

IRINA IONESCO

*Ma Réalité Rêvée*



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A limited edition of  
four hundred and fifty copies

Copies one to one hundred and fifty  
include an original print,  
signed by Irina Ionesco.

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Paris, 2016

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# *Ma Réalité Rêvée*

by Irina Ionesco

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Un drame survenu à ma naissance m'a séparé de mes  
parents à l'âge de quatre ans. Dès lors, pour ne pas mourir  
— une force obscure m'a poussée à rêver la vie  
et sans cesse la réinventer.

Le mirage — la traversée du miroir furent mes armes  
de guerre, et pour m'exprimer je suis devenue danseuse.

Ainsi j'avais atteint mon but; attiser les regards.  
Hélas, un accident a mis fin à ma carrière de danseuse.

Un miracle est alors survenu. On m'a offert un cadeau  
qui bouleversa ma vie, un appareil photo Nikon F.  
Cet outil a véritablement transformé mon regard sur le  
monde lui donnant de nombreuses facettes et laissant au  
rêve la possibilité de s'introduire dans la réalité en de  
multiples miroirs en continuant la puissance du rêve à  
travers ce théâtre discontinu qu'est la réalité.

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La Mort Amoureuse, 1985

# The theatrical, neo-surrealist world of Irina Lonesco

by Dr. Matthias Harder

Painting and photography must always be understood within the context of their creation and the prevailing spirit of the times. Only then can we judge whether a nude is particularly revealing, provocative, or even obscene — and not only appearing to be so.

Our art museums are filled with nude paintings that date back to the Renaissance and Baroque, during which not only the mythological figures of Venus, Eva, Maria, or Lucretia served as models, but also young women from the environment of the painters at the time. Through oil paint on canvas they were transformed into captivating saints or personifications of virtue, according to the visual canon and traditional reception at the time. Much later in the 1960s and '70s, the changes unleashed by the sexual revolution were dramatically felt in the social fabric as well as the arts. And artistic photography, with its visualisation of the naked human body, played a significant role, for instance through the enigmatic and melancholic images of Irina Lonesco.

Lonesco grew up in Constanta, Romania and settled in Paris in 1951, where she explored painting and then took up photography. She had her first solo exhibition in 1974 at the Nikon Gallery in Paris, the first major forum for many notable photographers, such as Helmut Newton one year later.

Even today, photography like no other medium can enchant or disturb us, excite or amuse us. A single photographic image can exert immense appeal and influence. The human body, particularly the nude female, is one of the most photographed, and thus one of the most important, motifs in the history of the photographic medium. Most of us are fascinated by nude photographs, whether consciously or unconsciously; through them Eros can transform into an obsession. The photographic gaze onto unclothed people, from the early daguerreotypists to the likes of Edward Weston and Man Ray, from Nan Goldin to Joel-Peter Witkin, has captured all varieties of love and passion, harbouring both beauty and fear. And when the work of a photographer like Irina Lonesco is so hotly debated, it deserves to be re-examined after a few decades of distance.

Lonesco's erotic productions evade simple categorisation as only portraits, fashion, or nudes. Instead they are a composite, in which the photographer explores the dualism of revealing and concealing, and plays subtly with the lewd and the louche. Lonesco outfitted her female models in lingerie and fur stoles, veiled them in tulle and netting, adorned them with opulent jewels and flowers, and posed their semi-nude bodies in nocturnal, neo-surrealist settings, often in front of mirrors. The models donned costume after costume before Lonesco's camera, against the ever-changing backdrop of her small stage. Unconventional props, half-object, half-decoration, and theatrical makeup underpinned her subject's personality, indeed, role. Pictured mostly alone, they play the role of *femme fatale* among others, staged by the photographer, their director.

