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Mirrors and Mimesis: An Examination of the Strategies of Image Appropriation and Repetition in the Work of Dara Birnbaum

Dot Tuer

SLOGANS TO BE SPREAD NOW BY EVERY MEANS

(leaflets, announcements over microphones, comic strips, songs, graffiti, balloons on paintings in the Sorbonne, announcements in theatres during films or while disrupting them, balloons on subway billboards, before making love, after making love, in elevators, everytime you raise your glass in a bar):

OCCUPY THE FACTORIES

POWER TO THE WORKERS COUNCILS

ABOLISH CLASS SOCIETY

DOWN WITH SPECTACLE- COMMODITY SOCIETY

ABOLISH ALIENATION

OCCUPATION COMMITTEE OF THE AUTONOMOUS

AND POPULAR SORBONNE UNIVERSITY

16 May 1968,7:00p.m. (1)

Je voulais écrire une poème

Je voulais écrire deux poèmes

Ce voulais écrire dix poèmes

Je voudrais écrire cent poèmes

mais je fais la révolution.(2)

The poem above precedes the opening credits of Dara Birnbaum's *Canon: Taking To The Street*(1990)

In Dara Birnbaum's single channel videotape, *Canon: Taking To The Street*, (1990), the political act of taking to the street is framed and reframed through an *n.paradoxa* online issue no.3 May 1997

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iconic evocation to the Paris uprising of May 1968 and a digital reworking of amateur video footage from a Take Back the Night march held at Princeton University in April, 1987. In the opening sequence of the videotape, the words from a poem of art and revolution appear line by line on the screen. The background, a faint rose colour, turns to a vibrant revolutionary red as the lines of the poem add up to an affirmation of action over art. Then images from the silk screen posters made by students in 1968 burst upon the screen, and as quickly disappear. In quick animated succession, a line drawing of a woman throwing a brick with the accompanying slogan, *La Beauté et dans la rue*, is followed by a figure muzzled by the hand of authority with the slogan *Sois jeune et tais toi*, a blindfolded figure speaking into a microphone with the slogan *Informacion Libre* a fist with the slogan *Leur compagne recommence*. *Notre lutte continue*, and a final image of the Sorbonne With the words *université populaire. OUI*. In the wake of this quick time accumulation of historical references, video footage bursts through a line drawing of the brick: transforming a weapon of the street into television screen within the screen. Still-born icons of another era cast into motion, the hand made posters give birth to the indistinct and grainy black and white video images of a march held fifteen years later, and they in turn give birth to a complex entanglement of recorded fragments of history and their artistic representation. On one hand, the sharp contours of the poster's line drawings, imbued with the confrontational patina of an historical specificity, contrast starkly with the abstracted and dreamlike images of the Take Back the Night march, in which shadowy figures of an indeterminate darkness could belong to any street and any protest of a post-Vietnam era demonstration. On the other, the *speeding up* of historical time through the animation of inert posters, and *slowing down* of historical time through the digital manipulation of the video footage collapses temporal demarcations between these two moments of passionate resistance, blurring the boundaries between authenticity and simulation. Doubling back upon each other within an electronic sphere of mediation, the images in Canon become a series of ghostly echoes that displace the nostalgia for a representational purity with a slippage between art and action. Recasting the recorded fragments of the past as both the subject and object of a technological repetition, Birnbaum points to the fragility and the potency of image appropriation as an artistic gesture of remembrance and of re-enactment. For while the students of the Ecole des Beaux Artes in Paris worked feverishly through the night to produce artisanal images heralding a revolutionary daylight it was the visual remnants of their failure that inspired the students of Princeton to take to the streets with portable video cameras to claim back the night.

A deftly wrought play between the specificity of history and its re-imaging within an electronic sphere of mediation, Canon's conceptual framework pivots on the use of a double-edged strategy of appropriation and repetition: a strategy that has been central to Birnbaum's artistic practice over the last two decades. From early works

such as *Technology Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978) that takes as its subject the image circulation of gender through television, to her recent work, *Hostage*, (1994), that takes as its focus the media coverage of the kidnapping of a German industrialist, Hanns Martin Schleyer by the Red Army Faction in 1977, Birnbaum has explored the entanglements of identity and ideology through the juxtaposition and recirculation of found images. An image flaneur of the global village, Birnbaum takes as her site of investigation the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision, described by theorist Paul Virilio as the "the handling of simultaneous data in a global but unstable environment where the image is the most concentrated but also the most unstable form of information." (3) Prowling on the edges of this vast technological apparatus, she isolates and recontextualizes fragments from a swirl of electronic data to reflect upon the ways in which culture remakes nature and mediation reshapes identity.

In so doing, Birnbaum's artistic practice aligns itself philosophically and conceptually with a vision of technologically saturated environment that extends from Marshall McLuhan's claim in 1964 that 'after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself into a global embrace, abolishing time and space as far as our planet is concerned,'(4) to Jean Baudrillard's assertion of a post-modern condition as one of a simulacrum, in which 'simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.' (5) Yet despite the obvious affinities in Birnbaum's work with the ways in which McLuhan's global nervous system or Baudrillard's simulacrum challenge a representational purity that privileges originals over copies, she shares little of McLuhan's unbridled optimism or Baudrillard's pessimistic passivity for technology's omnipotence. Rather than succumb to McLuhan's enthusiasm for technology's potential to refashion the self, or surrender to Baudrillard's modernist lament for a reality lost in the shuffle of degraded copies, Birnbaum's artistic practice calls into question the ideological underpinnings of a global nervous system, locates within the simulacrum the potential to destabilise the fixed identity of gender, to pry loose history from its temporal moorings.

In seeking to inscribe a site of intervention upon the smooth surface of the simulacrum, Birnbaum's complex play in her work upon copies within copies also finds a resonance in Gilles Deleuze's critique of a Platonic idealism that underpins the ordering of representation in Western culture (6) in Deleuze's reading of Plato's hostility to an imitation or mimesis of appearances, he notes that Plato distinguishes between good copies and bad copies. Good copies are based upon the degree to which the representation of appearances resemble ideal forms or Ideas. Bad copies, on the other hand, are imitations of appearances that while seeming to perfectly mimic reality are upon close inspection not even like the originals they profess to resemble. In Plato it is bad copies that give rise to the simulacra; to a false representation that

challenges the primacy of sameness linking appearances to models to Ideal Forms And it is the simulacra that Plato represses in the search for a knowledge and truth that enlightens rather than deceives, purifies rather than contaminates.

In turn, argues Deleuze, Plato's decision to exorcise the simulacra from the order of representation constructs a legacy in Western culture of repressing difference in favour of sameness, in repressing the power of mimesis to conjure phantasms of indeterminacy, to infuse the copy with the power to affect the original. What is condemned in the process, writes Deleuze, 'is the state of free, oceanic differences, of nomadic distributions, and crowned anarchy'(7) Thus to assert the primacy of the simulacra is not to give into a world of degraded copies, but in Deleuze's words to 'render the order of participation, the fixity of distribution, the determination of hierarchy impossible.'(8). For Deleuze, then, what is at stake in the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision, in the sense of each image of reality in turn affecting reality, of a nervous shifting and sliding of constants into constant flux of exchange, is a reordering of difference and sameness, an unravelling of fixed identities and representational certainty.

In one of Birnbaum's earliest works *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, (1978) it this primacy of the simulacrum that is asserted in her image appropriation of a popular American television show of the 1970s. Similar to other video works produced by Birnbaum from 1978-1982, she describes her strategy in *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* as one of 'attempting to slow down the 'technological speed' of television and arresting moments of TV time for the viewer, which would then allow for examination and questioning.'(9) in so doing, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* becomes a crucial example of Birnbaum's ongoing investigation of the ways in which an interrogation of identity and ideology cannot be disentangled from the proliferation of images within a contemporary field of vision. Distilling from the smooth narrative space of television the explosive moments of Wonder Woman's transformation from office girl to all American Amazon, Birnbaum reveals in *Technology/ Transformation: Wonder Woman* a doubling of identity within mediation, points to gender as subject to an image chain of reproductions. For as the figure of Wonder Woman repeatedly *appears* and *disappears* in a puff of smoke, it is not the difference between her two selves, but their sameness, that becomes visible. Within this image play upon temporality and repetition the fluidity of identity is unveiled as an optical illusion; the ordering of difference and sameness is called into question. A seemingly simple act of isolating fragments from a global nervous system of image circulation, Birnbaum's gesture points to both the determinacy and the indeterminacy of gender within the simulacrum: in which the accidental and the heterogeneous reworking of television destabilises identity as that puff of smoke occurring between images.

In choosing to focus upon the *special effects* that enact Wonder Woman's dizzying metamorphosis from a secretary to a prototype cyborg, Birnbaum's intervention upon

the smooth space of the simulacrum reveals not only a doubling of identity but of ideology. For in *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, it is not only the fixity of identity that is unveiled as an optical illusions but the emergence of a *new* woman through technology. In so doing, this early work by Birnbaum offers an interesting counterpoint to the feminist artists of the seventies who heralded the video screen as an emancipatory interface of self and technology that would undo an ideological and historical overdetermination of gender within mediation.

For curator Mary Jane Jacob, 'access to video allowed women and others- until then marginalized by the mainstream - to have an equal voice,'(10) while critic Martha Gever proffered that video reposed a redefinition of reality by asserting the validity of women's existence and experiences, by challenging accepted ideas about those experiences. (11). 'With its grainy white and black images, awkward close up framing and image feedback capabilities, feminism with a portapak appeared to offer the opportunity to turn the technological eye of the camera back upon the simulacrum, to refuse the narrative devices and encoded repetitions of television through a fluid mirroring of body and machine that art critic Rosalind Krauss has termed an "aesthetics of narcissism.'(12)

Upon a closer examination, however, the utopian aspirations for this *new* interface of technology to challenge an overdetermination of gender through self-exploration and self-representation disappears like Wonder Woman in the lightning flash of an explosion. For while video offered women artists the potential to explore the identity of self as an ever-changing, shifting, and unstable reflection of *reality*, the ease with which they entered the arena of video art also can also be traced to an already predetermined system of ideological coding; a coding in which the entrance of women into the work force and public space at the turn of the century was linked to the gender-typing of the typewriter and the telephone. In turn, the attribution of technological innovations in the industrial work place with specific gender traits can be traced to a nineteenth century speculations upon the relationship of electricity as the *vital source* of female energy: a speculation that finds its materialisation in the telephone operator, the office girl, and in the contemporary armies of word processors and micro-chip fabricators.

For example, a recruitment catalogue for secretaries from 1892 notes that 'as stenographers and typists (women) have special qualifications in neatness, taste, deftness of action, and quickness of perception, and there is no line of industry to which they are better adapted ... possessing nimble fingers, nervous and delicate organs and being quick to hear, think, and comprehend.' (13) Similarly, the decision of the Bell Telephone company in the 1890s to use women operators instead of men was accompanied by an assertion of femininity as essential to a human interface between a flow of electricity and the voice. The trade magazine of Ma Bell, as the company is informally known, praised in 1898 the 'clear feminine quality of the voice' as best suited to 'the delicate instrument of the telephone,' proposing that

women could "put their femininity to the service of the community"(14) through their occupation as telephone operators. In turn, the gender-typing of technology at the turn of the century finds its contemporary echoes in Marshall McLuhan's description of the telephone as a kind of electronic call girl, and his argument that ' the typewriter and the telephone are most unidentical twins that have taken over the revamping of the American girl with a technological ruthlessness and thoroughness." (15)

In *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, it is the "technological ruthlessness and thoroughness" of this gender-typing that becomes visible through Birnbaum's double-edged strategy of appropriation and repetition. Isolating from a global swirl of images those of an office girl and her Amazon double, Birnbaum highlights the simulacrum's fantasy projection of an instant emancipation from the dreary and everyday exploitation of white collar labour. Simultaneously, Birnbaum's constant repetition of Wonder Woman's explosive moment of transformation bears witness to the violence that the simulacrum enacts upon the social body. Reworking the narrative devices and encoded repetitions of television, Birnbaum turns the eye of the camera back upon the simulacrum to reveal in the "new" interface of the video screen a container of old and problematical ideologies. For, as Wonder Woman stares into a mirror during a sequence of the tape, it is not a fluid exchange of identity that is reflected back, but the chimera of a technologically induced liberation. Here, the narcissistic gaze of video art is hemmed in by the insistent glare of the mass media; the utopian aspirations to refashion the self through a "new" interface of technology are encircled by the image proliferations of a central nervous system. A subject produced not only by technology, but also by ideology, Wonder Woman's "good copy" of her former secretarial self offers up an illusory emancipation: an illusion that is echoed by the soundtrack of the videotape, in which Wonder Woman's image is framed by the overtly sexual lyrics and fabricated voices of The Wonder Woman in Discoland Band - a group explicitly engineered and marketed during the height of the television's show's popularity to cash in on the commodity fetishism of Wonder Woman's mystique.

