievous that Mr. Donoghue is so reminded.³⁰

For Tanning, surrealism was not to be confused with theoretical currencies of the postmodern era. Such delineation is interesting because again it suggests her awareness of the movement's historicisation during the latter part of her career, and again her self-acknowledgement as an eye-witness and, therefore, a primary authority on such matters.

In an earlier 'Letter to the Editor' of *The New York Review of Books* (1967), Tanning defended one of her literary icons, Vladimir Nabokov, claiming a penchant for his 'far-fetched language' in controversial novels such as *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962).³¹ Again, this brief public defence demonstrates not only Tanning's reading of English-language literary reviews during her time in France but her shrewd understanding of the critical reception of avant-garde texts and the power of writing as an expressive vehicle, which she would increasingly tap into.

Purple prose

If Tanning's literary pursuits are historically rooted and highly visual in their content, then it would be true reciprocally to claim that her visual works are very literary, certainly in ekphrastic terms. Her artist's book, *Ouvre-Toi*, could be said to offer an intriguing hinge point in her oeuvre. Prepared as a companion to her soft sculpture show at the Alexandre Iolas Gallery (23 February – 18 March 1971), *Ouvre-Toi* comprises a series of aquarelles (originally ink and colour wash drawings). The elongated, frieze format includes several folded pull-out pages that invite the reader to play with her non-linear narratives, flipping between images, many of them abstracted reclining nudes and convulsive, concentric figures (mostly dated between 1965 and 1970). The combination of text and image in *Ouvre-Toi* is noteworthy. Firstly, the handwritten French text has the effect of annotated narrativisation (or comic thought bubbles) for her soft sculptures which appear in sketch form. Here, the artist's book conflates the medium of soft sculpture with a literary outburst – providing narrative readings for her sculptural environments, such as *Hôtel du Pavot*, *Chambre 202* (1970–73). For example, the words 'Les portes de l'enfer viennent de fermer' ('the gates of hell have just closed') offer an interpretative subtitle to the titular sculpture, *Ouvre-Toi* (1969, now destroyed). Elsewhere, her concentric figures are labelled 'Maternités', confirming readings of these bodies as feminine, and suggesting something voyeuristic about the reader's encounter with these conceptual orgies. These schematic bodies even operate as a form of writing, as a visual language of corporeal motifs. Secondly, anticipating her essay 'Some Parallels', Tanning lists favourite authors by their first names, such as Anatole (France) and Emile (Zola), drawing dotted-line connections between them. These are interspersed with the names of select literary figures, such as 'Irma' and 'Zoë', possibly the heroines of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1901) and *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva* (1907). Tanning makes further dotted links between seemingly



10.3 Dorothea Tanning, page 4 for the exhibition catalogue *Ouvre-Toi*, 1971. Ink, coloured ink, and wash on paper.

disparate examples of ideas for her artworks' titles. For example, 'Dionysos S.O.S.' (which would not be realised as a painting for another sixteen years until 1987), Dante, and *Don Juan's Breakfast* (1972) offer an unusual trio of masculine author and legendary figures associated with excesses of the flesh. The overall effect is an intertextual network or genealogy of literary co-ordinates, markers to those who shaped her thinking, and, in turn, a mind map of future creative directions. As Tanning writes in *Between Lives*: 'I have loved and venerated my references or influences. But to name them would take another book – not just an art book but a book as packed with images as the human brain.'³²

Not only does this artist's book offer a curatorial rethink of the very notion of the catalogue in terms of exhibition interpretation, it also provides insight into Tanning's experimentation into relationships between her visual artworks and their accompanying literary precursors. The title of the project is significant as well – *Ouvre-Toi* (*Open Sesame*) offers a way in, marking a medial moment where a visual domain yields to a linguistic one. In the fairy tale 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves', part of *The Arabian Nights* cycle of storytelling, the term 'open sesame' is famously used as a command or password to unlock the door to a cave.³³ Here the magical words suggest that Tanning reveals the secrets of her practice: the interjection of text into her sumptuous palimpsest of visual languages. Writing on Angela Carter's novels, Anna Kérchy terms this tendency 'grotesque over-writing', an excessive and ecstatic prose that seeks to embed the flesh and 'somaticisation of text'.³⁴ Carter herself was indignant about the perceived kitsch of her narrative-saturated writing, claiming 'I write overblown, purple, self-indulgent prose. So fucking what?'³⁵ Tanning's own self-confessed 'purple prose'³⁶ would, meanwhile, find its fullest realisation in the fictional domain of

