A Dreadful Lust for Forbidden Eyes: Unica Zürn and the force of imagination

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AISTHESIS VERLAG

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Almost everything that has been written on the work of Unica Zürn deals with her suffering, most of all her psychic torment. This is partly due to the artist herself, who spoke and wrote publicly about her mental crises and detrainments in mental hospitals. Her self-presentation in an exhibition catalogue of 1967 shows how well aware she was that it enhanced the attention for her work.


2 »[...] Unica Zürn has lived in Paris since 1953. She has been interned several times in psychiatric clinics (Berlin, Paris as well as in La Rochelle) over the last five years. The short, very beautiful and in no way scary phase of delirium (hallucinations) comes at the high price of a sudden collapse into the deepest and most desperate depressions.
She chose to represent herself in the German-speaking culture as an intriguing, artistic, mentally ill patient, yet nonetheless one that aimed for a very prestigious French publisher. Zürn turned her mental illness into her trademark. She hoped that this would appeal to the imagination of the public and boost the sale of her work. Such had notoriously been the case with the Romanian avant-garde painter Victor Brauner (1903-1966), whose work all of a sudden began to sell far better after he had painted his one-eyed self-portrait, his eye thereafter actually being knocked out by his friend, the artist Oscar Dominguez (1906-1957).³ Both the fact that Zürn foregrounded her psychiatric history and the fact that the drawing she mentioned is really the bleakest and most gruesome in her entire oeuvre, reveal her self-positioning strategy. In Paris she already had this reputation when in 1962 a very prestigious gallery exhibited the restored pen drawings she had torn up in a fit of despair while living alone in a hotel room. Yet Zürn’s work is not at all ›insane‹.⁴

[...] There exists a large drawing with texts (see illustration), which she produced in a light delirium. It shows a devilish grimace and she has given it the title ›The death of the American president John F. Kennedy‹. [...] The fantastic states the different crises of her illness put her into are fascinating and of poetic value. After her recovery she writes down her impressions on mental illness. The 200 pages long manuscript is being translated into French at the moment. She hopes to publish it with Gallimard in Paris.« Exhibition catalogue Unica Zürn: Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Radierungen – Hans Bellmer im Studio: Druckgraphik, Zeichnungen, 28.4.-4.6.1967. Hannover: Galerie Dieter Brusberg, 1967. P. 2-4.


4 Zürn was hospitalized six times. Three of her stays in mental hospitals (in 1960, 1962 and 1970) were extended disproportionately, because they coincided with a break in the relationship with Hans Bellmer, which made her practically homeless. During her longest hospitalization period in Sainte Anne, Zürn spent half of her time on leave with Bellmer and was only released after Bellmer went into treatment for his alcohol addiction. Three further hospitalizations (in 1964, 1969 and 1970) did not happen out of pure psychiatric necessity, but were in fact measures to protect her, or to unburden the ailing Bellmer. The hospitalization in La Rochelle in the summer of 1964, however, did happen in order to let Zürn regain peace of mind, as she was severely shaken after having spent several weeks with her daughter, whom she had not seen for ten years. For the last but one hospitalization Zürn feigned confusion, because her home situation exceeded her forces. With regard to her last stay in hospital, Bellmer seems to express in a letter that she could be dismissed after a few days already, yet that no-one, not even Zürn herself, had any idea where she could go. See: Marion de Zanger. »Orakel en Spektakel. De waanzinnige receptie van Unica
She exploited the interest, widespread in the avant-garde art world and in progressive psychiatry, in the art of mentally ill people or other ›outsiders‹. The hype that existed in those days, and in fact still does, is the reason why, next to art museums, also museums for art brut, later named outsider art, exist today. As recently as late 2013, Belgian curator Jan Hoet (1936-2014) put on display art works by artists with and without psychiatric records in his exhibition Middle Gate Geel ›13 in order to show that the difference that is always assumed neither exists nor can be traced (Geel, Belgium 29-09-2013 – 19-01-2014). The work of artists with and without psychiatric history in this exhibition had a lot in common, not in the least the conviction that life can be difficult, bleak, confusing, painful and sexually restless. In the accompanying catalogue it was pointed out that a specific art category such as art brut, outsider art, art by mentally ill people, or psychiatric art is a myth. Around 1967 Zürn certainly embraced this myth, which both harmed and helped her.

