



THE WITCH'S CRADLE

EILEEN AGAR
GERTRUD ARNDT
JOSEPHINE BAKER
BENEDETTA
CLAUDE CAHUN
LEONORA CARRINGTON
ITHELL COLQUHOUN
VALENTINE DE SAINT-POINT
LISE DEHARME
MAYA DEREN
LEONOR FINI
JANE GRAVEROL
FLORENCE HENRI
LOÏS MAILLOU JONES
IDA KAR
ANTOINETTE LUBAKI
BAYA MAHIEDDINE
NADJA
AMY NIMR
MERET OPPENHEIM
VALENTINE PENROSE
RACHILDE
ALICE RAHON
CAROL RAMA
EDITH RIMMINGTON
ENIF ROBERT
ROSA ROSÀ
AUGUSTA SAVAGE
DOROTHEA TANNING
TOYEN
REMEDIOS VARO
META VAUX WARRICK FULLER
LAURA WHEELER WARING
MARY WIGMAN

In the first half of the 20th century, the Enlightenment concept of the self as a contained, unitary body was blown wide open by the emergence of technologies that blurred the distinction between human and machine, by psychoanalytic models that illuminated the influence of the unconscious, and by the feminist ideal of the independent and autonomous *Neue Frau* (New Woman). This shift undermined longstanding and pervasive dualisms between human and nature, the animate and the inanimate, mind and body, and female and male in favour of fluctuating hybridity and relationality.

The artists, dancers, writers, and cultural figures grouped here adopt themes of metamorphosis, ambiguity, and fragmentation to contrast the myth of the Cartesian unitary – and *de facto* male – self, rebuffing the idea of Man as the centre of the world and the measure of all things. Hailing from different parts of the world, including Europe, Africa, and the Americas, these artists were close to the dominant avant-garde movements of their time – particularly Surrealism's exploration of the body from within, Futurism's and the Bauhaus' technophilic meldings of human and machine, and the Harlem Renaissance and Négritude movements' revaluation of cultural identity – while maintaining a great degree of independence from them. Often marginalised in the history of art, these artists share a refusal of the patriarchal and the heteronormative vision of gender and identity, exercising control over their own bodies with a complexity and ambiguity, and occasionally even irony, often absent from the work of their male peers.

The mannequins and automata, dolls, puppets, and masks that populate their paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures, and illustrations subvert the sexist tropes of the *femme fatale* or *femme enfant*; metamorphosis becomes a political, erotic, and poetic tool to craft new, multifold visions of subjectivity. Whether parodying the image of the eroticised woman – as in Gertrud Arndt, Leonor Fini, Josephine Baker, and Rosa Rosà – or employing androgyny to achieve the emancipation and autodetermination of the feminine self – as in the work of Claude Cahun and Florence Henri – each of these artists, in their own individual ways, turn traditional conceptions of gendered subjectivity into materials for fabulation. Some of these artists – Jane Graverol, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Laura Wheeler Waring, and Mary Wigman – reinterpret ancient myths of enchantment through archetypal figures such as the sphynx, the *femme arbre*, or the witch, portraying women as healers and hybrid beings that merge human, animal, machine, and monster. Others – like Baya Mahieddine, Toyen, Loïs Mailou Jones, and Antoinette Lubaki – use nature as a metaphor for female reality, evoking mother goddesses, anthropomorphic deities, and fablelike scenes and anticipating ecofeminist preoccupations. Meanwhile, abstraction becomes a means to craft the shape or abilities of new bodies in works by Alice Rahon and Valentine de Saint-Point. Whether by evoking nature, escaping into fantasy, or by using their own bodies to model new possibilities, each of these artists employs self-metamorphosis as an answer to the male-dominated constructions governing identity.