Playing a double game with technology's seduction in *Technology/Transformation : Wonder Woman*, Birnbaum unveils within the simulacrum a seamless web of images that tightens imperceptibly around a capacity to distinguish the self from its technological interface. Responding to this spectre of a technological omnipotence, she repositions the viewer as a smart agent of mediation navigating a nervous flow of images and data. In so doing, this early work by Birnbaum becomes an example of counter-modernist or anti-modernist strategy: locating within the simulacrum a site of ideological contestation in which a cybernetic collapse of TV's, VCR's, PC's, satellite transmissions, and cable networks threaten to redefine consciousness as subject to the interfaces of a global feedback system. Here, the entanglement of technology and ideology is externalised in the sensation of surveillance cameras stalking one at every turn, like a secret agent who is discreet

in his distance, but nevertheless persistent in his task of shadowing one's every activity. It is internalised in the rarefied experiments of corporate laboratories such as Xerox's Palo Alto Research Centre in California, in which a visionary investment in the development of ubiquitous computing leads Mark Weisner, the head of its Computer Science Laboratory, to proclaim that 'the most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it.'⁽¹⁶⁾

Ten years after the making of *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, it is this seamless weaving of ideology and the social body through the video interface of a global feedback system that becomes the focus of Birnbaum's Rio Videowall. A public art wall project commissioned and designed for an Atlanta shopping mall Rio Videowall extends Birnbaum's interrogation of the simulacrum as a site of contestation to an investigation of the ways in which a proliferation of image and data flow occupy the social body, subjecting the reordering of difference and sameness to an ideological circularity. In the middle of the public plaza, Birnbaum has placed a video bank of twenty five monitors. When the plaza is emptied of people, the data bank of images exist in a dormant state of aestheticized tranquillity: filled with digitalized images of the natural landscape existing on the site of the mall before it was built. However, when the shoppers fill the plaza, the movement of their bodies interrupts this smooth simulacrum landscape. For within the mall itself, two live surveillance cameras are linked to the video wall, so that when pedestrians pass in front of the camera, the silhouettes of their bodies are keyed into the pristine Edenic state of the image data banks. As the live body is dematerialised through the surveillance camera and rematerialized as an image in the plaza, the body's shell is simultaneously filled with live satellite transmissions from CNN: Atlanta, of course, being the hometown of Ted Turner's media empire. In the process, a riot confusion of feedback and transmission, appearances and copies, ensues: pointing to the interface of the video screen as a mechanism of representation that leads, in Paul Virillio's words 'from the aesthetics of the appearance of a stable image to the aesthetics of the disappearance of an unstable image.'⁽¹⁷⁾

Using the interface of the video screen to intertwine the architecture of commodification and rewriting of the body through information, the distractions of the mall and the distractions of the news flow are temporally suspended and conflated within the simulacrum. Here, the externalisation of technology through surveillance and internalisation of technology through the ubiquitous computing of Xerox PARC are reversed. Instead of technologies 'weaving themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it,' Birnbaum's installation highlights the invisible economies of technology's coercion. For rather than amplifying an information flow of data and images, the insertions of the bodies as shells overflowing with information points to the sensory deprivation that occurs when the determinacy of culture displaces the indeterminacy of nature. In the Rio

Videowall project, the reordering of sameness and difference through the interface of the video screen points to the paradoxical function of technology to insure an ideological unity through a decentralisation of image transmission. In so doing, Birnbaum's work serves to echo a warning issued by Michael Taussig, (an Australian anthropologist and theorist) that 'the most critically important feature of the war of silencing is its geographical, epistemological and military strategic decentredness.'⁽¹⁸⁾

In Birnbaum's work, *Hostage*, first exhibited at the Paula Cooper gallery in New York in 1994, an interrogation of the global nervous system at its most nervous ensues: an interrogation that explicitly links Virilio's 'aesthetics of the disappearance of an unstable image' to such a war of silencing. A six channel video installation with an interactive laser beam, *Hostage* takes as its point of departure the media coverage of the kidnapping of the German industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer by the Red Army Faction in 1977, and the subsequent suicide of three of the Baader Meinhof members in Stammheim prison. In the installation, four monitors were suspended from the ceiling, diagonally spanning the gallery space. Another two monitors were mounted at eye level on opposite walls of the gallery with a laser beam ruffling between them at the chest height. On the four monitors suspended from the ceiling, images of archival television footage of events from the period of the kidnapping are simultaneously transmitted: images montaged and repeated by Birnbaum to construct from the invisible order of the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision a perceptible chaos.

At the far end of the gallery, the video screen mounted on the wall featured an interview with Schleyer videotaped through the eye of the vitro clandestine camera of the kidnapers, and rebroadcast on German television at the time of the kidnapping to *prove* Schleyer was still alive. Directly opposite this video, the sixth monitor bombarded the viewer with fast cutting clips in which text from various American newspaper reports on the hostage taking crisis and the Red Army Faction is superimposed upon a visual background of archival footage from the other monitors. When the viewer passed in front on the laser beam that connected the two monitors, the image and text on the news gathering monitor was frozen in time and space for as long as the viewer remained in the line of the laser's light. Fragmented, disjointed, nervous making the video installation positioned the viewer in a place where all images were collapsed into simultaneous time. The viewer, as much as the Germans at the time of the kidnapping, is held hostage to an image machine: as if the interface of a global feedback system had gone awry, no longer assuring control but producing chaos. Here, interactivity was not the allure of integration, but the shock of finding oneself a target of the nervous system. For it is only when caught in the 'light' of the laser beam that historical time was momentarily frozen.

In turn, the role of the viewer as a media target was mirrored by the plexiglass silhouettes of a firing range target that were suspended in front of each ceiling monitor, Resembling the shell of a body, these targets became metaphorical

interfaces between body and screen, explicitly linking the omnipotence of technology to state control. On each target, the imprint of a bullseye ring was elongated to simulate a fingerprint: evoking another form of interface in which the imprint of the body's contact with the state entangles identity and ideology not only in the flow of images but the classification of information. At the beginning of each of the six video tapes that were continuously playing, an image of this target was reproduced and superimposed upon an electronic identification countdown for the broadcast transmission of United Press International Television Network. Serving as an image map for the information flow on the video screens, this target was keyed with the words, *roving reporter*, to acknowledge the independent news gathering service from which Birnbaum obtained the footage for *Hostage*. Footage that had been withheld by all the major mass media sources and German television. As the countdown reached zero, the image of the target was riddled with bullet shots, further adding to the noise and confusion of the installation's visual pandemonium.

While only the most determined viewer could have pieced together the disparate data of the six monitors into a coherent narrative, a viewing of Birnbaum's installation channel by channel makes explicit the many guises in which the State deploys the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision. For the German state, the screen not only functions to transmit information, but to withhold it. It becomes a mask to black-out information, a tool of negotiating with the kidnappers, a broadcast site for the video sent by the kidnappers of Schleyer. After the murder and recovery of Schleyer's body, it also serves to resurrect the body of Schleyer as a martyr to the central nervous system's collapse, in the newspaper text on the sixth monitor which included a *New York Times* report that 'television cancelled programs and substituted funeral music,' and a *Chicago Tribune* report on October 26, 1977, that 'the ceremony was televised into the factories of Daimler-Benz, of which Schleyer had been a director.' On the other hand, for the members of the Baader Meinhof group, the interface of the screen becomes a site of absence, a space in which only the guards at Stammheim prison are witness to a continual video surveillance. As a result, the subsequent "suicides" of the Baader Meinhof members while in prison become a discursive site of media theatre, in which the reports on the hostage taking crisis circulating in print medium construct a narrative that fills in the image gaps of television.

In Birnbaum's archival reworking of this narrative, she uncovers the use of gendered identity by the mass media as a division between monstrosity and violence. Interspersed throughout the more factual reports on the hostage taking, news clips from American sources on the sixth monitor construct a psychology of West German "terrorism" based upon women's participation in the Red Army Faction. Revealing the paradoxical determinacy and indeterminacy of gender in the flow of information, Newsweek attributes this phenomenon 'to the typical emotional fervour of females,' while simultaneously reporting the denunciation of a German woman politician who

argues that "these women negate everything that is part of the established feminine character." *The Chicago Tribune* quotes a German police official in saying "women's participation (in terrorism) is the dark side of women's emancipation," while a headline of the *Los Angeles Times*, "A new generation of deadly young women," is accompanied by an assessment of a German criminologist who links their feminine pathology to "the influence of domineering mothers,' and fathers who were "often described as dictatorial and absent." But perhaps the most succinct analysis is offered by a neighbour of a Baader Meinhof member, who is quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as describing how "she sang communist songs all night and never cleaned the stairs."

A cacophony of image circulation and information overload, *Hostage* succeeds in locating in the hostage taking crisis of 1977 a collapse of the nervous system upon itself. It pinpoints an historical moment in which the interface of the screen and the image bled over into the social body to entangle image and response, terror and repression. Holding up a mirror of the nervous system to itself, Birnbaum reveals behind an ordered system of representation a deadly embrace of appearances, in which the Baader Meinhof group and the German state are caught into a game of mimicry in which each imitates the other in a constant escalation of violence. Conjuring image phantoms from history to reveal the internal logic of the nervous system, she escalates a nervous flow of images to the point where the interface of the screen becomes a death space in which the copies of the simulacra stare down upon each other. For like the ancient Aztec god of sorcery, Tezcatlipoca, whose allusive smoking mirror revealed behind the chimera of the image the raw face of power, Birnbaum points in *Hostage* to the coercive mechanisms of image control that underlie an image proliferation. And as a sorcerer, Birnbaum also uses *Hostage* to reinvest the images of history with meaning. Reordering images through the simulation of an historical moment, Birnbaum mimics the constant movement of the nervous system to fracture the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision into a "profane illumination" of discordance. In so doing, Birnbaum points to the potential of re-enchanting history through the image phantasms that lurk beneath the smooth surface of the simulacrum: embracing the strategy of a roving reporter who sifts through image banks to discover the ghosts of ideology that haunt the interfaces of a global feedback system.

Perhaps what is most fascinating in Birnbaum's *Hostage* is the inability of the mass media coverage that inundates the viewer on the sixth monitor to offer a cogent analysis of the system's sudden nervousness, outside, of- course, an interpretation of women guerrillas as the unfortunate by-product of female emancipation. *Time* and *Newsweek* coverage of the event in 1977 offer 'no ready explanation to the terrorist movement except that it grew out of the Vietnam War,' noting that the 'emergence of a fanatical minority has baffled analysts. Such bafflement was not ingenuous. Attempts by leading European theorists in Semiotext(e)'s German Issue to disentangle the ideological and technological strands that wove the mimetic

escalation of violence in Germany, a sense of unease and confusion ensues compounded by division of the pages of the journal to mimic the division of the Berlin Wall (18). At the same time, it was here that Paul Virilio first published *Pure War* and Jean Baudrillard began his slippery theoretical slide towards the hyperreal. In this light, it is interesting to note that in Paul Virilio's *L'Espace Critique*, published in 1984, he contextualizes his analysis of the ubiquitousness of contemporary vision by arguing that the architecture of a global system is generated as a response to the euroterrorism of the late 1970s whereby the 'screen interface of computers, televisions, and teleconference, the surface of inscriptions, hitherto devoid of depth, becomes a kind of *distance*, a depth of field of a new kind of representation, a visibility without any face-to-face encounter' (19). In linking the image proliferations of the simulacrum to the defensive responses of a multinational capitalism and to the material traces of architecture, Virilio's analysis, like Birnbaum's *Hostage*, not only isolates the nervous system at its most nervous, but points to the ways in which economic, political, and military power is reformatted upon an image plane of information. For as a strategic focal point of a multinational capitalism's bid for global hegemony, the screen interface has not denuded representation of its power to influence the lived realities and productive forces of society, but paradoxically, doubled the stakes of representation's power to influence the global course of politics and economics. From the televised simulations of the Gulf War to the frenzied trading of international money markets, the capitalist infrastructure that the students of May 1968 sought so idealistically to overthrow holds post-industrial society captive to what Michael Taussig has termed 'the visual contract with reality,' (21) in which a mimetic structure of mediation accords the copy the power to affect the original. For in 1995, the ideological bipolarity that was unravelling in a still divided Germany's confrontation with the Baader Meinhof has collapsed into a global embrace of technology as an tool of enhancement, offering up the utopian fantasies of a cyberspace future as a salve for the violence that an Information Revolution enacts upon the social body.

In response to this increasing abstraction of technology and increasing power of the simulacrum, Birnbaum's work deploys the screen interface as a mirror to disrupt a mimetic structure of mediation: reflecting back and destabilising the entanglements of ideology and identity, of politics and the social body within a global feedback system. As such, Birnbaum's artistic interventions upon the smooth space of the simulacrum become highly political in intent. Rather than accord art the status of a pale and ineffective shadow of mass media, she points to its potential to function to render the internal logic of a global nervous system transparent, to conjure up the image phantoms of history embedded in a proliferation of images as material adversaries in a border war between ideology and identity. Here the seemingly irreconcilable opposites of art and action in May 1968 are reconfigured to point to the importance of art as an act of political intervention. For, to paraphrase Mark

Weisner's claim that the 'most profound technologies are those that disappear', the most profound ideologies are also those that disappear through technology's invisible economies of domination. To challenge these invisible economies of domination as Birnbaum does in her work is to locate within the simulacrum not only a site of contestation but resistance: excavating from the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision the power copies have to interrogate an ordered hierarchy of representation, to undermine the ideological underpinnings of a global nervous system.