Her early death at the age of 54 – suicide – increased the attention for her mental suffering, which is, however, often overemphasized and even manipulated, as, for example, in the retrospective catalogue Unica Zürn: Bilder 1953-1970 (Unica Zürn: Images 1953-1970). In this catalogue, several undated little ink drawings sketched in an untypically simple style and some undated clumsy etchings are put at the end of the chronological survey of her oeuvre (two reproductions are even printed upside down), thus suggesting that her mental state worsened perceptibly. Something similar happened in the flyer and introduction of the recent solo exhibition Dark Spring (New York, 2009) and the group exhibition Surrealismus und Wahnsinn (Surrealism and Madness, Heidelberg 2009-2010), which characterized Zürn emphatically by her »ever recurrent admissions in mental hospitals and her suicide«. Even more recently, the exhibition Nerveuze vrouwen (Nervous Women, Ghent 2012-2013) displayed the audiovisual recording of an interview with the psychiatrist who played a central role in the construction of Zürn’s psychiatric image.

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7 The undated little ink drawings are probably first attempts in a situation, in which she had no decent drawing material at her disposal and probably date from around 1961. The first engraving experiments are most likely much older.
Thus the diagnosis »schizothymiques« was reconfirmed for the umpteenth time, as if no serious doubts about the diagnosis of schizophrenia⁹ or the impact of the heavy pharmaceutical treatment existed already during her life and after her death. Not a word about this.

I. Leaving Traces¹⁰

Zürn did indeed write about her personal experiences and from that it becomes undeniably clear that her life was far from easy. She suffered many misfortunes and anxieties: the rape by her brother, the assaults by her mother, the divorce of her parents, the sale of the parental home (a large villa full of art works from all continents), the death of her father, who never returned from his journey to Italy, her brother’s death on the Russian front at Witebsk during the Second World War, the adultery of her husband Eric Laupenmühlen and the pregnancy of his mistress, the birth of her son during the bombing of Berlin and her ensuing scarlet fever, the Nazi-sympathies of her mother and stepfather, the incomprehension of migrated German artists in France for those who had stayed at home in Nazi-Germany, the break with her mother, two illicit abortions, the taking into care of her son without her knowledge, a time of poverty together with Bellmer, the recurring uncertainty about her residence permit in France, Bellmer’s preference for excessive eroticism, the nasty side-effects of psychiatric drugs, the embarrassment about her lack of proficiency in French, the robbing by her psychiatrist, and the many suicides in her immediate surroundings. Not least because of Zürn’s own testimonies and various other sources, a lot of research effort has gone into the mapping, description, and explanation of her suffering.¹¹ Drawing on her literary and plastic art work, each scholar seems to perceive a different person. Depending on prior knowledge and theoretical perspective, Zürn’s work is either considered as that of a schizophrenic, a manic-depressive, of someone with a schizo-affective or multiple personality disorder, a wrongly diagnosed

⁹ See for example: »Also sprach Unica Zürn. De secundaire literatuur over het beeldende werk van Unica Zürn«. de Zanger. Een verschrikkelijk verlangen (see footnote 6). P. 21-56.


¹¹ See: de Zanger. »Zover het oog reikt«. In: de Zanger. Een verschrikkelijk verlangen (see footnote note 6) and the aforementioned chapter 2.
psychiatric patient, a shaman, a spiritual sage, a medicalized or sexually traumatized woman, a woman without subject position, a frustrated, hurt or abused woman, a female artist who collapsed under male surrealist artistic practices, or an artist who did not acknowledge the limits of the artistic process. Zürn is considered a marked person, a conscious or subconscious victim, voiceless, powerless. Yet Unica Zürn left us with some very characteristic words and images, and her life was also one of pleasure, enjoyment, satisfaction, surprise and challenge. Writing, drawing and painting – writing stories and conceiving anagrams and afterwards also making pen and ink drawings – was her raison d’être. Not simply because writing prose and poetry, painting and drawing were such fantastically delightful experiences, but because the process of creating made life worth living.