Lonesco's complex, often dark arrangements function like a theatre play in several acts, or a movie, captured frame by frame. Yet the decisive element in her refined black-and-white images remains the partial nudity

and immediate sensuality of the female models. Sometimes their breasts are exposed, or their pubic area, or with their eyes half-closed they can seem almost corpse-like in the windowless interiors. Morbid associations come almost immediately to mind, with the late 19th-century symbolism with its images of melancholic, world-weary women, and maidens at the height of beauty in the throes of some deadly disease.

Lonesco's productions abound with poetic and natural eroticism; never do they seem distasteful or pornographic. She makes occasional references to the stories of French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet and possibly films by Luis Buñuel. Her models appear simultaneously fragile and self-confident; this apparent ambivalence owes much to the shifts in the perception of women in Western society. The complementary duality of voyeurism and exhibitionism present in Lonesco's work, like that of showing and hiding, is clearly inscribed in the field of fashion photography, for example. Fashion aims to seduce, as it should — visually, cognitively, and factually — to encourage consumption of the dresses and stockings, jewellery, and footwear it depicts. It is no wonder that such things have become popular objects of fetish.

In the 1970s and '80s, Irina Lonesco developed a keen and intense eye for women and their seductive allure. The impact of her nude photographs, with their enigmatic and timeless aura, reached well beyond the gaze of male viewers. Indeed, artists like Irina Lonesco helped to establish a new type of woman: a sensual and ambivalent embodiment of the unconventionality and permissiveness of the times.

When artists in their representation of people tread the fine line of the morally permissible, as was the case with Lonesco's contemporaries and successors such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Nobuyoshi Araki, and Cindy Sherman, discussion about the work and the bourgeois outrage it sparks is inevitable. And this may very well be the only way to expand the photographic canon: when such images beyond the norm take hold in our individual and collective visual memory.

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Dr. Matthias Harder has been working as the chief curator at the Helmut Newton Foundation in Berlin since 2004 and has been teaching at the Free University of Berlin since 2002. Prior to his current position, he was a guest curator at the Fotomuseum/Münchener Stadtmuseum for three years and a curator at the New Society of Visual Art in Berlin for four years. Born in Kiel in 1965, Matthias Harder studied Art History, Classical Archaeology and Philosophy in Kiel and Berlin. He publishes regularly in respected international magazines and has written numerous articles for books and exhibition catalogues.



# “My story is what it is. This is what I experienced but I had to grow up and grow old to understand it”.

by Pierre-Paul Puljiz

The work of Irina Ionesco is as singular and as free as its author's life. Hers is a story built on family trauma, a heartbreaking separation, abandonment, and forced exile, painful yet sometimes enchanting, in the “wild” of war-time Romania, of lost parents, briefly found once more in Paris, before they disappeared again...

Later on, Ionesco's life was made up of travels around the world, of encounters and amazing cabaret shows, of theatres, casinos, and luxury hotels. The line between professional collaboration and love was always close, as was the line between luxury and precariousness, life and death... Ionesco was alternately dancer, boa constrictor's charmer, human target, professional gambler, and finally, painter and photographer — self-taught, but always accomplished.

Eros and Thanatos, costumed and adorned with Oriental decorations, where the dark was like ink. The setting: a rather small and narrow stage, with no outside window, without exit, on which Ionesco's models, as if under hypnosis, chosen as a result of her random meetings, could mount and infinitely multiply facets of themselves and of other identities.

Irina Ionesco was born in Paris, but it could have been anywhere else as her parents were travellers and artists. Her father Adolfo was a violinist, playing classical music in a symphony orchestra and travelling to concerts all around the world. Her mother Margareth was a trapeze artist, full of sass, who was sixteen when Irina was born.

Ionesco was her maternal grandfather's name, whom Irina had never met; her grandmother Elizabeth had remarried. From birth until she was four years old, Irina, her parents and grandmother lived in Paris. When Irina was four, her mother met, in the *Quartier Latin*, a very cultured and noble Chinese university student she decided to follow to China. She got a contract with a Chinese circus to gradually settle there, in hiding, to be accepted by her new Chinese family and to disappear from her Parisian family.