Notes

1. May 1968 document reproduced in *Ken Knabb (ed. and trans.) The Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) p. 344
2. Anonymous author, reproduced in Dara Birnbaum's *Canon: Taking to the Street*, 1990
3. Paul Virilio *War and Cinema* Translation by Patrick Camiller. (New York: Verso, 1989) p. 71
4. Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1964) p. 3
5. Jean Baudrillard 'The Precession of Simulacra' in Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (eds) *Simulations. Translation* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) p. 2
6. I would like to acknowledge Paul Patton's superb synthesis of Gilles Deleuze's critique of Plato and Seth Benardete's commentary on Plato in formulating my summary of Deleuze's theory. See Paul Patton, 'AntiPlatonism and Art' in Constantin V. Boundas & Dorothea Olkowski (eds) *Gilles Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy*. (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Seth Benardete *Plato's Sophist*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984)
7. Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition* Translation by Paul Patton. (London: Athlone Press, 1 (1994) p. 265
8. Cited by Paul Patton in 'Anti-Platonism and Art' in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy* op. cit, p. 152
9. Dara Birnbaum, 'Author's Introduction' in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (ed) *Rough Edits: Popular Image Video Works 1977-1980*. (Halifax: Nova Scotia pamphlets 4, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1987) p. 13
10. Mary Jane Jacob cited by Jo Ann Hanley in *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75* (New York, Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993) p. 10. Exhibition Catalogue.
11. Martha Gever cited by Jo Ann Hanley *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75* p. 14
12. This phrase was coined by Rosalind Krauss in "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in *New Artists Video*, ed. Gregory Batcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978) p. 43
13. Cited in Graham Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution: The Feminization of Clerical Work* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987) p. 75
14. Cited in Michele Martin, 'Hello Central?' in *Gender, Technology and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), p.59
15. Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* op cit., p. 266

16. Mark Weisner 'The Computer for the 21st Century' in *Scientific America* (Vol. 265, No. 3, September 1991) p. 94
17. Paul Virilio *The Lost Dimension*. Translated by Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991) p. 25
18. Michael Taussig *The Nervous System* (New York ; Routledge, 1992)p. 21
19. Paul Virilio *L'espace Critique* (1984)
20. Paul Virilio *The Lost Dimension* p12

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Louise Bourgeois's *Cells*: Looking at Bourgeois through Irigaray's Gesturing Towards the Mother

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'It is difficult to find a framework vivid enough to incorporate Louise Bourgeois's sculpture. Attempts to bring a coolly evolutionary or art-historical order to her work or to see it in the context of one art group or another, have proved more or less irrelevant. [...] Rarely has an abstract art been so directly and honestly informed by its maker's psyche.'¹

So wrote Lucy Lippard in 1975. Twenty years later the same case can still be made. Reading various articles and essays about Louise Bourgeois, I have been struck by the continuing search for frameworks within which her work can be discussed and tested but also how writers come to terms with it. While the commentators have not had violent arguments with each other, their lack of unity is notable. Thus one writer will account for Bourgeois's work within expressionism; another will call it formalist. One writer will say it is materials-led: another that it is shaped by the artist's life story. One will describe it as symptomatic of a dysfunctional family background: another, as symptomatic of Bourgeois's involvement with Surrealism. The one thing that the writers do all seem to agree upon is that the work is somehow something to do with the body and with sex though whether it is descriptive symbolic, metaphorical, representational or evocative in its relation to the body is not something about which there seems to be any consensus. Likewise, the writers exhibit similar ambiguity about the work's relationship with sex - extending to lack of clarity about whether its apparent sexiness is related to the body of the artist; whether it is a result of its relationship to their bodies: whether it is gender-specific; etcetera. The cumulative effect of reading the extant literature on Bourgeois is that in general the terms 'body' and 'sex', in the discussions of her work, remain

remarkably unproblematised as if in and of themselves these words are universally understood and experienced and can be used as some form of benchmark. What I would like to do here, far from supplying any overall key to Bourgeois's work, will probably add to the stirring and muddying of the waters. I want to supply a partial reading of some of Bourgeois's works through a partial reading of some of the writings of the French psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray. I am doing this for quite pragmatic reasons: Bourgeois is an artist to whom I have long been drawn, but with little clarity in my reasons for responding to her work. The invitation to contribute here has arrived whilst I am in the middle of a research project on Irigaray and I have found some of my work on her has given me clearer insight and understanding of Bourgeois, in particular. I have come to an understanding of the more recent Cell series.

There is a paradox in this, and I think it important to outline briefly the aspects of Irigaray's writing which are of use in such a discussion. After all, Irigaray tends to locate visual pleasure within the realm of the male (particularly in her earlier writings) while locating female pleasure within the body and more specifically within touch. In an often-quoted passage she states:

'The predominance of the visual ...is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation'.²

This would imply a closure for a discussion of work by a woman artist. Further, it is the passages of her writing which touch upon sexuality, ethics and criticism that can be most easily extracted and worked upon, not her discussion of the visual. Thus her work can most easily (but I think misguidedly) be seen as having more relevance for her discussion of either the ostensive subject matter of artworks or for the broader contextualising and frame of reference that an artist might construct; and as having less relevance for the material practices of making art works, looking at them and understanding those processes. Yet it is precisely the latter not the former which drew me to recent work by Bourgeois. While thinking about the Cells I have found passages in Irigaray which have aided my understanding of and accounting for, particular practices involved in them. In the reading of Irigaray I offer here I will concentrate on the essay 'Gesture in psychoanalysis'.³

In this essay Irigaray explores two sites of gesture from her experience of the psychoanalytic scenario - gestures which are particular to the analytic scenario and those which originate beyond it, but which she has uncovered as a result of her participation in it. Irigaray begins her paper with a long discussion of the gender-specific experiences of the classic analytic scenario as embodied through physical gesture - the lying down of the woman the unseen-ness of the man who sits behind her. Irigaray's subsequent discussion of gestures from beyond the analytic scenario (but discussed within it) is then reflected back upon this initial discussion to re-

enforce from other viewpoints her original contention that this is a gendered experience readable through physical expression. It is this aspect of Irigaray's essay - her findings of gestures and their practices which, although uncovered during analysis are in fact extra-analytic - which is of particular use to the present discussion. Much of Irigaray's argument derives from her exploration and understanding of the girl / mother relation and in particular from her insight into the ways in which the little girl comes to terms with her mother's absence. I wish to argue that the gestural practices Irigaray has located in this process of the little girl may also be discovered resonating within a strand of Bourgeois's practice cumulating in the Cell series and related works.

But how does this concentration of Irigaray upon the girl/mother relation aid our understanding of work by Louise Bourgeois? After all Bourgeois is now famous for making work which stems from her feelings about her father not her mother. As Robert Storr has written describing conversations he had with Bourgeois:

'It was while preparing a slide show autobiography for her 1982 MoMA exhibition [...] that she first told in full the story of her father and the mistress which has since become myth of origin for much of her work.'

However, he does go on to complain:

'Enlightening in many respects, in others this story has restricted the interpretation of what she has done to narrowly personal of archetypically Freudian sources.'⁴

In our eagerness to hear another version of the Freudian family romance - in this case, the charming, philandering, autocratic and ultimately intolerable father, whose mistress is not only the daughter's nanny, but who is also moved by the father into the marital home - it becomes easy to focus on the daughter-to-father emotion; the anger, the desolation of the daughter, the young Bourgeois. It becomes manifest in the work: and indeed is of great importance for it. Bourgeois herself helps us focus on this through her own words, providing a moving, at times devastating, account of her autobiography: 'My father betrayed me by not being what he was supposed to be... It is just a matter of rules of the game, and in a family the rules of the game are such that a minimum of conformity is expected'; and 'My father provoked in me a continual loss of self-esteem'.⁵ She has also stated that when her mother died, her father ridiculed her grief.⁶

But this dysfunctional father/daughter relationship has functioned as a *suitable* subject for critical voyeurism. Among the commentators on Bourgeois, Julie Nicoletta has written:

"The story of this affair [...] has taken on the aura of myth. No one interested in Bourgeois's work has looked beyond this Freudian idea of a traumatised childhood to see what other factors may have inspired Bourgeois."

Nicoletta's option is to follow a Lacanian model in a discussion of Bourgeois's *Femme-Maison* series - which may or may not be a way out of this particular family romance. But what struck me when reading the literature on Bourgeois was the lack

of discussion of Bourgeois's relation to her mother. For instance Mira Schor has written '[Bourgeois's] insistence on the source of her work residing in psychological wounds inflicted on her by her father contravenes any formal theories of art and yet embodies the Oedipal crisis that psycholinguistic theory interprets as the entrance of human beings into the Symbolic Order of the Father. Bourgeois obsessively returns the critical audience of her work to its motivating source the murderous rage of a betrayed daughter. Her admission to the symbolic order has been warped by her father's open affair with her governess.'⁸

Schor then continues the paragraph:

'[Bourgeois's] link back to the Imaginary (completeness of relation to the Mother) is damaged by her mother's presumed complicity.'⁹

However, she does not develop this. Donald Kuspit does propose an argument about the importance of Bourgeois's mother:

'Bourgeois's entanglement with her mother, not her father, is becoming clear as the inner content of her work. She has filled the void of mother/artist in spirit as well as substance, an Oedipus replacing the mother instead of the father, a Sphinx whose Secret is that a story about a relationship to a father is really a story about a relationship to a mother.'¹⁰

This, however, is the conclusion, rather than the starting point, of his article and a theme which does not appear to have been taken up by anyone else. Maybe a girl's relationship with her mother is seen as having less potential for scandal and tragedy, less glamour, and less scope for critical voyeurism. Bourgeois herself however, gives us plenty of prompting to take her relationship with her mother seriously. To give just three examples:

'These titles are informative. 'Blind Vigils' is like 'Blind leading the Blind'. Blindness came from the blush I experienced at the side of the people around me, everybody. As I say, my father was promiscuous. I had to be blind to the mistress who lived with us. I had to be blind to the pain of my mother.'¹¹

'When I was afraid of my mother dying, a challenge I could not meet, the warding off of her death, not to let her disappear, I made a vow. I swore to myself if my mother survived that morning I would give up sex.'¹²

The material was there taking all that room and bothering me, bothering me by its aggressive presence. And somehow the idea of the mother came to me. This is the way my mother impressed me, as very powerful, very silent, very judging, and controlling the whole studio. And naturally this piece became my mother. At that point, I had my subject. I was going to express what I felt toward her... First I cut off her head, and I slit her throat ... And after weeks and weeks of work. I thought, if this is the way I saw my mother, then she did not like me. How could she possibly like me if I treat her that way? At that point something turned around. I could not stand the idea that she wouldn't like me. I couldn't live if I thought that she didn't like me. The fact that I had pushed her around, cut off her head had nothing to do with it. What

you do to a person has nothing to do with what you expect the person to feel toward you... Now at the I became very, very depressed, terribly terribly depressed."¹³

I find it interesting that these comments of Bourgeois have surfaced in recent years, and I would like to link them to a strand in her work which, although it can be traced back, has also emerged in a particularly notable manner over the past decade in the *Cell* works and other related pieces. In these we can find Bourgeois's embodiment through particular manipulation of space through materials, of her earlier interest in the spiral and circling movement. This is manifested in earlier works in a more straightforwardly representational manner. We also find a blurring of subject/object relations: the Cells are not easily containable art objects as such, and neither are the 'objects' comprising them clear in their object status to either the viewing subject or to Bourgeois herself. These aspects of Bourgeois's work can be brought into focus with the aid of the Irigaray essay 'Gesture in Psychoanalysis'.

As I have indicated, much of Irigaray's argument derives from her exploration of the specificity of the girl/mother relation, and in particular how this is made manifest through the gestural processes of the girl. As a context for her discussion, Irigaray refers back to Freud's observations of his grandson, little Ernst who devised what Irigaray describes as "an action designed to master" the absence of his mother.¹⁴ He did this with a reel and string, repeatedly throwing the reel away, then retrieving it with the string, accompanying this with noises interpreted as 'fort-da' - 'away-here'. Irigaray indicates in 'Gesture in Psychoanalysis' the gender specificity of the story; her point is firstly that Ernst is a boy, and nowhere does Freud suggest that a girl might act in the same way. (He was a boy. It is important to be faithful to the text. Not every substitution is possible, especially when sexual difference is involved in Freud's text, the child is a boy. And Freud never wrote that it might have been a girl' (p.97). Irigaray also discusses the story of little Ernst in an earlier lecture reprinted in the same volume of essays.¹⁵ The responses of girls to the absence of their mothers therefore merit some separate attention. Irigaray states that a girl could not have produced the same action:

'My hypothesis is that the child in the story couldn't have been a girl. Why?. A girl does not do the same things when her mother goes away. She does not play with a string and a reel that symbolise her mother, because her mother is of the same sex as she is and cannot have the object status of a reel. The mother is of the same subjective identity as she is' (p.97) Irigaray's French privileges the concept of gesture more strongly than the Gill translation, starting this passage 'Une fille ne fait pas les mêmes gestes'. p.111.

Instead the girl:

"plays with a doll, lavishing maternal affection on a quasi subject, and thus manages to organise a kind of symbolic space; playing with dolls is not simply a game girls are forced to play, it also signifies a difference in subjective status in the separation from the mother. For mother and daughter, the mother is a subject that cannot easily be reduced to an object, and a doll is not an object the way that a reel, a toy car, a gun, etc., are objects and tools used for symbolisation."¹⁶

Here we have an insight that might begin to aid our understanding of some approaches of women to making art works. Such an accounting would be located in an understanding of the girl's organisation of 'a kind of symbolic space'. The subjective status 'of the relationship which leads to play, and the fact that the thing played with "is not an object' in the way that the boy's toys are. This certainly differs from the approach of many male artists, male curators and the masculinist art market, which in its mainstream manifestation can verge on the anal: i.e. the insistence upon the production and showing of the object. Instead, Irigaray is offering, in this image of the little girl and her dolls, an approach where process can be stressed, where the importance of the art object as object is fundamentally compromised, and with it the notion of mastery. (It is noticeable that the concept of the integrity of the object and the construction of mastery and genius both mainstays of masculinist discourses have repeated come under fire from various feminist analyses. See for example, the cumulative work of writers such as Lucy Lippard and Griselda Pollock). It is an insight Irigaray gained from analysing an experience which is predominantly female, which is pivotal in the engendering of an *appropriate* femininity in girls - Irigaray acknowledges the social coercion of play - and one which also reflects and makes manifest the girl's psychic accommodation of the social absence of her mother. Thus through this argument of Irigaray's we can propose a woman's relation to the art works she is making which is both specifically female and yet variable among women. Any such accounting would of necessity be embedded materially in particular practices. The practices of play (their processes and effects) are embedded in and understandable through social practices. Thus the embodiment of such play practices in art practices may well be discernible, but is by no means inevitable. This is a model which might, therefore, be appropriate for particular practices which are likely to sit uneasily in any mainstream (masculinist) discourses, yet also resist any simplistic collapse back into an essentialist discourse. It is also an insight through which we can begin to account for the desire of many women artists to work with representations of the female body or *bodiliness* - if you like, an accounting which would refute charges of narcissism. Artists as diverse as Louise Bourgeois, Leonora Carrington, Geneviève Cadieux, Helen Chadwick, Mona Hatoum, Laura Godfrey Isaacs, Jana Sterbak could be discussed in this context. *The Cell* series is just such an instance. As I indicated, Bourgeois's work has proved highly resistant to co-option by any mainstream art discourse: it has also not provided openings for an essentialist discourse while clearly manifesting a *bodiliness*.