II. One should celebrate the parties as they come

In December 1956, Unica Zürn wrote the following:


12 »Man muss die Feste feiern wie sie fallen«. Title of an anagram, dated 1955, Montpellier. GA 1. P. 32.
kommen und meine Schultern durchkneten, − ich habs nämlich in den Schultern − Hans sollte einen Raum haben, wo er wieder anfangen kann, Objekte zu bauen − dazu eine Ziege, Hühner, Kater und Gemüsegärten. Ich halte sehr viel vom ›Herbeiwünschen‹ der Dinge. Man ist ja nicht unbescheiden. Man braucht wahrscheinlich eben doch ›die Leute‹. Wir haben uns vorgenommen, das ein bis ’chen mehr als bisher zu pflegen. Wenn es uns nur nicht so schwerfiele, denn im Grunde ist es ja so, dass man in diesem Stübchen, bleibt man nur gesund, liebt sich, hat Lust zum arbeiten und Geld zum Essen, Trinken, Rauchen und Heizen −, noch jahrelang sitzen möchte.\footnote{At this time of year we rise late − also because it is cold and by the time the little oven has warmed the tiny place we shiver of frost. At 11 o’clock we go to Marcelle and drink our first milk coffee, while yawning gab a bit together about what should be done today − or I tell Hans what I dreamt and then we go shopping for lunch and by 12 we come home, where it is warm meanwhile and I start tidying up after a courage-glass of wine. Every day we cause enormous piles of waste and dust – where is all comes from, no-one knows – I think it is because of the walls – but then it is all in one: kitchen, studio, bath house and washhouse, sleeping, living and dining room. It is ludicrously cozy and shamefully small and packed to the ceiling. Of course we dream of more space, I am in fact still convinced we will be ›rich‹ one day, although that might still take a few years. I would love to draw in a spacious and bright room in which you could walk around and listen to Mozart while drawing. We would like to have a bathroom once and read detective novels while sitting in the tub, and twice a week an old and fat Chinese masseuse should come to me and knead my shoulders − I suffer from my shoulders − Hans should have a place where he can start constructing objects again − and a goat, chickens, a cat and a vegetable garden. I believe a lot in ›whishing‹ things. One isn’t modest. Probably one does indeed need ›people‹. We are resolved to take care of that a bit more than we have done until now. If only it weren’t so difficult for us, because, in fact, it is the case that one would like to remain in this tiny place if one would only stay healthy, love each other, feel like working, have enough money to eat, drink, smoke and heat.}\footnote{GA 4.2. P. 530-531.}

In December 1956 Zürn was forty years old and Hans Bellmer fifty-four. Zürn had met the emigrated surrealist German artist Hans Bellmer (1902-1975) in Berlin and shortly afterwards moved to Paris with him, where they lived in a poor, dingy and noisy hotel that was mainly inhabited by Arab migrant workers. Here, Bellmer rented one »tiny room«.\footnote{For a good description see for example: Peter Webb/Robert Short. \textit{Hans Bellmer}. London/Melbourne/New York: Quartet Books, 1985. P. 208-209.} While Zürn really enjoyed the sound of the Arab neighbours, it greatly annoyed Bellmer, who invariably woke up too early due to the early rise of their co-tenants and was unable to go to sleep again afterwards. They avoided the outdoor closet of the hotel by
having a cheap coffee outside the house. Sleeping at night was difficult for both. Zürn suffered from nightmares, because she worried about her little son and daughter, whom she had left in the care of her ex-husband and his new family, and only sleeping tablets offered some relief. They both had been in great pain that year, suffering from headaches, toothaches and aches in fingers and heels. There was only just enough money for food, drinks and cigarettes, and luckily the wine was cheap. At times, they had to look for fag ends, yet once in a while Bellmer sold one of his works of art and then they celebrated and bought lobster, caviar and champagne. The theme of their lives was *irrsinniger Zauber*\(^{15}\) (mad magic) and life was at its best when they were in their room, each of them at his/her own table, creating magic images. Mysterious, wonderful and creepy monsters, creatures and images that make you wonder, fill you with disgust, make you blush or grow silent. Of course they did not always succeed in finding the necessary peace, quiet and concentration: »Hier geht es bergauf und bergab, in einem Rhythmus, der erstaunlich gleichmässig ist. Wenn nichts mehr da ist – kommt plötzlich und von einer Ecke, die man nie in seine Hoffnungen einbezogen hat – etwas Neu­es.«\(^{16}\) Zürn and Bellmer did as much together as they could. It was a challenge for Zürn having to fetch drawing material from the little town of Ermenonville (where they sometimes lived for several months) on her own, when Bellmer was not able to join her because of his health problems. She had been much more independent in Berlin.\(^{17}\)