Chasm, and within paintings such as *Stanza* (1978) with its abstracted typewriter, but I would suggest that *Ouvre-Toi* provides a self-critical, experimental ground that enabled her promiscuous medial parallels to come together. The reader opens on to a paradoxical encounter between conceptualism and narrative excess; the mind/body duality is squandered. Whilst Tanning had published her first collaborative suite of prints accompanied by writing, *Les 7 périls spectraux* (*The Seven Spectral Perils*) (1950) with the poet André Pieyre de Mandiargues, at an earlier stage of her career, by 1971 *Ouvre-Toi* is possibly the first time that her own texts and images are so intrinsically enmeshed within her thinking.³⁷ Printmaking is key to this endeavour but so are writing and its sculptural correspondents. She would go on to make another suite of prints in 1973 entitled somewhat ecclesiastically *En chair et en or* (*In Flesh and Gold*) accompanied by ten of her own French poems. *Ouvre-Toi* serves as a useful tool for unpicking her self-criticism, exploring her text/image intersections, and revealing the mechanics of her writing style which, whether fiction or non-fiction or even in the overlap between the two, is always deeply cerebral and unapologetically 'purple'.

Conclusion: open sesame

All my life I've been on the fence about whether to be an artist or writer ...
I've just found that I ultimately had more to say on canvas than on paper.³⁸

Dorothea Tanning

The emergence of Tanning's writing practice as a sustained venture coincided with a growing scholarly interest in the work of women associated with the surrealist movement. It is useful to mediate such viewpoints and clashes from a generational angle. What we certainly learn from the study of her critical writings is that she wrote (and rewrote) almost consistently throughout her professional life alongside her better-known visual corpus. There is extensive evidence that one medium informed another and that she was proficient in thinking experimentally late into her career across a range of media. Such intermedial investigations coupled with processes of self-quotation make it difficult to isolate her non-fiction writing from her creative writing, painting, sculpting, and print-making. Tanning once spoke of using art to make 'a little order out of the chaos',³⁹ and writing seems to have performed a similar function, a method of managing the clutter of dreams, friendships, and the imagination. As such, it is no surprise that Tanning experienced discomfort at being historicised and labelled, despite the fact that the ongoing critical classification of 'woman surrealist' has arguably enabled a solid context for her promotion. Her writing offers an 'open sesame' to fuller

understandings of her own position within and beyond the late twentieth-century critical context she was working alongside and through. Texts like those analysed above demonstrate not only an independent mode of thinking but an assertive and self-assured commentary on cultural history. She was nothing if not an important witness to the historical surrealist milieu. Yet she was also in a position to step outside of the movement. As I hope this chapter has made clear, she needs to be better recognised and acknowledged independently as a contemporary writer of experimental insight and literary merit. Focus on her critical writing alongside her multifaceted creative practice presents a case for Dorothea Tanning as a twentieth-century intellectual who has much to offer twenty-first-century feminist discourse.

Notes

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- 1 Dorothea Tanning, ‘Some Parallels in Words and Pictures’, *Pequod: A Journal of Contemporary Literature and Literary Criticism* 28–30 (1989), p. 168.
- 2 Dorothea Tanning’s manuscript for *Chasm* started life as a short story, ‘Abyss’, first published in *Zero* magazine in 1949, then privately published in 1977 by Standard Editions in New York, before being published by the Overlook Press and Virago in 2004 as *Chasm: A Weekend*. It was subsequently translated into Swedish by Kristoffer Noheden in 2009 for Sphinx Bokförlag as *Avgrund*, and more recently translated into Dutch as *De kloof – een weekend* for Uitgeverij Orlando in 2019. For an extended reading, see my study *A Surrealist Stratigraphy of Dorothea Tanning’s Chasm* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 3 See select texts and notebooks in *A Public Space* 24 (2016), ed. Tess Scriptunas and Pamela S. Johnson, p. 37, p. 52.
- 4 Mieke Bal, ‘Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder’, *Biography* 25:1 (Winter 2002), p. 181; Dorothea Tanning in Peter Schamoni, *Dorothea Tanning: Insomnia* (1978), VHS transferred to MP4.
- 5 Constance DeJong describes her own self-identity of ‘writer-artist-performer’ as ‘hybrid’ and the scene as ‘porous’. Interview with Jennifer Krasinski, *BOMB Magazine* (3 April 2017), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/constance-dejong/>, accessed 24 November 2019. For more on DeJong, see Karen di Franco, ‘How Does a Work End?’, *So Anyway Magazine* (2019), www.soanywaymagazine.org/spoleto-special, accessed 20 November 2019.
- 6 Jane Kramer, ‘Self Inventions: Dorothea Tanning, Painter Turner Poet’, *The New Yorker* (3 May 2004), p. 42; Gaby Wood, ‘I’ve Always Been Perverse’,