Irigaray can aid our understanding of Bourgeois's bodily practice within the space of the Cell works. She proposes that dance is another way in which girls cope with the absence of the mother. and in particular a whirling or spinning dance:

'This dance is also a way for the girl to create a territory of her own in relation to the mother. [...] Among women, the relationship to sameness and to the mother is not mastered by the '*fort-da*'. The mother always remains too familiar and too close. [...]

the sexual movement characteristic of the female is whirling round rather than throwing and pulling objects back as little Ernst does. The girl then tries to reproduce around and within her an energetic circular movement that protects her from abandonment, attack, depression, loss of self. Spinning round is also, but in my opinion secondarily, a way of attracting. The girl describes a circle while soliciting and refusing access to her territory. She plays with this gestural territory and its limit. There is no object here, in the strict meaning of the word, no other that has had to be introjected or incorporated. On the contrary, girls and women often set up a defensive territory that can then become creative, especially in analysis."¹⁷ Again there are some significant choices in the Gill translation. In Irigaray's original, little Ernst has '(un) geste de lancer et rapprocher'; Gill offers 'attracting' as the translation from Irigaray's 'séduire'. The sentence 'She plays with this gestural territory and its limit' is my own translation of the original 'Elle joue avec ce territoire gestuel et sa limite.' Gill offers 'She is making a game of this territory she has described with her own body'.

This passage is quoted at length because it clearly adds to the earlier discussion of process. Here, there may be space for developing a model for performative aspects of women's art practices - actual making and doing, gestures in the studio, the physical negotiation of the work by artist and viewer alike - all of which anecdotally so many women artists hold in high esteem. In doing this it is important not to collapse the term 'performative' back solely into the category of performance as it might be commonly be understood in a visual art context, particularly as performance art by women has rarely been accommodated within feminist cultural theory, which has been dominated by the motion of both body and image of woman as Object of the male gaze.¹⁸

An Irigarayan model of a woman performance artist 'soliciting and refusing access to [...] this territory she has described with her body' could well begin to account for the resistant position many women performers feel themselves to be in with regard to both the male gaze and to this strand of feminist theory. Crucially, however, the way in which Irigaray uses the word 'gesture' - her constant description of gestures as being in some way performed (whether that performance is the reason for the gesture's being or whether the performance of the gesture is considered pragmatic, or a means to an end) - this suggests also that this is a specific concept through which we can begin consideration of the physical gestures of women artists in their studios, certain gestural structures they build into their work, their approach to the spaces in which their work is made public and the manner in which it is made public. In short, it suggests a space for analysis of what where and how the performative gestures of women artists are in their practices. As with the distinction I have just made of performance art from a notion of 'the performative', so too 'gestural' should be read as literally 'of the gesture' in the manner in which Irigaray charts the gestures of lying or sitting in the analytic scenario, and not gestural as used in relation to, for instance, Expressionism - this particular distinction is crucial,

given the naming and over-determination of a particular form of gesture within the area of visual art discourse, and how it is redolent of patriarchy, modernism, essentialism and genius.

Irigaray rounds up this part of her essay by saying:

'Girls do not enter language in the same ways as boys. [...] They enter language by producing a space, a path, a river, a dance and rhythm, a song... Girls describe a space around themselves rather than displacing a substitute object from one place to another or into various places.'¹⁹

To summarise: if the relation with the mother leads girls to a distinct relation with the thing that becomes the representation of the mother in her absence; if it leads them to particular approaches to the definition of space - space which is both a defensive space which speaks of the experience of loss, and a display at the same time; and if this is achieved through movement which is gendered, sexualised even, which is gestural, movement which attends to process rather than object - then I think we have a set of concepts which can facilitate a developing analysis of aspects of Bourgeois's practice. We have to return to Bourgeois's relation to her mother.

I think we can take it as read that all little girls at some point will miss their mothers, or have to come to terms with their mother's absence: it is part of the usual and inevitable process of separation. In *Gesture in Psychoanalysis*, Irigaray is not referring to particularly notable or extreme case studies; rather she is locating her discussion within a realm of *usual-ness*. Louise Bourgeois would have experienced such moments. But for Bourgeois the experience of missing her mother would have been intensified by Madame Bourgeois's displacement from her position as mother within the family as a result of her husband's introduction of his mistress into the house. She no longer had a relationship to her husband which was clear and comprehensible to little Louise. There was also no longer clarity in the mother/daughter relationship, as the mistress was also tutor to the girl, in loco parentis in more ways than one. Madame Bourgeois was still physically present, but her position as mother was displaced; it is this removal that caused such pain, anger and anxiety in her daughter. The anger is expressed towards the father for doing what he did; and towards the mother for not being all she should have been. It is notable that in this story the father's position as patriarch of the family remains intact: in this respect he was still what he should have been although personally flawed and unethical in his relationships with these three women.

Bourgeois has frequently referred to her life history as the cause of her impulse to work. For example Deborah Wye quotes her as saying of some earlier works that they 'had nothing to do with sculpture, they meant physical presences. That was an attempt at not only recreating the past but controlling it.'²⁰ Drawing upon the insights offered by Irigaray, I would like to argue that the past decade during which Bourgeois has been articulating in interviews the intensities and complexities of her feelings towards her mother has also been the period in which she has articulated this relationship through her work. Irigaray indicated that the girl missing her mother will (amongst other things)

organise a symbolic space around herself . She produces a territory through gestures of spinning, sexuate, gender-specific circular movement. This performs three main functions for the girl: it protects her from abandonment, depression, attack, loss of self, it attracts; it refuses access. It is also a process in which there is no clear object in relation to the subject.

This is precisely the process I think Bourgeois has performed with her Cell pieces and related works such as *Precious Liquids*(1989). Constantly referred to by critics as installation pieces' these are rare among installation work for making manifest a self-determined, architectural, material description of the artist's own psychic space, rather than the artist making manifest their psychic(or intellectual or whatever) space within a given architectural space. Their role in protecting the artist from her childhood abandonment and loss of self is apparent from her own statements. Little in the work is reducible to object-status ; things in the works are never treated in a manner that can be identified as symbolic objects but retain an ambivalent status. Thus, for instance, marble 'sculptures', referring in both material and its working to a well-established tradition of object-making are placed in space or juxtaposed with other materials. Likewise, found objects, in the works are not placed to emphasise their Surreal nature or their usage as universal symbols or to encourage a reading of them as fetish objects: rather they are used as visual material with which an idiosyncratic narrative is being articulated. Viewers are attracted in to the *Cells*. but at the same time kept at bay through Bourgeois's description of this her symbolic space. She does this sometimes literally by making us peer in, while refusing us clear physical or visual access: sometimes she does this through her image. With what can be for the viewer a baffling lack of didacticism for such precisely selected or made things and such rigorously articulated space

The dimensions of the Cells are significant too. There is here an engagement with gestural territory and its limits and a spatial relationship to the human body. Their general title recalls on the one hand cells of incarceration or contemplation with their connotations of space in tight relation to body size and, on the other hand, evocations of body cells and implications literally of incorporation of experience. With the *Cells*, Bourgeois does in indeed 'produce a space, a path, a river, a dance and rhythm, a song'. One can almost imagine Bourgeois performing the Irigarayan dance, spinning around, arms outstretched, to find the dimensions that are appropriate. She has made many comments about the significance to her of spiralling, in a manner which equates with Irigaray's notion of spinning. For instance:

"There are a lot of spirals... but they are not automatic. The spiral is a vacuum it represents something... the void, the anxiety void, the void of anxiety '²¹
and

"The spiral is an attempt at controlling the chaos. It has two directions. Where do you place yourself ; at the periphery or at the vortex? Beginning at the outside is the fear of losing control; the winding in is a tightening, a retreating, a

compacting to the point of disappearance. Beginning at the centre is affirmation, the move outward is a representation of giving, and giving up control : of trust, positive energy, of life itself " ²²

and

'The spiral is the beginning of movement in space. As opposed to the rigidity of the monolith, the subject is exploring space.' ²³

The spiral anti the spinning figures can be found as a theme in many works earlier than the Cells. There it is in sculptures such as the *Spiral Women* of the late forties and early fifties; *Life Flower*¹ (1960); *Spiral/Summer* (1960); *Spiral Woman* (1984). This last has a slate disc some three feet wide placed on the floor; hanging above it, at about head height, suspended on a wire and able to turn, is a small bronze of a female figure. Her torso and head arc surrounded by a thick coil of bronze: her limbs are positioned as if she were twirling round. In the terms of this discussion this appears to be a transitional work, somewhere between, on the one hand, the earlier projection onto materials of what it is to spin and spiral, as in the earlier *Spiral Women*; and, on the other, in the subsequent *Cell* works, a manifestation through the performative manipulation of materials of that spinning, its causes and indeed its pleasures.

Robert Storr has looked back to what he calls 'the whirling dervish figure' in plate 4 of *He disappeared into Complete Silence* (1947):

'When she [Bourgeois] comes round it is never to close the circle but to re-inscribe its course with a new emphasis, widening or narrowing its scope as she proceeds. [...] The animating force of her formal language and a self portrait, that figure is the direct spatial expression of an insatiable need. she is the spiral-woman, seeking but never finding the absolute core of her being, always advancing even when she seems to be retracing her steps, always restless because she has not reached her outer limits. Nothing in the psychic or aesthetic economy of Bourgeois's obsessions has altered these terms.' ²⁴

But Storr, for all his acute perception in his essay, also forgoes any account of Bourgeois's mother, despite mentioning both her father and his mistress. In doing so he also demonstrates the effect of this lack, by suggesting that the artist is 'seeking but never finding the absolute core of her being' in missing the mother, and the little girl's relation with the mother, the void is, rather, in the centre of his discussion of Bourgeois: a void, that to use another Irigarayan concept, represents in a patriarchal structure "the horror of nothing to see."²⁵ If however we accept the importance of the mother/daughter relationship, we can also explore in Bourgeois's work a specificity of form, body, and meaning which otherwise remains unacknowledged.

Notes

1. Lucy Lippard 'Louise Bourgeois. From the Inside Out' *ArtForum* (March 1975) p..27
2. Luce Irigaray *This Sex which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,1985) (trans. of 1977 text) pp.25-26
3. Irigaray *Sexes and Genealogies* New York: Columbia University Press (trans G.C. Gill) pp.89-104

- French edition in *Sexes et Parentés* (Paris , Les Éditions Minit 1987) pp.103-118
4. Robert Storr in *Tate Gallery Magazine*, no.6. (Summer 1995) p.29
 5. Christine Meyer-Thoss *Louise Bourgeois: Konstruktionen Für den Freien Fall: Designing for Free Fall* (Zurich,Amman,1992)
 6. Deborah Wye 'The Drama of the Self: the Prints of Louise Bourgeois' in Wye and Carol Smith *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois* (New York,Museum of Modern Art, 1994) p.18
 7. J.Nicolette 'Louise Bourgeois' Femmes-Maisons' *Women's Art Journal* (Fall/Winter 1992-3)
 8. Mira Schor 'From Liberation to Lack' *Heresies* Vol 6 No. 4 (1989) p.20
 9. *ibid.*
 10. Donald Kuspit 'Louise Bourgeois: Where Angels Fear to Tread' *Artforum* (1987) pp.120-121
 11. Alain Kirali 'The Passion for Sculpture: A Conversation with Bourgeois' *Arts Magazine* (March 1989) p.71
 12. Meyer-Thoss *Louise Bourgeois* (1992).
 13. Mignon Nixon 'Bad Enough Mother' *October* No.72 (Winter 1995) p.87
 14. Irigaray 'Gesture in Psychoanalysis' in *Sexes and Genealogies* p.56
 15. Irigaray 'Belief in Itself'. *Sexes and Genealogies* p.23-53
 16. Irigaray 'Gesture in Psychoanalysis' in *Sexes and Genealogies* p.97
 17. *ibid* p.98
 18. This can be found in strands of feminism as diverse as, on the one hand , the anti-pornography movement , in its activist form e.g Andrea Dworkin *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* London: Women's Press,1981 or in psychoanalytic film theory,particularly the line of enquiry engendered by Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Screen* Vol.16 no.3 pp.6-18.
 19. Irigaray 'Gesture in Pyschoanalysis' in *Sexes and Genealogies* p.99
 20. Deborah Wye 'One & Others' in Wye *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Museum of Modern Art,1982) p.19
 - 21.Christine Meyer-Thoss *Louise Bourgeois: Konstruktionen Für den Freien Fall: Designing for Free* (Fall 1992) pp.72-73
 22. *ibid* p.179
 23. Alain Kirali 'The Passion for Sculpture: A Conversation with Bourgeois' *Arts Magazine* (March 1989) p.74
 24. Robert Storr *Tate Gallery Magazine*, no.6. (Summer 1995) p.31
 25. Irigaray *This Sex which is Not One* p.26

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Feminist Readings of Louise Bourgeois or Why Louise Bourgeois is a Feminist Icon

Katy Deepwell

This paper explores why and how Louise Bourgeois is so celebrated, loved and admired by many feminists, including myself, and the ways in which her work has been read by feminists. For, how Louise Bourgeois is discussed as a major woman artist appears to suggest not only the diversity of feminist approaches to her work but also some of the familiar differences between American and British feminist approaches both in art criticism and art history.

It was Lucy Lippard who, in 1975, first described Louise Bourgeois as a woman artist who 'despite her apparent fragility' had 'survived almost 40 years of discrimination, struggle, intermittent success and neglect in New York's gladiatorial art arenas. The tensions which make her work unique are forged between just those poles of tenacity and vulnerability'.¹

This theme of survival coupled with commitment to her own practice, both within and apart from critical neglect, is emphasised in many accounts of Bourgeois' work. While Bourgeois had been known to many artists in New York through public exhibitions since the fifties and from the seventies as a teacher, a woman artist who has survived to see a turnaround in her own reputation (and one which has been fuelled by feminist research and curatorship) is a phenomenon to be celebrated. However, it has been feminist art historians who have consistently drawn attention to the ways in which women artists have been routinely neglected, ignored and discriminated against in terms of exhibition and the writing of histories of art.

Ann Sutherland Harris in 1989 argued that Louise Bourgeois' *entry* into the mainstream in the eighties bore closer examination because of the *criteria* upon which such judgements were made. She asked the question: what forms of public

exhibition, critical reception or scholarly enquiry did it take for women to be recognised in the mainstream?