But Zürn stood at the beginning of her career as an artist and poet. She had been a writer in Berlin, but writing radio plays and short stories for German newspapers from Paris proved practically and financially impossible. Bellmer encouraged her talent for drawing and writing poetry. When they met in Berlin, Bellmer had taught her the art of making anagrams, in which she later excelled. After seeing her randomly drawn doodles, he also realized that Zürn had a beautiful and powerfully imaginative penmanship and he encouraged her to make the most out of this technique of *écriture automatique*, by using it as unrestrained, carefree and bold as possible. The publication of Zürn’s *Hexentexte* (*Witch Texts*) was the first milestone in the new course she had taken.\(^{18}\) In December 1956, with Bellmer’s technical assistance, Zürn inves-

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15 GA 4.2. P. 491.

16 »Here things go up and down in a rhythm that is astonishingly regular. When nothing is left – all of a sudden and from a place one would never have included in one’s hope – something new springs up.« GA 4.2. P. 524.

17 GA 4.2. P. 545.

tigated which technique would suit her free and loose hand: oil or tempera, etching or ink drawing.

In her early work (Fig 1) Zürn conjured up a jumble of fantastic creatures that either seemed to belong to the submarine, subterranean or ethereal world. Their language is mysterious, they are grey and pink, but also yellow, brown and black and they reveal themselves simultaneously en profile and en face. From their heads and arms all kinds of vicious tentacles sprout; eyes, nipples, vaginas are accentuated in a similar manner. In the middle of this phantasimagoria also two small hearts leap up. In December 1956 Zürn had her first solo exhibition in the bookshop gallery *Le Soleil dans la Tête*, which, as she admitted herself, would not have been possible without Bellmer.\(^{19}\) The exhibition got good reviews in four newspapers and magazines, one of which was the very prestigious magazine *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (N.R.F.). A second exhibition was planned in the same gallery in the following year and it left an excellent impression both on Bellmer’s surrealist colleagues and writer friends as on doctors and philosophers from acquainted intelligentsia circles.

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\(^{19}\) GA 4.2. P. 538. This gallery had works by Bellmer in stock.
In Berlin, Zürn had lived amidst the avant-garde, absurdist cabaret artists of the Badewanne. Yet in Paris, she found herself in the supreme avant-garde intellectual environment of the surrealists and art autre artists of Bellmer’s generation, such as Max Ernst, Matta, Man Ray, Joyce Mansour, Victor Brauner, Jean Dubuffet, Hans Arp and Henri Michaux, to name but a few whom she got to know personally. The appreciation for Zürn’s anagrams, pen drawings and paintings was genuine and general, yet it was first and foremost the appreciation for Bellmer’s wife, as she also presented herself on the front page of various manuscripts. This was the artistic environment in which the psychiatrists Gaston Ferdière and Jacques Lacan conducted innovative research into art brut and psychopathological art and debated about it. Art brut comprised the work of ›extraordinary‹ people, prisoners, psychiatric patients or other outsiders that were considered of no importance by the establishment of that time and were ignored, ridiculed or destroyed.

III. Utility is the beginning of all evil

Writing and drawing were Zürn’s ultimate means to give meaning to life and, at best, even to transcend it. Zürn wanted to be surprised, she wanted to be challenged to think out of the box, be amazed; she loved fables, parables and oracles, fancy fairs and circus, slapstick and spectacles. A leitmotiv in her work is her love for what she called »the lower city« and the volcano in Katrin. Die Geschichte einer kleinen Schriftstellerin (Katrin. The Story of a Little Writer, ca. 1953). The book is about a girl, like she herself once was, who dreams of becoming a writer. The world she loathes is the so-called middle city, the bourgeois world of careerists, settled people, museum directors and academics, a world in which artists do their utmost best to satisfy their »highly honourable« audience. The world she loves, on the other hand, is the lower city, the multicultural world of the man in the street: the nightlife, the harbour area, the variety theatre, circus, puppet theatre and gypsies. The world she longs for is the volcano, the place where artists can commit themselves wholly to art, where they live on spiritual food and aim for nothing but the deepening and improvement of their work: »Ceci est une exploration. Par les mots, les signes, les dessins.« The investigation, exploration and discovery of yet unexplored imaginative worlds, beyond the familiar and

permissible, but also beyond the border of Western culture was something Zürn and her fellow artists pursued in extreme ways.