Irina's father continued to play in the orchestra, leaving the care of Irina to her grandmother. Given this unstable environment, compounded with a suicide attempt by Adolfo, her grandmother decided to take her back to Romania.

Irina Ionesco preserved very few memories from that time: the departure of her mother and the fierce argument between her father and grandmother before she forced their departure for Romania. But above all, most of all, she remembers her complete lack of identity, lost in the middle of three different people: her mother, her father and grandmother, who she did not even not give a name to, as she was unable to understand the links between them all. She saw everything but did not yet fully understand. Everything seemed true and false at the same time. Her world was an enigma.

Later Ionesco learned that her father Adolfo was actually her grandmother's second husband — and her mother's step-father. Irina's mother Margareth

had been born to her grandmother's first marriage, and when Elizabeth re-married, was adopted by the second husband Adolfo. He was over ten years younger than the grandmother and struggled to see Irina's mother Margareth as his daughter. When the grandmother Elizabeth went away for a few months, an affair started and Irina's mother Margareth became pregnant. Irina's birth was experienced by the family as a total tragedy, a destruction of the family pattern, that no one wanted to explain.

After Irina and her grandmother's departure, her father fell for the daughter of a diamond dealer and dropped the violin for stones. His life improved. But Irina's life became more difficult. Between the port of Constanta with her grandmother and the Romanian countryside with her uncles, whom she was scared of, life was becoming tougher. The war and its atrocities had arrived. Farms were requisitioned by the Germans. Her uncles left, leaving only the young Irina with her grandmother on a farm occupied by German officers. It was there, between the port of Constanta and the Romanian countryside, that Irina Ionesco's imagination was forged, composed of lavish Orthodox masses, that she considered much more beautiful than the theatre, and gypsy festivals, marriages, folklore, costumes, and decorations that she would keep in her mind forever. She dreamed a lot, imagined her parents, wondering what they would look like, staring at details of a carpet or of a wall until she was in a trance-like state.

When the Russian army arrived, they were much worse than the Germans. After the armistice, Ionesco finally clandestinely returned to Paris with her grandmother. Now aged fifteen, Ionesco met Margareth in Paris, who was always beautifully dressed and adorned with exquisite jewellery. This careless, adventurous, curious and always cheerful mother left for China again soon after. She was prevented from returning by the war between China and Japan. As for her father, Ionesco also began to know and appreciate him, but he died shortly after in a car accident. Slowly, Irina began to understand this rather unusual family situation in which she ultimately was the victim.

She then lived in Pigalle, alone with her neurasthenic grandmother, without the possibility of communicating with anyone. She enrolled in a dance class to evade her loneliness, “seduced” a teacher and eventually took over a position in the prestigious cabaret show that had been left vacant by his daughter, who left with a wealthy Russian. This was a show played in Monseigneur, with two boa constrictors and music by Rimsky-Korsakov. Irina took up her place in the show with the only ambition of travelling the world, touring theatres, cabarets, casinos, and sometimes circuses. Staying in Monseigneur did not interest her.

*Life on the road in the early 1950s*

Ionesco's life was far from the usual fairground clichés, and was led in luxury hotel suites, with two bathrooms, one for her and one for her two six- and seven-metre long boa constrictors, which needed their own bath. Ionesco made a splash on stage with golden makeup that coated her entire

Fafa, 1970



body. It was nudity, but it was also a costume. It pushed the boundaries of costume with a mixture of unconsciousness and assumed freedom.

The boas were becoming increasingly heavy, too heavy for Ionesco’s frail body. Meanwhile, she had met a dancer on the road whom she liked very much. He was also a stage director and professor of philosophy. They ended up setting up a new dance show together, but one night, an accident happened while Ionesco was on stage and he did not catch her. She crashed into the orchestra pit, sustaining several broken bones. She was immobilised for months, when all she had known was movement, in happiness and in misfortune.