'Her award for distinguished achievement from the Women's Caucus for Art [in 1980]? Carrie Rickey's review in *Artforum* and John Russell's in the *New York Times* in December 1979? Eleanor Munro's chapter on Bourgeois in her book, *Originals: American Women Artists?* Or was it perhaps the honorary degree from Yale in 1977? In 1980, Bourgeois had not yet had an exhibition at any public or university gallery which gave her more than a brochure. Many people first discovered Bourgeois and had a chance to savour her work when the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA) gave her a one-person show with a proper catalogue in 1982.'²

Ann Sutherland Harris' questions draw attention to the institutional parameters for notoriety, success in terms of recognition by institutions alongside critical acclaim. She highlights the links between museum curation / collection policies and the dealer-system. For, it is only since the MOMA New York exhibition in 1982 that Louise Bourgeois has acquired an international reputation. However, Ann Sutherland-Harris' commentary about what it takes to acquire a reputation as a 'mainstream' artist do not fully address another interesting aspect to Bourgeois' lifetime of public exhibitions, her participation in numerous feminist and women only shows during the seventies (roughly 18 of the exhibitions between 1972-1982, listed in Deborah Wye's 1982 book³, e.g. '13 Women Artists' organised by the New York Women's Ad-Hoc Committee in 1972. 'American Women Artists' Show' organised by Gedok, at the Hamburg Kunsthau, 'East Coast Women's Invitation Exhibition' in 1974 at Philadelphia Museum, etc. Bourgeois' willingness to show with other women certainly increased her reputation amongst other women artists even while it may have contributed very little to her achieving a 'mainstream' status in the international dealer/critic/museum system. I am calling attention to this aspect of her exhibitions (alongside a life-long commitment to sending works to fundraising exhibitions for a range of social and political causes e.g. her protests against the exclusions of the Whitney Museum in the 1970s) because it contributed to her visibility amongst women and because it is often neglected in discussions of her critical reputation.

Her outstanding Achievement Visual Arts Award by the Women's Caucus for the Arts in 1980 is also significant in terms of the level of recognition she has amongst other women. WCA is the largest organisation for women artists and art historians in the USA. In 1980, WCA awards were also given to several other 'survivors' of both longstanding neglect and recent recovery in the New York art world: Lee Krasner, Anni Albers, Caroline Durieux and Ida Kohlmeyer. WCA honours have no equivalent in Britain though the Gabrielle Munter Preis, administered by the Frauen Museum might qualify, and this is in spite of the many women artists in Britain who might qualify for an award recognising more than twenty years of consistent achievement. The honours awards are one means through which American feminists have made

links with an older generation of women artists well-established in the commercial mainstream, promoting and honouring their professional activities in newly formed women's organisations.

Another strategy can be found in the groundswell of research, publications and interviews with a large number of women artists by feminist art historians. Amongst British feminists, where links with earlier generations have not been so widely sustained, even shunned by one or other party, where *art world* forms of feminism have appeared less of a phenomenon, (and the politics of recovery subjected to all kinds of valuable methodological revision), feminism appears as the product of specific generational groups rather than a broad-based alliance.

With regard to Louise Bourgeois this is not the same question as whether or not Louise Bourgeois is or calls herself a feminist and what kind of feminist she might be nor does it reduce to simply a question of whether or not she intended her work to be *read* as feminist statements. It does however indicate a political sympathy with feminist platforms in the seventies and that recognition of her work as emanating from her specific experience as a *woman* is important to the context in which her work should be seen, namely, that the *personal* in her work is always part of a broader set of *political* commitments. The tribute she received in the speech given for the 1980s WCA honour awards indicates two further important points about Louise Bourgeois' significance for other feminists:

'You say in form what most of us are afraid to say in any way. Your sculpture defies styles and movements and returns to the sources of art - to the cultural expression of communal belief and emotion.'⁴

Louise Bourgeois work is firstly read as representative of 'communal' and shared beliefs among women. She is praised for 'speaking out', that is to say, for finding a visual form for experiences which are shared by many women. Her work although motivated by personal self-examination and self-reflection is read as a political message. The speech also offers a reading of Louise Bourgeois's work in individualist terms, as a major avantgarde figure who cannot be slotted into or comfortably accommodated by the version of modernist art history which relies upon definitions of styles and movements. A similar argument had been advanced by Lucy Lippard in 1975 when she wrote that:

'It is difficult to find a framework vivid enough to incorporate Louise Bourgeois' sculpture. Attempts to bring a coolly evolutionary or art-historical order to her work, or to see it in the context of one art group or another have proved more or less irrelevant. Any approach...and any material....can serve to define her own needs and emotions. Rarely has an abstract art been so directly and honestly, informed by its maker's psyche.'⁵

The recognition of her *individual* contribution and the difficulties of finding adequate terms to describe it, while keeping a feminist perspective in view, underly the case made by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard in *The Power of Feminist Art*

about Louise Bourgeois's image of the *Femme-Maison*.⁶ This image is frequently read by women as a representation of the *abolition of identity* for women in home and family and a deliberate *cry for help*. In this respect, Bourgeois's image (drawn in 1946-7) anticipates and alludes to the *problem with no name* that Betty Friedan identified in the sixties as the dissatisfaction, the lack of fulfilment, of women who embarked on *careers* as housewives and mothers in modern suburbia. However, as Whitney Chadwick points out 'although Bourgeois pointed to the home as a place of conflict for the woman artist, critics [at the time, 1946-1947] read the paintings as affirming a 'natural' identification between women and home.'⁷ And it is here where the difficulties of discussing Bourgeois's work and the lack of attention to feminist readings of Louise Bourgeois' work start that many male critics (e.g. those mentioned below) read her work as propping up stereotypes about *woman* or domesticity rather than challenging them. Broude and Garrard, for example, draw attention to the ways in which women-centred aspects of Bourgeois art are being submerged by mainstream critics who want to bend her into being a *link* between masculinist movements, citing Michael Kimmel who argued that Bourgeois *deals* with sexual identity and her work is about polarities '*male and female, aggressive and passive*'.⁸ Broude and Garrard suggest that much critical discussion of Bourgeois today often positions her work as a means of propping up dualism and phallogocentrism rather than demonstrating a challenge to it as some feminist readings of her work since the 1970s have argued.

Art critic's difficulties with discussing Louise Bourgeois' project as that of an avantgarde artist have to do with the paradoxes of both feminism and modernism. Nicole Dubroeuil-Blondin, in an essay tracking Lucy Lippard's work as a feminist critic, argued that in the 1980s 'we can sense...the formation of a new and forceful alliance whose complexity has not yet been thoroughly examined and which at first sight seems to have found a paradoxical formulation'⁹ in the renewed attention to the work of avantgarde women artists. Her essay raises four options whereby a modernist woman artist could to some extent be historically re-accommodated :

[1] Must the woman-paradigm be considered as the model rupture, the total 'other', the definite subversion that will reconcile aesthetics and politics? [2] Does its forceful arrival on the contemporary art scene mark an assault on an enemy territory that must be conquered and rebuilt on better foundations? [3] Or is not the avantgarde itself undergoing profound changes in its post-modernist phase, its new configurations corresponding exactly to the problematics of women's art? [4] Will that art be simply another chapter - albeit a chapter particularly rich in plastic propositions - of the dominant art that is now creating history?' [my additions]¹⁰

The feminine problematic for modernism is not an 'inversion' of the male-dominated tradition, a shadow, an alter-ego or even a *differend*, a signifier of pure free floating difference. Nor can the problematic of women's art practice in modernism be shown as a separate and 'Other' tradition. Exploring the problematic

which women artists represent in modernist discourse might, however, mark a means to a new formulation or a potentially a reformulation of the terms of reference in modernist debates and it is here that the critical readings which develop of an artist like Bourgeois provide such an interesting case study. If we return to Dubreuil-Blondin's appraisal of Lippard's project between 1965-1975 some key elements in how she first read Bourgeois's work in modernist terms start to emerge.

Lippard, in spite of her defence of Minimalism, positioned herself against Greenbergian modernism and Fried's formalism because of the 'indices' of modernist evaluation they had developed. She was interested in broadening aesthetic experience through 'any sort of deviation that threatens the regularity of structure or that opens up paths other than the consideration of medium specificity'.¹¹ Her curation of *Eccentric Abstraction* was an explicit challenge to the then dominant current of formalism which had defended a rigid often purely geometrical abstraction, on iconographic, material and socio-political levels.

Eccentric Abstraction held at the Fischbach Gallery, New York in 1966 had included Bourgeois along with Eva Hesse, Alice Adams, Lindsey Decker, Keith Sonnier, Bruce Nauman, Jean Linder, Gary Kuehn, Don Potts, Frank Lincoln Viner, and Kenneth Price. In an article 'Eccentric Abstraction' in *Art International* (1966), Lippard draws some important distinctions between surrealism and the movement she names as *eccentric abstraction*. Surrealism, she argues, was based on the 'reconciliation of two very distant realities whose relationship is grasped solely by the mind' (e.g. Man Ray's work *As Beautiful as the Chance Encounter of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella on a Dissecting Table*). *Eccentric abstraction*, by contrast, was based on the reconciliation of different forms, or formal effects in a cancellation of the form-content dichotomy.¹² This, Lippard argues, results in a 'complete acceptance by the senses - visual, tactile and visceral' in the absence of 'emotional interference and literary pictorial associations.'¹³ The artists included pursue this in different and individual projects but 'object to the isolation of biological implications and prefer their forms to be felt, or sensed, instead of read or interpreted. Sensual aspects are perversely, made unpleasant or minimized. Metaphor is freed from subjective bonds... Too much free association on the viewer's part is combatted by formal understatement, which stresses non-verbal response'. This, Lippard argues, results in the viewer's 'complete acceptance by the senses', of the 'visual, tactile and visceral' qualities of the art object, in the absence of 'emotional interference and literary pictorial associations'.¹⁴

Their work is unlike most modern sculpture since the 1950s. It is 'a non-sculptural style', closer to abstract painting than to any sculptural forms in so far as it is neither assemblage, 'which incorporated recognizable objects', was additive and conglomerate in technique nor is it like minimalism which seeks to 'activate' the space or site.¹⁵ Lippard also remarks upon the artists' refusal 'to eschew imagination and the extension of sensuous experience while they also refuse to sacrifice the solid formal basis

demanding of the best in current non-objective art.¹⁶ Lippard defines 'eccentric abstraction' as a 'non-sculptural style' which is closer to abstract painting than to either of the two then dominant currents in modern sculpture. It is neither Assemblage 'which incorporated recognizable objects' and was additive and conglomerate in technique, nor Minimalism which sought to *activate* the space or site.

For Lippard, the work of these artists marked a new reconciliation between the art-as-art or the art-as-life positions, through their use of new synthetics as opposed to old sculptural materials and forms which were felt and seen as an *alogical visual compound* or *obstreperous sight*.¹⁷ These artists rejected 'the arbitrary in favour of a single form that unites image, shape, metaphor and association, confronting the viewer as a whole, an undiluted aesthetic sensation, instead of as a bundle or conflicting or balanced parts.'¹⁸ She then went on to attribute the work's 'near visceral identification with form' as characteristic of its embrace of as form of *body ego*:

'Body ego can be experienced two ways: first, through appeal, the desire to caress, to be caught up in the feel and rhythms of a work; second, through repulsion, the immediate reaction against certain forms and surfaces which take longer to comprehend. The first is more likely to be wholly sensuous while the second is based on education and taste, the often unnatural distinctions between beauty and ugliness, right and wrong subject-matter'¹⁹

Although in 1965, she rejected the identification of the work with genital imagery in *Eccentric Abstraction*, Lippard developed her arguments about 'bodily identification' as a specifically feminine aesthetic in *From the Center* which also significantly included a recent *Artforum* essay on Bourgeois. In *From the Center* she describes how Judy Chicago's and Miriam Schapiro's ideas of core imagery as a *feminine aesthetic* have contributed to the debate about women's art in terms of identifying recurrent forms and elements. These included, in her infamous definition:

'a uniform density, or overall texture, often sensuously tactile and repetitive or detailed to the point of obsession; the preponderance of circular forms, central focus, inner space (Sometimes contradicting the first aspect); a ubiquitous linear 'bag' or parabolic form that turns in on itself; layers, strata, or veils, and indefinable looseness of handling; windows; autobiographical content; animals; flowers; a certain kind of fragmentation; a new fondness for the pinks and pastels and ephemeral cloud colors that used to be tabu unless a woman wanted to be accused of making *feminine*' art.²⁰

Bourgeois' work could be described as possessing all or any of the above elements, depending on which pieces of her work were under discussion. The association of her work with 'a feminine aesthetic' was developed through the inclusion of the essay in the same book. But it is probably more important to draw finer distinctions between Bourgeois's work and the arguments advanced by Lippard on *Eccentric Abstraction* and 'biomorphic abstraction', for Bourgeois's work is not identical either with feminist definitions of core imagery (except in so far as the some of the general

attributes in the list above could all apply to individual pieces by Louise Bourgeois), nor a new surrealist tendency. Nor, as Robert C. Morgan points out, is it the same as arguments surrounding another current identified by Robert Pincus-Witten in 1987 as 'post-minimalism' (which Pincus-Witten identifies as a development beyond 'eccentric abstraction') nor does Bourgeois's work represent a *transitional case* between these two forms of sculpture for a younger generation of sculptors.²¹

While Bourgeois' work clearly alludes to an erotic it cannot be reduced, (as if all discussion of women's eroticism could!) to another example of core imagery. Bourgeois makes clear her own identification with Lippard's thesis on *Eccentric Abstraction* as well as her distance from 1930s forms of modernist identification with geometric and non-geometric abstraction, when she was asked by Cindy Nemser in 1970, if some of her forms had male and female sexual connotations,;

'No, I don't see that at all. I'm not conscious of that at all or not even unconscious. I'm aware they can be thought of as that even in the process of making them, but I'm not saying that....I think the circle is very abstract, I could make up stories about what the circle means to men, but I don't know if it is that conscious. I think it was a form, a vehicle. I don't think I had a sexual, anthropomorphic or geometric meaning. It wasn't a breast and it wasn't a circle representing life and eternity.'²²

Lippard's own commentary on Louise Bourgeois by 1975, however, reverses this impression and speaks frankly about the sexual associations and connotations of her work. It is this clarity about the sexual imagery combined with a psychoanalytic vocabulary that then becomes important in how Bourgeois' work may be read. Lippard also quotes Bourgeois' 1974 statement that 'If we are very very compulsive, all we have at our disposal is to repeat, and that expresses the validity of what we have to say. This is so important to me that all I can find is to repeat and repeat and repeat.'²³ Repetition combined with psychoanalytic reading have become predominant as a theme in postmodern work and a means to creating a critical discourse about contemporary work, but apart from the identification of neurosis or psychosis, this vocabulary also fails when confronted by the experimentation and repetitions which Louise Bourgeois' work manifestly demonstrates. This, I believe, is due to the current paradoxes presented by both feminism and modernism when speaking about a woman avantgarde artist whose work slips between all 'normative' accounts of modernist/postmodernist discourse.