In 1958 Zürn produced a fascinating manuscript: *Das Haus der Krankheiten. Geschichten und Bilder einer Gelbsucht* (*The House of Illnesses. Stories and Pictures from a Case of Jaundice*). It contains a forty-two-page story and seventeen drawings, that relate a peculiarly imaginative journey through the rooms of the body in order to transcend a strange experience, i.e. a mortal enemy has shot out the hearts of the artist’s eyes. The journey leads through many spaces and ends in *Das »verbotene« Zimmer* (*The »Forbidden« Room*), also called *Zimmer der Augen* (*Room of the Eyes*). The top left of the image depicts the part of the house called *Kopfgewölbe* (*Vaults of the Head*). The Room of the Eyes is filled with eyes and has an open window, through which a white eagle enters and where, on a plate in front of a Buddha statue, the remains of the eye hearts lie. Zürn’s story is an adaptation of the tale of Bluebeard. She interweaves the idea that not only a glimpse into the forbidden room but sometimes also a glimpse into the eyes of someone can have a devastating impact that leaves no escape and unavoidably determines life.

»Das weiß jedes Kind« (every child knows that).

The theme of encounter is present throughout Zürn’s entire oeuvre and reappears in ever changing versions and shapes in her anagrams, prose and graphic art. Recurring aspects of encounter are the colours red and white, as well as the numbers six and nine. These are the opposite pairs she juggles continuously in a Taoist yin-yang way. White and nine are no doubt favoura-

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23 The theme of encounter was often imagined and rephrased within the avant-garde, see: de Zanger. Een verschrikkelijk verlangen (see footnote 6). P. 141f. A less known but absolutely beautiful expression of this theme can be found in: François Cheng, *L’éternité n’est pas de trop*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2002. Cheng based the story on an anonymous Chinese publication from the end of the Ming Dynasty. He had read it in a French library in the fifties, yet it disappeared from that same library later. Cheng was a close friend of Henri Michaux, who, by coincidence, had Zürn’s manuscript *Das Haus der Krankheiten* in his possession.


25 Zürn and her friends, among whom Henri Michaux and Hans Arp, contributed great wisdom to the Taoist writings. She refers to them at several occasions, or to Lao Tzu (also written as Tse or Zi) as well as to Zhuang Zi. See for example: GA 4.2. P. 471, 473 and p. 545.
ble signs but invariably and endlessly they change into their opposites, as in the Chinese book of oracles *I Tjing*. The Taoist faith in the effectiveness of not-acting is also a recurrent theme in Zürn’s work. Next to the influence of Lao Tzu and of the fairy tales, Zürn also refers to other literary imaginations, such as Vincenzo Bellini’s *Norma* or André Breton’s *Nadja*.

![Plan des Hauses der Krankheiten](image)

Fig. 2: »Plan des Hauses der Krankheiten« (plan of the House of Illnesses), Federzeichnung (pen and ink drawing), 1958, *Haus der Krankheiten* © Verlag Brinkmann & Bose Berlin

Most drawings in *Das Haus der Krankheiten* reveal a style that is atypical for Zürn, as they illustrate a specific thought in a fairly clear manner. Nevertheless, especially the *Plan des Hauses der Krankheiten* (Plan of the House of Illnesses) (Fig. 2) conveys a good impression of the meaning and tone of Zürn’s imagination. The imaginary journey that is made in this manuscript sets off in the *Wachturm von Dr. Mortimer* (*Dr. Mortimer’s Watch-tower*), from where the protagonist escapes to seek rest and sleep in the *Kabinett der Sonnengeflechte* (*Cabinet of the Solar Plexuses*). This room avoids the secret
path to the *Saal der Bäuche* (*The Hall of Bellies*) and the *Busenstube* (*The Bosom Room*). In the first room she can all too easily imagine how repulsive it will be. Whereas at an earlier stage she would have preferred to be in the *Busenstube*, where there is milk and everything is quiet, it does not appeal to her anymore now. The *Kammern der Hände* (*Chambers of Hands*) is familiar territory; it is the room of the white-haired gentleman, who feeds her with soup and supplies her with vitality. The rooms she feels attracted to are the *Räume der Herzen* (*The Suite of the Hearts*) and, even more so, the *Zimmer der Augen* (*Room of the Eyes*). However, it is not safe inside the house, as enemies may appear everywhere. They are unpredictable and have their suspect places and secret routes set out on the floor plan. She skips the *Räume der Herzen*, having received more than enough stabs in her heart during her life. The most desired room, the forbidden room of the eyes, is the one she initially hardly dares to enter, yet where, in an apotheosis, she retrieves the hearts of her eyes, which enables her to leave the house, guided by the call of the cuckoo, the owl and eagle owl.