The dancer returned to his philosophy while Irina was stuck in a hospital bed in Damascus. Recovering gradually, she went out and met other artists, including a knife thrower, for whom she became a living target. Boas did not scare her and neither did knives. “I am Romanian, anyway!”, she used to say. It was a wild time back then, as trapeze artists did not use nets and knife throwers did not fake any of their stunts. After leaving the hospital, Ionesco found herself strapped to a wheel that turned and turned, always facing a knife thrower. All she was wearing were blood red panties.

The crowd went from silence to delirium wherever they played their show. But Irina started to be less excited by this life. It was too static! But it was always going to be a meeting, one of those chance meetings, those loves, life-changing ones, which caused Ionesco to make a turn while remaining on the road.

Ionesco encountered an Iranian professional gambler named Reza, who was playing in casinos all over the world. Squandering the family fortune in one city, making it up in another one and then repeating the same process again, from the street to luxurious suites and vice versa. Back in Paris with Reza, she decided to drop it. She needed freedom, freedom of movement.

In 1964, a real artistic shift finally occurred. Ionesco met Corneille, the Dutch painter who, along with others including Karel Appel, had co-founded the COBRA group, the aim of which was to abolish classicism.

Irina Ionesco began to paint, and this phase lasted five years. Corneille helped her to expose her work, but soon disagreements arose between them. He did not much appreciate Irina’s paintings, made of decorations, empty décors, haunted by footsteps, nostalgic and melancholy, stealthily left by their occupants: a piece of clothing, jewellery, a suit. Corneille, certainly anxious that Irina would stop painting, offered her a Nikon camera and a first photography lesson. Her brief career as a painter was therefore interrupted by this camera, which became her alter ego. The décor as evidenced in her paintings was already there, the costumes too, but it was only when she turned to photography that characters showed up.

Irina still had to find her first model. Her gaze fell on Anouk, the daughter of a couple she was friends with, who had lost the sense of her own image. Shut away in her room, unable to look in the mirror, she spent her days endlessly brushing her long pre-Raphaelite hair. She lived alone in a lost world, from which her parents took her out once a day for a walk, before she started brushing her hair again. Irina then thought about this camera offered by Corneille and decided to photograph Anouk, to see if she could possibly recognise herself in a picture. She took Anouk home, and for fun, found some costumes and jewellery from her world travels. Anouk, dressed and adorned, posed tirelessly. But Irina was struggling with technology and especially with light. She remembered some recommendations Corneille had given her, and called him for advice. He advised her to use tungsten lights. Irina did not have tungsten lights but remembered the lighting in *Barry Lyndon*, a film she had loved.

She went to buy dozens of candles to light up the whole room. Thus was born the first photograph taken by Irina Ionesco. This first picture could also have been her last one as her whole style was encapsulated in it: decorations, costumes, symbolic and fetish accessories, lighting, and an atypical model.

After Anouk came Fafa, a member of the “family” in the broadest sense. Fafa came from the countryside. She was small but her proportions fitted in front of the camera. She could look taller or smaller, enabling the artist to mould her into multiple characters, like an actor playing several roles. This enabled Irina to project whatever troubled her. She was working on others to seek herself.

Theatre, and Irina’s facility to enter and leave her own reality, were a huge luxury. Her theatre, her cabaret, these closed doors she inflicted on her models who stayed with her in her apartment, transformed into a photo studio, where she directed everything from costumes, to make-up, accessories, and light. This closed door gives its sense to all her photos, with white skin and dark pubic fleece, the creation of a world.

More models followed. After Fafa came Florence, Vivianne, Milena, Maroussia, Sacha. So many of these close and long-lasting relationships started in the street, or in bars, or at friends’ places, and all were photographed by Irina, in her apartment — a similar working style to her contemporary Carlo Mollino in Turin. Every day of the week was specifically booked for a particular model. They were posed and motionless characters, contrasting with the twirling dancer that the photographer herself had been. Characters were stuck in an imaginary and morbid world, with eroticism and death never far away. Ionesco brought out of her models what they could not see in themselves, and through these multi-faceted women, Irina continued her never-ending search for her own identity. In a silent and hypnotic game with her model, she created her photographs like “painting in process.” Sessions lasted one day, or one night, with Irina then saying, “Goodbye, goodbye, see you next week.” Day after day, week after week, month after month, artwork was created.