The problems presented by the paradoxical relationship of feminism and modernism can be usefully reconceived in relation to Theresa de Lauretis' theory of *technologies of gender*. Here gender is represented as a set of constructions maintained and produced by all practices, institutions and discourses. In patriarchy and, for the purposes of this argument, in mainstream modernist thought, gender relations are always asymmetrically constructed against a (masculinist) norm. Feminism and feminist resistances appear as a form of 'space-off' - a view askance, a space apart, where combinations of difference and explorations of contradictions

and polarities start to multiply.²⁴ De Lauretis' account emphasises the importance of gender as a relation which is traced, critiqued and analysed as the result of any given formation. For feminists, the necessary critical negativity which is produced is affirmative in so far as it emphasises that power (moving from passivity to activity) is what motivates an individual's investments in specific discursive practices. This theory is in opposition to gender as *difference* : as opposition defined in terms of pure difference. It is also in opposition to *writing* as woman , even to *devenir femme* and the French feminist emphasis on *écriture féminine*. De Lauretis insists upon feminist theory continuing its radical critique of dominant discourses on gender ; asking questions about how particular constructions are developed in relation to particular interests. Here, this involves asking why and in whose interests are certain ideas of Bourgeois's project maintained in art criticism and repeatedly circulated as *orthodoxies*, for example, why is autobiography and the artists' personal memories emphasised rather than a feminist reading of the *personal as political*. The second related question from de Lauretis is : in whose interests are any de-re-constructions effected? In de Lauretis' terms, the 'subject of feminism' refers to both the outlining of the historical condition of a particular construction offering resistance to dominant technologies, a 'reading against the grain', and the theoretical conditions of its possibility in :

'a movement back and forth between the representation of gender (in its male-centred frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out and more pointedly makes unrepresentable. It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the 'space-off', the elsewhere, of those discourses, those other spaces, both discursive and social that exist...in the margins...'between the lines'...'against the grain' in the interstices of institutions, in counterpractices and new forms of community.'²⁵

From a feminist viewpoint, heteronomy is emphasised to demonstrate that the principal ordering of the world (even modernist canons and definitions) is neither monolithic nor fixed and thus subject to change. While modernism offered a means of representation, it could not account for aspects of women's experience, which as they entered the frame, became incomprehensible. They remain as part of the 'space-off' the looking askance that women's work represents in malestream thought. Male critics find it hard to comprehend or sustain a potential feminist reading of Bourgeois' work , except through a negative *totalising* view of feminism as an inversion of male values or as an expression of woman's desire to 'have' the Phallus. Donald Kuspit, for example, in *Where Angels fear to Tread Artforum*, 1987, can only use the Freudian term *penis envy* to name Bourgeois' project .

'She wants recognition of her share of natural power, which man, in a political act of expropriation, and in a materialist act of literalism, has claimed entirely for himself '...'her power to give birth in order to ground and guarantee his own sociopolitical power by hoarding all power, the *penis envy* at its deepest can be

understood as woman's demand that her own implicit *phallicness* be explicitly recognised'²⁶

While Kuspit notes that in Bourgeois' work the 'power of men and women integrate violently yet seamlessly',²⁷ he has to find other ways to *master* his subject. So she becomes a 'handworker rather than [a] literary artist. She models or shapes or, let us say *masturbates* it to find the phallic in it' and this activity is 'not strictly a sexual wish, but a more inclusive wish for metamorphosizing merger'.²⁸ Kuspit has difficulties (particularly here in the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis) in explaining what is going on in her work. The binary oppositions of abstract/ figural, radical subjectivity / public sculpture, inside/outside, damage/repairation, fear/mastery, order/chaos reappear with one term privileged over the other, rather than producing a situation in which the very binary oppositions are themselves challenged or undermined. While recognising themes as pregnant, phallic, and fecal, the language breaks down when trying to explain the multiply phallic, clitoral and multi-breasted forms except in terms of a repetitive, serial or minimalist character.

A refreshingly different reading is provided by Mignon Nixon writing in *Parkett* about Louise Bourgeois *La Fillette* and the photographs taken by Robert Mapplethorpe of Lousie Bourgeois where she holds this latex sculpture as a *prop* in a photography session.²⁹ Louise Bourgeois calls *La Fillette* (little girl) her 'little Louise' - a 'child self with a lost state of self-love'.³⁰ It is simultaneously her and the projection of and display of her own desire. It is both a self-representation and an object-made for psychic use. She projects herself onto the object and it remains a substitute for what is lost. The security of the sculpture as doll/infant/girl's desire is made multipally ironic by its excessive representation as overgrown Phallus.³¹ It is the projection of little Louise's desire but it also represents the fragility of masculinity when for the photograph in Lippard's book *From the Center* it was displayed hanging on wire hook. Her play with the object as she is being photographed marks its representation as both toy, penis and baby - Freud is turned potentially on its head and his conception of women's desire for control as 'penis envy' placed in question. Lacan's idea of woman *being* the Phallus, desiring to have the Phallus is another possible interpretation or this scenario, but here Bourgeois consciously and ironically acts out Lacan's structure for the unconscious. Nixon follows sequence of photos by Mapplethorpe discussing how Bourgeois holds *La Fillette*, cupping, stroking, clasping or supporting the sculpture: 'acting out attraction, fascination, attachment, pride but also manipulation, control, discipline and power; that is, she represents the Mother's double fantasy of seduction and dominance. The distinction, however, obvious, between a portrayal of mother and baby, which for Bourgeois this is not and the scenario she does play, between mother and doll, defines her representation not only as a fantasy, but as a strategy.'³² Nixon details how MOMA took Mapplethorpe's photos for publicity in 1982, cropping them and removing *La Fillette* from view, leaving only a headshot of the artist. A detail,

where the 'appropriation of desire by [a] female subject' is denied or attenuated'³³ and the codes of artist's portrait are then confined to facial expression.

Bourgeois herself repeatedly makes the point in interviews that it is necessary to move from the passive to the active, from the recognition of what oppresses you, be it your fears or the overwhelming emotions provoked by desire in order that you find a way to come to terms with these emotions. Her work embraces complex reversals of emotion in seemingly paradoxical forms (neither completely phallic nor an expression of core imagery). For example, in her sculpture of a pregnant woman who is frightened but projects a defensive image of being frightening, whose interior *life* is marked by the contradictions of her *external* appearance. Or *Mamelles* where the attitude of a man to whom all women are objects to be sucked dry appears as multi-breasted, vaginal pink, horizontal form. The complexity of these kinds of reading, however, is at odds with her assimilation into current categories of 'post-minimalism', the abject, or forms of postminimalist abstract sculpture by contemporary younger women artists which are marked by the use of 'negative feminine spaces' (e.g Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost* or *House*, Janine Antoni *Wean*, or Helen Chadwick's *Piss flowers*).

I believe, it is necessary to distinguish feminist as opposed to non-feminist critical or formalist readings. For it is in the attention to the visibility and viability of feminist readings in or against those circulating in the mainstream where one can find the woman-centred perspective in Louise Bourgeois' work and where her considerable appeal to other women lies.

Notes

- 1) Lucy Lippard 'Louise Bourgeois: From the Inside Out' reprinted from Artforum 1975) in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* New York: Dutton, 1976 p.249
- 2) Ann Sutherland Harris 'Entering the Mainstream: Women Sculptors of the 20th Century' *Galerie* Vol 2 pt 2 Fall 1989 p.8
- 3) D.Wye *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois* (New York, MOMA, 1982)
- 4) D.Wye, 1982 p.110
- 5) *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* p.238
- 6) N.Broude and M.Garrard *The Power of Feminist Art* New York: Harry Abrams, 1995 p.20
- 7) *ibid*
- 8) *ibid*
- 9) Nicole Dubroueiel-Blondin 'Feminism and Modernism: Paradoxes' in B.Buchloh, S.Guilbaut D.Solklin (ds) *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers* Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press, 1993 p.197
- 10) *ibid*, p.195
- 11) *ibid* p.200.
- 12) *Art International* (Lugano) Vol 10 No. 120 1966 p.28

- 13) & 14) *ibid* p.39.
- 15) & 16) *ibid* p.28
- 17) *ibid* p.35
- 18) & 19) *ibid* p.34
- 20) Lippard *From the Center* p.49.
- 21) R.C.Morgan 'Eccentric Abstraction and Postminimalism' *Flash Art* No. 144 Jan/Feb 1989 pp.73-81.
- 22) quoted in Broude and Garrard *The Power of Feminist Art* p.19
- 23) quoted in Lippard *From the Center* p.240.
- 24) T.de Lauretis *Technologies of Gender : Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Macmillan, 1987) see pp.1-26
- 25) *ibid*.p.26
- 26) Donald Kuspit 'Where Angels fear to Tread' *Artforum* 1987 Vol.25 pt 7 March 1987 p.115.
- 27) *ibid*.
- 28) *ibid* p.116
- 29) Mignon Nixon 'Louise Bourgeois' Fillette' *Parkett* 27 1991 p.49-51
- 30) *ibid*.p.49
- 31) *ibid*.p.50
- 32) *ibid* p.51
- 33) *ibid*.p.50.

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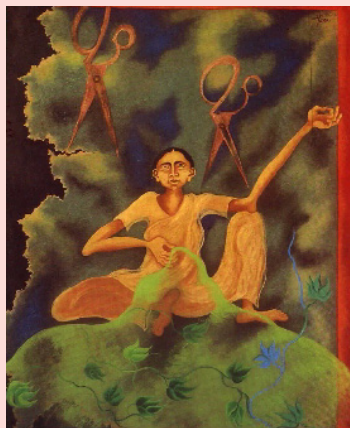
Arpana Caur: A Profile

Nima Poovaya-Smith

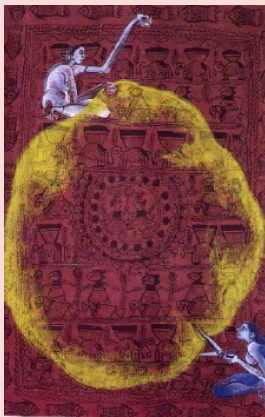
In 1991 Bradford Art Galleries and Museums were presented by a well wisher with two paintings from two Indian women artists. A small oil by, arguably, one of India's first great moderns - Amrita Sher-Gil - who died tragically young at the age of 28 in 1942, and another oil by Arpana Caur, a large glowing canvas entitled *Time Image - 2*.

Sher-Gil's painting was a portrait of a woman, obviously based on an Ajanta cave painting - moody, mysterious, and curiously implosive. Arpana Caur's work was much more gestural. Against an infinity of stormy, indigo sky and a white speckled red foreground the figure of an aged women, ghostly in her white shroud-like sari, faces a saucer-eyed child. Old age and youth mirror each other; the viewer was confronted by an allegory on the theme of immutability and mortality that was quite terrifying.

The gift of the two paintings coincided with the opening of an exhibition on Sikh culture, curated by Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, called *Warm and Rich and Fearless*. Since both Sher-Gil and Arpana are of Sikh descent, it seemed appropriate to incorporate their works in the exhibition. The display also included



Arpana Caur *Woman Embroidering* oil on canvas 1995 120cm x 152.5cm



Left : Arpana Caur *Night and Day* Godna drawing & gouache on paper 1996 57.5cm x 40cm
(Godna is a School of Indian folk art, Madhubani region, Bihar in India)

Centre: Arpana Caur *Prakriti-3* Godna drawing and gouache on paper 1996 57.5cm x 40cm

Right: Arpana Caur *Between Dualities* oil on canvas 1996 210cm x 152cm

miniature paintings of the Sikh school, woodcuts, rich damascene and gem-studded armour and weaponry, jewellery and phulkaris and baghs, embroidered textiles from the Punjab, in which Sikh women, in particular, excel.

All these objects were intricately worked, the gold koftgiri inlay on the steel armour, the bejewelled daggers, the laboriously embroidered phulkaris, the hierarchical troubled world presented within the miniatures and even Sher-Gil's sombre earth-coloured palettes showing a dreaming girl. In this exhibition, one was surrounded by minute detail. But dominating all this were the spacious, horizons of Arpana's painting, a perfect contrapuntal device. Although allegorical, it was also modern and it was confident. And in its modernism and confidence, it seemed to breathe a different glowing life into the surrounding works. It not only brought their richness even more to the fore, but it also further particularised them.

And strangely enough there were all manners of echoes, hints and allusions between this extraordinary painting and the other exhibits. The horizon seemed a non-formulaic re-working of the horizons contained in the miniatures, the flower-speckled foreground reminded the audience of embroidered phulkaris.

And this is how the whole body of Arpana's work has, rightly or wrongly, become fixed in my mind. They are not only lucid articulations of our contemporary state, through figures that resonate with quiet strength and anguish, they also act as mechanisms of release of earlier traditions. The works become agents of empowerment for the widows of Vrindavan, and the other dispossessed. But in the process Arpana compels one to look at her own sources differently. She takes the

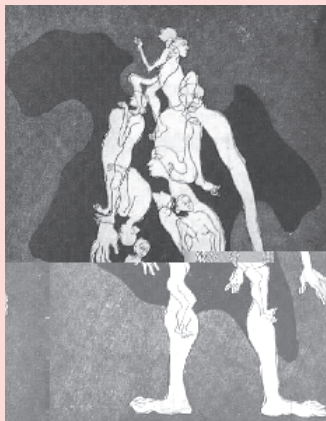


Arpana Caur *Compassion* Godna drawing and gouache 1996 30cm x 40cm
 Arpana Caur *So Many Horsepower* Godna drawing and gouache on paper 1996 50cm x 40cm
 Arpana Caur *The Embroiderer* oil on canvas 1996 165cm x 137.5 cm
 All images © courtesy of the artist.

landscape and female figures of the 17th and 18th century Basholi Hill School, and by setting them in a seemingly boundless universe, she frees them.