Zürn’s drawing style (Fig. 3) cannot be compared to Bellmer’s. One of her strengths was that she was self-taught and that her handwriting was not polished by formal education. In her pen drawings and especially in her écriture automatique she drew freely without preconceived ideas or images, with a released hand, that allowed her imagination to flow from the pen without interference or touch up. Her ultimate goal was to create images, creatures and phantasmagorias that would surprise or appall people, move or shock them. The crazier the better. The technique for anagrams is similar to that of the écriture automatique. The point of departure of an anagram is a sentence, such as, for example: »Utility is the beginning of all evil« (»Die Nuetzlichkeit ist aller Laster Anfang«). While making anagrams, the rule of the game is that only the letters of that first sentence may be used. The letters are set free from their initial context and new words and sentences are created with them, like an oracle, that may be wonderful, surprising and incomprehensible. From the sentence above the following anagram was generated:

Zart sang ein Leichenkleid aus Flitter alt:
Neuland, Angst, ich friere kalt. Alle Zeit ist aller Anfang. Die Nuetzlichkeit ist Laster.²⁶

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²⁶ A distressing example of the lack of understanding towards her work is revealed in a letter Zürn’s mother wrote to her doctors on the occasion of her daughter’s first hospitalization in Berlin: »Sie war so sehr von ihrer künstlerischen Berufung überzeugt und verachtete das bürgerliche Leben, in dem wir ja alle wurzeln und wurzeln müssen, so sehr. [...] Man müsste einen gütigen Geistlichen bitten, mit ihr
zu sprechen, ihr vielleicht eine Arbeit zu verschaffen, Hilfskräfte werden ja jetzt überall dringend gesucht! Sie müßte diese Arbeit dann geduldig und ohne Widerwillen verrichten, so wie wir es ja alle tun müssen. Dann wird sie bald wieder ein gesunder und zufriedener Mensch werden.« GA 4.3. P. 329-330; see also de Zanger. »Man soll das tun, was einen besessen macht«. In de Zanger. Een verschrikkelijk verlangen (see footnote 6). P. 221-223.
Zürn’s art of pen drawing is mostly in small format, often not larger than a sketch book or a music score, which made her art an intimate kind of work, more bibliophile than museological. She welcomed every small creature or chimera, as her main goal was to bewitch the spectator.

Zürn did also work with larger paper formats (Fig. 4) and those drawings were more appropriate for gallery exhibitions. Generating large drawings in one fluent movement demanded good timing and concentration. Zürn herself did not seem to approve of some of her larger works, as she crossed out some of them and started again on the other side of the paper.

Zürn’s phantasmagoric world was entirely different from that of Bellmer’s. Her iconography and handwriting are immediately recognizable. While her art is never malicious or rude, but in general has something pleasant, fairy-like and exotic, Bellmer’s phantasmas are fearless and without inhibitions. The power of Bellmer’s style lies in the virtuosity of his drawing and graving
technique. Yet their mutual inspiration waned over the years, in spite of the fact that their material conditions improved somewhat and they now occupied two rooms in the Rue Mouffetard number 86.

IV. When the nine has become the six

Zürn’s sign of the zodiac was Cancer, hence her astrological number was 69, a constellation in which the battle for hegemony between the numbers nine and six takes place. They are each other’s opposite and complement, the reverse side of the same. Zürn associated her European zodiac sign with Yin-Yang, the well-known Chinese Tai-Chi symbol. From 1957 onward she played with the numbers nine and six in various ways: nine is life and six is death, two nines looking at each other make up a heart, which is risky. Two nines or ninety-nine is a much better situation. Two sixes facing each other make an ace of spades, which is something one should be aware of, because it can turn into an ace of hearts.