In 1974, Ionesco exhibited for the first time at the Nikon Gallery. The exhibition was an immediate success. This was innovative and strong self-taught work, both erotic and morbid, made of freedom we may not allow ourselves to have nowadays. It was disturbing, provocative and sometimes taboo. This was a time and a body of work whose soundtrack could be the meeting of Rimsky-Korsakov and Roxy Music. Like *Scheherazade* revisited by a sparkling Brian Eno, with Bryan Ferry as the knife thrower, in a cabaret of Tangier with dark, heavy curtains. Sylvia Kristel would be sitting in front of the stage, and at the table would sit William Burroughs and Brion Gysin.

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Pierre-Paul Puljiz is a French film producer, documentary filmmaker, and writer. He produced feature films directed by Larry Clark, Jonathan Caouette and Jean-Michel Vecchiet, as well as documentary films about Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jonas Mekas, Peter Lindbergh, Patti Smith, Hubert de Givenchy, Tom Wolfe, Albert Maysles, Paul Morrissey, Joe Dallesandro, Holly Woodlawn, and so many others. Puljiz has a strong interest in photography, underground movies, fashion, art and new generations of culture-crossing artists. As filmmaker he's currently working for France Television on a web series and a documentary film both dedicated to the Mexican spontaneous religion of the Santa Muerte.



Fafa, Je Vous Attend, 1973

# FAFA MÉTAMORPHOSE

*Un modèle exclusif doté de tout possible, métamorphoses et jeux divers. Fafa, inégalable actrice ayant admirablement peuplé mon théâtre en habitant tous les miroirs dans lesquels, inéluctablement, je me plonge.*

*chevelure défaite parmi des chairs de rose  
cascade de cheveux montrant un ovale parfait*

*yeux qui brillent comme des pierres précieuses  
yeux d'animaux de fourrure  
yeux comme des grands trous*

*mains qui tiennent des objets de culte  
mains qui invoquent la magie  
mains qui insèrent des objets oubliés  
souvenirs  
reliques des disparus*

*des doigts sur la fleur d'un sein  
géométrie amoureuse des siens  
lèvres noires à force d'être rouges*





Fafa, 1971





Fafa, 1975





Fafa, 1970





Fafa, 1970





Fafa, 1972









Fafa, 1972





Fafa, 1972



Fafa, 1972





Fafa, La Robe Marocaine, 1975



Fafa, 1972











Fafa, nude with male  
doll head and turban, 1970





Fafa, 1970





Fafa, 1975





Fafa, Poupée de Chair, 1970





Fafa, 1970









Fafa, half-nude reclined on floral fabrics,  
with giant fake sunflower and vase of fake roses, 1972





Fafa, 1970





Fafa, 1970





Fafa, 1970





Fafa, 1976





Fafa, 1970





Fafa, 1975





Fafa, Le Souvenir du Souvenir, 1975



Fafa, portrait with fancy  
makeup and wallpaper, 1970











Fafa, 1972









Fafa, I Love You, 1970





Fafa, 1972





Fafa, reclining nude with a heart tattoo I, 1970





Fafa, 1970





Fafa, reclining nude with a heart tattoo II, 1970









Fafa, 1972



# MIROIRS

*Les femmes que j'introduis dans mon univers,  
sont autant de miroirs qu'ensemble nous traversons.*









Anouk, first model, 1970













Model in black lace costume,  
with round mirror and feathers, 1970









La Damnation, 1980











# LE NU, L'ÉROTISME, LA THÉÂTRALITÉ

*Le maquillage, les parures, les reflets.  
Ou bien une certaine forme de théâtralité que  
traduisent les gestes,  
les expressions,  
la mimique.*

*J'y accorde une grande importance.*



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