Caur expands and personalises Sher-Gil's seductive 'otherness' editing out any hint of romance or onlooker status in the process. One of my favourite theories is Arpana's conscious or unconscious witty homage to the compositional devices of the Pahari and Sikh miniatures. William Archer has pointed out that Pahari artists of the Himalayan foothills found the surfing rhythms of the hookah an extremely useful device in painting, creating as it did its own spatial divides. But Sikhs frowned upon smoking and the Pahari artists who had transferred to the Sikh courts nimbly responded to this by replacing the hookah with the Chatri or ceremonial umbrella. With its slanted shaft and curving brims it too became an important compositional device. In a number of Caur's paintings it is the woman's exaggeratedly extended hand, whether she is lifting, carrying or, particularly, embroidering that immediately strikes the onlooker. The compositional device of the hookah and the chatri have been humanised and given life. The extended hand symbolises the strength and the power of the women who appear in Arpana's paintings. As Gayatri Sinha comments 'An image challenged as one of moralising domesticity, is in a way liberated by Arpana as the women is placed outdoors. Instead of a feminine, income-producing function, it becomes a political comment on women's productivity'.

And, what you see in the work in Caur's recent exhibition *Between Dualities* is the physical act of directly interweaving or encompassing Arpana's own visual vocabulary with the ancient vocabulary of the women artists of Mithila. The direct



Left : Arpana Caur
Body is Just a Garment
etching 1995
24 cm x 34 cm
Right: *Yearning*
etching 1995
24cm x 34 cm

nature of the intervention is a risky endeavour, but one that Arpana pulls off with cool assurance. Sometimes the intervention is shadowy and flickering, as in *Kalpavriksha - 1* and *-2* and *Prakriti* - where her own images are insubstantial and cloud like, trailing a nebulous passage across an ancient canvas.

In others the intervention is much more dramatic and witty in the oppositional images they provide as in *So Many Horse Power* where vertical columns of gaily coloured cars are painted against ranks of traditional Madhubani stylised horses. In the larger works in this series, the intervention is skilfully woven in. In *The Embroiderer*, for instance, very much a creation myth painting, for the woman could be weaving as much as embroidering, the figure in verdant green is nimble, hallowed by circle upon circle of folkstyle bird images. A bird figure seems to emerge from the mouth like a conch shell being blown at some ritual ceremony. The softness of the diaphanous cloth and the woman's seemingly peaceful although admittedly mythic task is rendered threatening by yet another halo of marching scissors. Arpana introduced them in a playful vein but the menage of their sharp steel blades is inescapable.

Perhaps because Sher-Gil and Arpana arrived together, metaphorically speaking, to Bradford's collection, they have become symbiotically linked in my mind. Sher-Gil is now a legend in India. A major road is named after her in New Delhi. There is a ban on the export of her works out of India. Her glamour and her beauty have created its own mystique.

In a very different way (thank god) I can sense the bare bones of legend already forming around Arpana. Most people I meet in India seem to be familiar with the various flash points that were defining moments in Arpana's life. Her parent's separation, the move from a suffocating, congested area to the grimness of a working woman's hostel, and the fact that Arpana is a self-taught artist - all these are well

known facts. Arpana however, is a very modern protagonist. Her own experience of displacement has given her a kind of reckless subversive daring.

This has also informed the work of her writer mother - the redoubtable Ajit Caur, author of the novel *Khana Badesh (Homeless)*. Indeed, having had the privilege of seeing them together in a bond that is fiercely close, and I'm sure occasionally combative, one cannot fail to be moved. 'I didn't need a god father', Arpana once said to me, 'I had my mother!'. You can see now why even the humblest woman in Arpana's painting manages to carry such authority and weight.

Arpana Caur, artist b. 1954, Delhi. She lives in New Delhi. She has shown widely in India since the mid-1970's and also during the 1980s increasingly in Europe and Japan. Her works are in many public and private collections in India, Stockholm, England and Japan. In 1995 she was commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum to execute a large work for its permanent collection on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Holocaust.

Arpana Caur's work since the mid-1970s is discussed by Gayatri Sinha in *Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India* (India: Marg, 1997). She will be showing in Kassel during *Documenta X*, June-September 1997.

Nima Poovaya-Smith is Senior International Curator, Bradford Museum, England.

This is the text of a speech delivered at the opening of *Between Dualities: Recent Works by Arpana Caur*, ARKS Gallery, London by Nima Poovaya-Smith.

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Constitution Intempestive de la République Internationale des Artistes Femmes

Violetta Liagatchev



Article 1 - Avoir la conscience la plus planétaire possible du monde.
Vivre avec le paradoxe de ses différences
Créer sa propre vision du monde et la communiquer à travers ses oeuvres.



Article 2 - Ne pas se laisser intimider par la frustration des mères.

Article 3 - Ne pas se faire souffrir par tradition



Article 4 - Ne pas se représenter comme un objet

Article 5 - Tirer le profit des cultures qui nous ont précédées et ne pas
respecter les les barbaries. Nous pouvons juger l'histoire



Article 6 - Ne pas s'abstraire du monde. La rivalité des femmes est le
principe de leur soumission

Article 7 - Ne pas rester à la traîne des monopoles culturels. Les devancer
en étant sensibles aux changements discrets du monde.



Article 8 - Créer un langage sincère et direct.

Article 9 - Ne pas se sous-estimer, ne pas sur-estimer, sachant qu'on a la
liberté de tout faire.

Article 10 - Ne pas cautionner par l'art, ni par le silence, la démagogie de la guerre, de la violence, du principe premier, de la sclérose culturelle des habitués du pouvoir

Article 11 - Réactiver la vie de l'art



JE ME SUIS RETROUVÉE DANS UN CIEL DE MATERIALITÉ. CHAUD, DOUX.
ET AUX MILLIERS D'ÉTOILES. CHAQU'UNE DE CES ÉTOILES PEND
LÉGÈREMENT EN DESSOUS DU FIRMAMENT.

L'UNIVERS EST FINI CAR RIEN NE LE DÉPASSE

LE MONDE EST ROND ET
MONDE - ON LUI A ATTRIBUE D'ÊTRE FEMME.
EST rond et c'est juste une extérieure ressemblance.
C'est comme si on n'arrivait pas à distinguer un chien d'un
autre chien.

MAIS MOI FEMME JE VOIS ET JE JUGE. JE GOUTTE ET JE
RESSENS.

CE QUI EST FIN JE VEUX LE PARTAGER.
LA BRUTALITÉ. QU'ELLE LEUR SOIT LA
MASTURBATION.

JE PEUX MOI FEMME , T'AIMER, TE CHÉRIR. ET TE DONNER MON
ADORATION ABSOLUE. MAIS À CONDITION QUE TOI HOMME TU
ABANDONNES A JAMAIS L'USAGE DES ARMES. TA VIOLENCE. ET TA FOLIE

MEURTRIÈRE QUI TE POUSSE VERS LE POUVOIR. SINON TU N'ES RIEN.
ET TU PÉRIRAS TOUT SEUL SOUS LE POIDS DE TA SAUVAGERIE.

CAR MOI FEMME . JE NE SUIS PLUS D'ACCORD DE SOIGNER TES
BLESSURES DE GUERRE, NI DE TE PARDONNER QUOI QUE CE SOIT.



Violetta Liagatchev is an artist working with video. Her 'Untimely Constitution of the International Republic of Female Artists' was published as her contribution to 'Masculin-Feminin' (George Pompidou Centre, Paris, 1995-1996).

She was born in 1966 in Moscow. French nationality. Studied 1986-1991, National Upper School of Fine Art, Paris; 1992 Rijksakademie; 1993-94 MA, Marseilles. She has shown her videos, photography, paintings, drawings and artists books in numerous exhibitions in France, Japan and Russia.

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Diary of an Ageing Art Slut from London, the Montmartre of the Millenium

Part 1 : September 1996

Monday

Plans for an earlier start than usual in studio curtailed by visit to dentist. It was really for tomorrow but I had it in my head it was for today. Anyway, it worked out alright. The dentist has given up on me keeping any sort of schedule that bears a resemblance to the appointment bookings. This she told me herself while drilling. She doesn't seem to get at all annoyed; though my jaw still aches. Unlike the smart ass young woman at the front desk; she had the nerve to ask me "What is the use of me having an appointment book if you don't stick to the right time?" Beats me! I thought to myself. They just clutter up your life.

Another fitting for the back denture and I finally consented to have the wisdom tooth out when the dentist poked it and I screamed. It seemed a good idea at the time. Still I do like her as she comes to the studio Open shows and any other art opening I tell her about. I never miss an opportunity for a future art patron. She wrapped up the extracted tooth for me without any reference to the tooth fairy which I thought was delicate on her part. It was a mess. The decay was there alright. I could poke a finger through the rot. How embarrassing!

The side of the face where it came out was still numb several hours later. But then it would be as I made her give me two injections for pain. I have become more of a sissy when it comes to pain in my advancing years but pain killers also make me feel good. Only when I checked in my compact mirror did I see that I was dribbling from my nose profusely down my face. I had not felt a thing. How could I as most of my head and neck was numb.

Back home I made myself a barley cup drink. I am off caffeine at the moment because acidic foods can worsen arthritis if that's what is bothering my shoulder. Must remember to make that doctors appointment for my aching shoulder joint.

I had just sat down with my hot drink and chocolate cake and tried to relax but to no avail when the cat next door who is becoming very dominant and now shits regularly in our garden confronted my cat and there was this right who-ha! Both animals were running around with tails so fluffed up from their attack positions that they looked absolutely enormous. With their tails looking like large bottle brushes and their bodies like they had been administered electric shocks I gave chase. The other cat shot out of our garden with my verbose cussing and throwing of bits of old sculpture after it before I realised that I perhaps might need them one day and stopped.

Soon afterwards I had become so bored with always packing my back gum with wadding that I reread the instructions the dentist had given me and noted I wasn't suppose to eat for at least an HOUR after the treatment. Stuff that! I decided to go to the studio after all and faint on the way there if I have too. I desperately wanted to put down some flat colours on the new large work. Still not decided as to whether I should go to the opening tonight with G. or not. I won't get a ride home if I do .On the other hand, one must circulate ...

Wednesday

Never made the opening on Monday but Tuesday turned out to be a full day. After two hours on my cleaning job I trundled off to my therapists. That's always a bundle of fun. I shan't go into details because I really don't like talking about it but I always go and check out Marks & Spencers afterwards for a little retail therapy. Now that always makes me feel better even if all I can afford is a special chocolate bar. Afterwards I came home and ate the rest of the chocolate cake and almost all of the lasagna before I went to the Artists Society meeting.

R. was feeling so guilty about not including me in on their recent Paris trip that she offered to pay my taxi home as I had to leave early for another important meeting. How was she to know that 'Important meeting' was the opening of Sam Taylor - Wood's new work. G. got me a ticket to the party afterwards. The food was very odd. H. said it was like Italian Communist party food. He's probably right and he should know as he has a house in Italy. It had an air of pretentious peasantry to it; roast pork and ciabata bread with beer. All sorts of film media people were there. Malcolm McClaren, Kylie Minogue, John McVicar and lots of others that I failed to recognize. None of them were over 5ft.

I saw my friend J. in the food queue and made a bee line for him. Us serious eaters always stick together. Informed him that my friend Em. was short listed for a job where he works so he moved closer to have a good chat. He also thought that every one here looked really really young and that all the famous people were rather short. We agreed that it was hard to tell the pretentious art crowd from the pretentious film crowd.

I could have stayed longer but the idea of tubeing it after 11 back to the East End was grim and as I had no money for taxi fares I left. Imagine I was home from a trendy party before 11.30 pm.!!! But I did meet a critic who had gone to the Courtauld and even seemed intelligent. However I couldn't make out whether he was gay or a camp heterosexual. He could be like my friend T. who is a closet heterosexual. Worse still I couldn't make out whether he was flirting with me or not. I am probably wrong as I'm not too bright about discerning peoples gender orientation at times.

My nearest and dearest had made supper for me when I got home. In fact I was a bit annoyed that I hadn't come home for supper earlier when I phoned him as he had made his special spaghetti sauce. However, I do need to go to openings. I backed out of the art bus going up to the Liverpool Tate for Friday. Clubbing it afterwards until 3pm. then bussing it back home again at the time seemed to leave me cold. I get very easily knackered these days. Maybe ten years ago or even fifteen

Friday

Today was alright in the studio except for the head ache. I trundled off home at three and decided that what I really needed was a bigger space. Time had come for a change in my life. I feel very stale. So I phoned M.R. when I got back home and put in a plea for something bigger and did he know any such space available in the organization he's with. He said when he came back from abroad he would come over and see me.

I almost forgot to note down last week about the opening at the Natuional Portrait Gallery which was rather a great night. G. knew the architect who redesigned the top floor. But then so did I and I knew his parents which she didn't. However she had the invite and could take a guest so we went. The P.V. was a very posh affair. Wonders of wonders P.'s parents were there. I do love them. It was so nice to see them again. His mum and I had a great chat while G. went off with his father to find P. I caught up with them later where his father introduced me to him - his son P. He always does this and introduces us like we haven't met before and I have known P. for twenty years!!

Anyway this great launch was sponsored by Vogue. Food was truly weird. P.'s mum informed me that I had eaten the decoration not the hor d'oeuvre at one point in the evening when she saw me struggling with what seemed like a bird's nest. It was really awful tasty stuff. I had to have another glass of champagne to wash it down. When I left, P. was in deep conversation so I just squeezed his arm as I went by and said "The conversion is divine." ...a bit dumb I know. I don't know where the blessed G. was. Not around that was for certain. Perhaps she found an interesting and available man to chat up! Anyway I promised P's parents I would keep in touch.