- The Observer* (15 August 2004), p. 7. Louise Bourgeois is similarly described as 'the oldest of young artists' by Frances Morris in *Louise Bourgeois: Stitches in Time*, ex. cat. (London: August Projects and IIMA, 2003), p. 10.
- 7 'Dorothea Tanning Obituary', *The Telegraph* (3 February 2012).
 - 8 Tanning's poem 'No Palms' appeared in *The Yale Review* (1999) followed by further poems published in *Parnassus*, *The Paris Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *The Boston Review*, among others.
 - 9 Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (London and New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001), p. 356.
 - 10 Kramer quotes Tanning's thoughts on feminism: 'disgusting'. Kramer, 'Self Inventions', p. 42.
 - 11 This is an example of what Susan Rubin Suleiman terms 'a double allegiance'. Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. xvii.
 - 12 Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 12.
 - 13 Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. xix.
 - 14 Anna Watz, *Angela Carter and Surrealism: 'A Feminist Libertarian Aesthetic'* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 4.
 - 15 Patricia Allmer, 'Feminist Interventions: Revising the Canon', in David Hopkins (ed.), *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 375, p. 373.
 - 16 The writer Kate Bernheimer (2001) and photographer Anna Gaskell (1998) both make reference to Tanning's visual artwork. The exhibition *Three Streets Away* (2019), curated by Alannah Currie, similarly explored Tanning's effect on contemporary art. See also Ann Coxon, 'Another Dimension: Dorothea Tanning, Contemporary Practice and the Legacies of Surrealism', *Dorothea Tanning: Behind the Door, Another Invisible Door* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2018), pp. 69–81.
 - 17 Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971), in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), pp. 145–78. The fact that Nochlin wrote about Tanning makes such connections even more pertinent. See Linda Nochlin, 'Introduction: The Darwin Effect', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*, 2:2 (Spring 2003).
 - 18 Dorothea Tanning, Cover letter to Mary Ann Caws (3 December 1989). Dorothea Tanning, 'Statement', in Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg (eds), *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 228.
 - 19 Constance DeJong, 'A History of Modern Love', *Ugly Duckling Presse* (2017), <https://uglyducklingpresse.tumblr.com/post/158941870944/a-history-of-modern-love-as-told-by-constance>, accessed 24 November 2019.
 - 20 Mary Ann Caws, 'Person: Tanning's Self-Portraiture', in *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 61.
 - 21 Dorothea Tanning, 'Statement', p. 228.

- 22 Dorothea Tanning cited in Chadwick, *Women Artists*, p. 12, pp. 14–16. See also Dorothea Tanning interviewed by Carlo McCormick where she famously claims: ‘Women artists. There is no such thing – or person. It’s just as much a contradiction in terms as “man artist” or “elephant artist”. You may be a woman and you may be an artist; but the one is a given and the other is you.’ *BOMB Magazine* 33 (Autumn 1990), pp. 38–40.
- 23 Tanning, ‘Statement’, p. 228.
- 24 Tanning, *Between Lives*, p. 336.
- 25 Constance DeJong, *Modern Love* (New York: Standard Editions, 1977), p. 19.
- 26 Tanning, ‘Some Parallels’, p. 168.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 29 Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) pp. ~~xi~~–~~xii~~.
- 30 Dorothea Tanning, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *The New York Review of Books* (4 December 1980), www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/12/04/deconstruction-an-exchange/, accessed 10 December 2018.
- 31 Dorothea Tanning, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *The New York Review of Books* (9 February 1967), www.nybooks.com/articles/1967/02/09/nabokov-2/, accessed 31 December 2018.
- 32 Tanning, *Between Lives*, p. 328.
- 33 Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 156.
- 34 Anna Kérchy, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), p. 12, p. 295; Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. xii.
- 35 Angela Carter quoted in *Angela Carter: Of Wolves and Women*, BBC Two, 4 August 2018.
- 36 Grateful thanks to Brenda Shaughnessy for this insight.
- 37 Tanning collaborated subsequently on several artist’s books with poets which married text and image: *Accueil (The Welcome)* by René Crevel in 1958; *Personne* with Lena LeClerq in 1962; *La Marée* by André Pieyre de Mandiargues in 1970, not to mention single prints for group projects and *Demain* in 1964 with her own poetry.
- 38 Dorothea Tanning quoted in Michael Kimmelman, ‘Interwoven Destinies as Artist and Wife’, *New York Times* (24 August 1995), p. 2.
- 39 Tanning, *Between Lives*, p. 326.