Increasingly, Zürn also played her own game instead of Bellmer’s. For example, she wrote the German manuscript called *Les Jeux à Deux* (between 1957 and 1959), a title that clearly refers to *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (1949), the work that had made Bellmer famous. Via Bellmer Zürn got acquainted with Henri Michaux (1899-1984) and Hans Arp (1886-1966), two artists and writers that outshined him. They were older than Bellmer and much more spiritually oriented than he was, be it in a somewhat rowdily, playful and adventurous manner. Michaux and Arp greatly appreciated Zürn’s work and had more access to it than their French colleagues, because of their knowledge of German.

*Les Jeux à Deux* draws up the rules for the perfect encounter, the one that is dominated by the number ninety-nine, the colour white, the infinite. It reveals Zürn’s quest for a place, a community, a (real or imaginary) land where she could feel at home, belong to, that appears in various manuscripts. She formulated it as such:

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28 Zürn. »Der Mann im Jasmin«. GA 4.1. P. 140.

This yearning for a homeland characterized Zürn in a very strong sense. It had been the driving force that brought her to world literature and the visual arts, to the artists’ colonies, first in Berlin and then in Paris. She had always wanted to travel in real life, at least more often to her children in Berlin, but also to other, especially faraway countries. She had an inkling that she would feel more at home outside of Europe. Yet although there was no limit to her imaginary travels, lack of money made travelling outside France impossible, something she regretted very much.

Zürn’s enthusiasm for Bellmer’s fascination for obscene and scandalous eroticism waned more and more. In 1958 she let Bellmer tie her up half-naked with a rope, and the atrocious distortions of her body were photographed in various positions in their robbers’ den. The pictures were preliminary studies for the cover of the spring issue of the surrealist art magazine *Le surréalisme, même* (1958) and were made in the spirit of the *Kriminalromane* (whodunnits) they had enjoyed reading together so much. The cover photo is a curiously abstract object that bears a strong resemblance to the surrealist fascination with Lautréamont, as represented by Man Ray.31 Bellmer’s private photo shoot, of which only the negatives existed, were printed and exposed eight years after his death32, something he would have disapproved of strongly.

30  »One mustn’t go into all rooms. Either they are too beautiful and so if one has to leave them again, one will yearn to go there for the rest of one’s life. Or they are too nasty. When one leaves, the sight sticks like slime and one can’t get rid of it. Before I came to the house of illnesses, I found myself in a very beautiful room. When I had to get out, I would have wanted to clutch a chair in order not to have to go. It was precisely the room where I belonged. I knew that there and only there my best powers could be set free.« GA 4.1. P. 63.

31  See: de Zanger. »Ins Weisse schwimmen«. Een verschrikkelijk verlangen (see footnote 6). P.148-152.

32  The series consists of nine negatives, 6x6 cm. For the exhibition *Hans Bellmer. Photographe* in the Centre Pompidou and Filipacchi in Paris in 1983 reprints of 16 x 16 cm were made. All nine prints also figured a year later in the exhibition catalogue
These preliminary images were part of Bellmer’s working method, but making them public in such a crude manner underscores his image as a scandalous artist, which happens at the expense of Zürn.

Zürn’s nine turned into a six more and more. Bellmer and Zürn were photographed together very often during that time and all these images reveal a grumpy Bellmer and a dispirited Zürn, though it could also be the pose they were asked to assume as it complied with their reputation. Yet it is a fact that Zürn underwent a second abortion in 1958 and complained openly to friends and doctors about Bellmer’s sexual preferences, something he admitted honestly when he was asked about it. It is also a fact that Bellmer had a drinking problem and suffered from depression from 1959 onward, something he would never be able to overcome during his lifetime. After the breakdown of their relationship in 1960, Zürn had a mental collapse and was admitted into a mental hospital in Berlin for the first time. It had a huge impact on their lives and they never quite recovered from it. Yet time and again they tried to pick up the pieces.

The desire to create diminished, yet both never lost it completely. At the depth of their misery, the six still changed into a nine. In 1963 Bellmer had, though one year later than initially planned, a large important solo exhibition in Paris at the Galerie Daniel Cordier. And in 1964 Zürn also had a second solo exhibition at the Galerie Le Point Cardinal, besides participating in collective expositions, such as *L’Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* (1959-1960).

V. The wonderful hour\(^\text{33}\)

From 1960 onward Zürn created much of her visual art in mental hospitals. During all her stays, she managed to regain tranquility fairly quickly as well as the courage and concentration to start drawing again. In all the mental hospitals she stayed, Zürn was recognized as an artist and writer and was provided with a workplace. Once unburdened by household duties and daily worries, she managed wonderfully well to make pen drawings in the small format of sketchbooks.\(^\text{34}\) All these drawings are signed, dated and provided with the

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34 In Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne also two other drawings in large format have been preserved.
name of the mental hospital. Additionally, Bellmer numbered the pages to
avoid theft. In 1966 Georges Visat, an important printer with whom Bellmer
cooperated, brought her etching plates, which resulted in a beautiful, luxu­
rious edition in large format, in spite of the fact that she had practiced the
art of engraving only once before. *Oracles et Spectacles* (1967) consisted of
eight anagrams translated into French and eight etchings, printed twice on
expensive thick paper and on rice paper – the latter were also coloured in by
hand.35  

Around 1967 Zürn set her mind on getting *Der Mann im Jasmin* published in
French translation, preferably with the editor Gallimard: »Es ist die für mich
wichtigste Arbeit, die ich in meinem Leben gemacht habe.«36 Zürn recounts in
*Der Mann im Jasmin* everything she saw and experienced within the walls of
the psychiatric wards. She also describes psychotic experiences in an expres­
sive language and calls them »valuable drawing lessons«. It gives the reader
a look into the forbidden rooms behind the walls of the mental hospital and
enables to get a picture of what may be perceived through the eyes of a
mentally ill person. Zürn also beautifully evokes her doctors’ attention for her
art and its possible relation to her illness. Her experiences are expressed in a
careful and colourful manner, but she also leaves certain things out, such as
her doctor’s reassuring observation on seeing her drawings, that »elle a repris
une activité artistique tout­à­fait normal.«37

To some extent Zürn exploited her insanity. Bellmer disapproved of this,
because it attracted the attention of art dealers he did not trust. He con­
sidered Zürn to be too decent, naive and trustful and thought it unwise to
focus on experiences of crises and hospitalization in such an extensive way.
But she did manage to have her own way as Gallimard accepted the man­
uscript of *Impressions from a Mental Illness*. Also Bellmer’s agent, gallery
owner André François Petit, became increasingly convinced of the importance
of Zürn’s visual art and considered promoting it. Because this prospect irri­
tated Bellmer greatly, the project was abandoned.38 Unfortunately Gallimard
postponed Zürn’s edition for such a long time that she did not live to see its
publication, although it is doubtful whether she would have liked the way it
turned out. The edition of *Der Mann im Jasmin* also contained various other
little manuscripts, such as *Das Haus der Krankheiten*, which were wrenched

35 With an introduction by Patrick Waldberg and a frontispiece and postscript by Bell­
mer.
36 »For me it is the most important work I made in my life.« Zürn. GA 4.3. P. 111.
37 Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne, Certificat de Demande Transformations de Place­ments (23th December 1961, file).
38 Interview with the author, 7th March 1995.
from their proper context and published without the pen drawings. Frustrated with the publisher’s delay, she had approached publisher Pierre Belfond for the French translation of Dunkler Frühling (Dark spring, 1969), an autobiographical novella about the awakening erotic feelings of her childhood. Belfond agreed to publish it on the condition that Bellmer would make a frontispiece for the title page and sign it by hand. Unfortunately, this publication appeared posthumously as well.

From 1967 onward, Zürn dedicated her life to Eindrücke aus einer Geistesk­rankheit (Impressions from a Mental Illness). She had not made any anagrams since 1964 and only drew sporadically after 1967. She and Bellmer did have their pleasant moments still, for example during the summer holidays they spent at the coast and the visits of their young adult children (Bellmer’s twin daughters, in particular Doriane and Zürn’s daughter and son Katrin and Christian). But the »wonderful hours« of creation nearly ceased. By now they lived in an apartment Bellmer had purchased. Yet he suffered a stroke in 1969, became partly paralysed and could not bear any sound anymore. Zürn was unable to deal with this situation. She made two more drawings in 1970, in one of which she seems to bid farewell to her »Chateaux d’Espagne«, her castles in the air.

Zürn rose and thrived as a writer and artist thanks to the stimulation of avant­garde circles, yet the preservation of her art and fame happened thanks to Ruth Henry, Inge Morgenroth, and Luce Irigaray, three outstanding feminists.39

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Exhibition catalogues


39 See: de Zanger. »Orakel en Spektakel« (see footnote 4).
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