I must confess that things between near & dear are as ever. He is actually trying very hard to be nice. However our sex life is still not too good. In fact it's the same as it has been for the past four years. Last year I counted how many times we had sex

and it was the same as it was the year before. This year it's exactly the same. Both Em and J. said counting was definitely a bad sign. Quell drag. How does he do it? Even I am not that good at being repressed AND carrying on a semblance of normality at the same time. However one musn't complain. Its free and sort of regular and he's a good kisser. After all we have been together almost nineteen years which is only one year short of the longest close live in relationship I have ever had. And that was with my cat, Matisse.

Monday.

Weekend was a bit flat. Should have gone to Liverpool and just suffered. After all, it was Rachel Whiteread's big show. But we finally got the tiles down on the floor upstairs. I justify improvements to the house by thinking that if I have to down-size because of enforced poverty I have one valuable asset. It looks great and it took only three months of nagging. Just the edges, corking and varnishing to do. Hope it can be done by the weekend. Nearest has been v. nice to moi lately. After asking to borrow this week's fare once again from him he forgot to give it to me. But when I panicked instead of complaining and telling me to get real work in place of all those part time art jobs I have he just went out and got the money from the cashpoint without a word. Wonders never cease. Having the hair cut tomorrow at the place Em recommended. Then at 5p.m. old friend M. and sibling coming for sibling's farewell dinner before it goes off to university. Must get her a card. Tonight I teach my mature students but first to the Committee office to send a fax, drop off a film and then to College.

Thursday

My friend M. and sibling ,who is my God-daughter, came over for slap-up meal which made the sib. very happy. I wonder what the child has been fed all her life. The sibling acted like she had never had a hot meal before in her whole life. I know her mum's cooking is a bit dodgy but you would have thought the child had died and gone to heaven with her 'MMMM my fav food' and 'Oh, its so divine.' She never stopped all night even after three helpings of seconds.

Apparently she has been acting real surly and longing out loud for the day she goes to University and away from home. Needless to say her mother is a mess about the whole affair. I keep saying ' it's only Brighton, not some where remote and cold place like Yorkshire!' But sibling has it in her mind that she is never ever going to come home again. Whenever I went into the kitchen her mum would follow and weep while the sib. was sucking her thumb in front of the T.V. I sent them home with some homemade jam and opened the bottle of wine which I didn't serve.

After they left, I felt very sad and a failure at my art and my marriage so I went to bed with the bottle of Beaujolais very early. Mr.G from down the road

gave me it for looking after his house while he was lecturing in Spain. Tomorrow after my cleaning job G. and I will go to the Bankside to view while it is being converted into the New Tate Gallery. Pretentious Moi ? I suppose its more tales of house hunting from her. I can't bear another house hunting excursion looking at more houses and flats. It can't be that difficult to find a house ? Mind you its 17 years since we last moved. I think I will suggest she try auctions.

SATURDAY 09.'96

Today was Helen Chadwick's memorial service at St.Martin's in the Field. The whole church was decorated with flowers in the manner of 'Helen'. At the end everyone was urged to take flowers home as a memory of her. There must have been over £ 3000 worth of flowers. A carpet of orange and yellow blooms was lain down the centre isle and around the huge columns were Irises strapped with packing bands normally used for shipping paintings. M. actually said hello to me and I gave her a kiss. Everyone was crying. But J.J. looked like she was sucking lemons up both ends ..the frost coming off her was arctic. When I smiled at her she bumped into someone. She is such a sad case.

Everyone from London's art world was there:- all the East End, all the artists who homesteaded in Acme houses when nobody was well-known but just poor and out of art school like Helen once was. The tributes were moving. Such a sad and untimely death. I shall just miss having our lunches and her tap on the studio window to see if I want to go for a cappuccino. The last time she did that I declined in order to finish some work. I thought they would always be another time but then death never lets you know when its coming.

C. met me at the National Gallery afterwards and we went for a Chinese as my birthday treat then back to the Nat. Gal. for tea then to Jigsaw and Next to check out clothes. It was just great to be alive and with a girl pal gossiping and checking out clothes. All along the way people were stopping and admiring the flowers I had taken from Helen's service. Everyone had been encouraged to do so and the West end of London was ablaze with people carrying huge bouquets like a piece of performance art. Helen would have loved that !

Part 2 : October 1996 - January 1997

Wednesday 2.10.96

Last week was my birthday. I had to go to my therapy on it. Quel Drag! I took two white chocolate Magnum ice cream bars as a treat to the session. It was a bit nasty of me as my therapists is trying to watch her weight and I knew she wouldn't refuse out of politeness to a client.

G. and Em are coming over for my birthday dinner. Of course I cooked it. They both brought me big bouquets of flowers and when the n.& d. came home he had another one as well. I felt truly loved. He also brought a huge profiterole cake. But I couldn't eat it as I have a lactose intolerance. You would have thought that after 19 years together

he might have remembered. However as my friends had also brought a little bubbly we were quite merry by the time he arrived with the cake and I was past caring. Well there was so much gossip to exchange as none of us had seen each other since the visit to the Tate's Bankside site.

I must say that the building shell is impressive. Met a chap that I used to know who drove a van service picking up and delivering artists works. You know that sort of "not quite a real business but filling in till I get a teaching position or bigger sales" thing. Doesn't do it anymore. Now he is self-important with his pieces of commissioned art chiselled into sides of buildings to 'provoke thought'. As if people don't think about issues of life and death without a chiselled reminder! Anyway I was just about getting impressed with his stand on being an committed artist - the one about giving up work to concentrate on his art and taking a chance in life when I remembered that he had a girl friend who had a full time teaching job. So much for taking a chance in life!

However what was really amazing was the unfinished building. It was like the interior of some huge galactic space ship. The space was vast and cathedral-like and I felt so tiny and small and overwhelmed with awe at its size. But what was even more moving was the fact that I could spy from my position on the scaffolding St. Paul's Cathedral through the fragments of dust covered glass in the windows; two very different cathedrals from two very different ages.

Monday 14.10.,97

Just a quick entry to say I went to an *Opening* if you could call it that. As it was in an office building got together by an arts organization run by artists who put on shows in such premises. One artist had the nerve to ask if I was an artist because I didn't seem to be dressed like one. Of course he was! One knows the look: leather jacket, baggy trousers, Doc Martins (paint covered) and a general air of studied scruffiness with the 'I just come out of the studio before a quick pint with the boys at the pub look.' I of course had on my nice coat that I had swapped with M. at College for a vanity case that she collects. It was originally her sisters' but it didn't fit M. Whereas M. is short and plump her sister is tall and slim like me.

I hadn't intended to stay long as I needed to go to the Whitechapel Art Gallery opening which looked more promising for contacts etc. But I got waylaid by the really scummy free food and lovely wine which is always great at business sponsored events.

I met my old friend K. who I haven't seen much since he moved studios. He says its quite nice not to have a roof that leaks and he doesn't miss the bird shit from the pigeons that used to be trapped in his old studio. He also doesn't miss that miserable dog I used to have who would shit in front of any of his paintings it didn't like. I told him that it just goes to show that good taste is instinctive. By the time we staggered back to the East end and to the Whitechapel Art Gallery it was closed. G. and I have three openings to catch this week!

THURSDAY 2.11.'96

Actually got a full day in the studio this week. Sorted out work to be photographed and delivered to the photographers. G.stayed Tuesday night as near & dear was out of town for the second week working. The cat has taken to running around the house at night all fluffed up which is really spooky. Perhaps the worming powder has speed in it?

Managed to get the work delivered eventually. Need to pick it up Friday. Went by the spot where Rachel Whiteread's House used to stand. How sad its not there. What was the matter with the petty local councillors who voted against it remaining? Some of us tried to prevent it being removed. When the final day came I even went down there with chains to do the old suffragette thing but no one else was there and the television crew just looked at me blankly and walked off. It's a sad state of affairs for a society that tears down works of art is all I can say. What next? Book burnings! At one time there would have been a proper protest. But the younger generation doesn't seem to have any interest in such ideals. Off to cousins in deepest Berkshire this weekend.

SATURDAY 2.11.'96.

What a week and what a month! This time of year is so filled with openings. They can be such hard work some times. Visit to cousins went well. Didn't stay all weekend as I needed to be home Sunday to get a teaching application in for Tuesday. Don't know why I bother. I am too old. Past that magic barrier and into an age range where you are too experienced and in a higher income bracket. At least that's what I tell myself. I hate the teaching system. It's male-dominated, ageist and all based on the old boy network : who you know or drink with in the pub. I guess I never drank in the pub enough with the boys.

I remember the studios in Wapping. They are now all very expensive riverside apartments far beyond the financial reach of the artists who discovered them. Everybody drank in the Town Of Ramsgate but it was a BOYS CLUB. They could drink longer and with less guilt. Most of women had other obligations at home or just found it all too boring except D. who was tolerated like a pet dog. Now she's an art historian who dresses only in black and quotes French feminist philosophers.

It always amazes me that the shivering impecunious artist in her/his struggle supports this weighty industry of curators, art historians, theorists, framers, photographers, shippers not to mention the galleries and their staff whose jobs are only justified by the artists struggling to create.

G. announced she received an invitation to the Turner prize ceremony this year so we need to do some serious shopping for an outfit.

5.11.'96.

Another part time job finished by 10 a.m. and into the studio. Things to be framed for the end of the month. Two competitions. Is it worth it? I could spend the entrance money on much needed materials instead or just some new underwear!!!! My dress looked great on the T.V. coverage of the Turner Prize.

JANUARY 1997

Christmas was a wipe out. I had the flu for three weeks and then nearest and dearest had it then I got it again for another week. All our Christmas is in the freezer. We ate Turkey sandwiches and champagne Christmas day in front of the T.V. then I went back to bed. At my annual Cocktail party for the neighbours before Xmas everyone sneezed themselves silly. The only way to stop it was to make stronger cocktails. Even the Vicar and his boyfriend went home pissed. I found a nice fifties dress with matching jacket for the party in my favorite charity shop to wear for it.

Part 3 : January - April 1997 SUNDAY, January '97

Last night for the first time in I don't know how many years I crawled into bed at 4 a.m. I was numb with tiredness having spent the last eight hours on my feet as a cloakroom girl for the Chisenhale fund raiser. I dressed a la Dietrich in my tails with a bra top and bow tie. It was truly a great evening. Only problem was I couldn't let anybody spell me off as I had this system of placing the coats when we ran out of tickets. I couldn't explain it to anybody else. There was so many people and so many coats; far more than expected. Apparently everyone had a great time. I would not know as I only saw the inside of the cloakroom.

Everyone willingly paid for their coats to be checked except two little toe rags. Two girlies who just grabbed their coats and ran. How pathetic! Apparently they also objected to being able to have only two free beers. "Excuse me sweetie" I yelled after them as they ran off "your trousers are split and your ass is hanging out." I also noted that they were wearing outfits from Whistle's clothes shop. Not known for it cheap little designs.

My legs are throbbing today. I can't believe that I used to do this all the time when I was younger. I must have been mad to volunteer. Its not as if I would even be offered an exhibition there. However, we must try to keep all public funded galleries open. This Tory government is doing its best to make everyone into completely ignorant materialist consumers of kitsch kulture and krap.

When I finally got into bed nearest and dearest shot over to the other side and told me not to come near him as I was like a block of ice. So I turned the electric blanket on and fell asleep. About two hours later I awoke suddenly and sweating from a rather bizarre dream to find all the bed clothes off, the cat on my feet and the dear one snoring his head off. I was just about to leave it all behind and go into the spare bedroom when I remembered G. was there. So the cat got drop kicked down the stair well, the electric blanket turned off and I opened the window and pulled all the blankets back on. The weird thing is that the dearest brought me a cup of tea around ten and said what a good sleep he had last night. G. went home after breakfast looking like a truck had run her over and I went back to bed till this evening.

This next week looks like every other one except I have an assistant starting soon. That is as soon as he can get himself together enough to turn up at the studio before two in the afternoon. He is one of my mature students who in exchange for extra tuition in putting his portfolio together is going to help me on my newest project. However he has been in a mental institution for some time but seems quite pleasant despite the experience.

FEBRUARY

The month of February was very dull. Work in the studio is going okay. The sale I had before Xmas worked a treat and I cleared a lot of debts. The large sheets of paper are arriving soon and I found some foam backed board to make a new portfolio for the drawings. I am well pleased with myself.

There was an opening at Delfina Gallery of some miserable slightly ironical photomontages. I went to meet G. but we missed each other. She was in one of her non-stop fast-talking whirlwind visits and managed to walk right by me.

I was too busy talking to an old friend M. who I hadn't bothered to speak to for years because I thought he was too boring and I never saw her come in. I gathered M. and I both thought the other was a bit off and not very interesting. But as he had the table with all the food on it I had to start up a conversation. That conversation landed up lasting for three hours. When I got home that night I told nearest and dearest that I had a lovely evening talking to M. 'You think he's boring' he said. Well I guess I didn't exactly think he was brilliant but its funny how people can get more interesting as they get older. He thought it was very odd and said it was probably in direct ratio to the large amount of free beer I had to drink.... Well not exactly, but M. just seemed more interesting than he did fifteen years ago. I suppose we did have a few to drink and we went to the pub as well but I didn't tell near. and dear. that.

SATURDAY, March

Well G. and I decided that the only way to catch up on the West End galleries was to blitz them all in one afternoon. Now I've done this before with her and it is truly an experience to remember. For one thing she has these huge long legs that take one step to my two and a half. But being the great pals that we are we always do it and every time I forget what an exhausting experience I had the last time.

However this time the shows we visited were so dull and thin and "Arty" that we got sidelined into a few clothes shops along the way in Bond street. At Fenwick's we booked into have a facial in two weeks time. I'll probably cancel it but it is nice to pretend you have money!

We made it to the Hayward in time to see the Prinzhorn collection; art produced by inmates of insane asylums collected from late Victorian to the twenties in Germany. Because of the strange quirks of history it got preserved as examples of degenerate art in Nazi Germany and eventually stored away and forgotten. What an

exciting exhibition! It just goes to show that as human beings no matter what mental state of sanity we may find ourselves in we have to communicate and communicate these wretched souls did. I wish I could do it so inventively! G. and I were both gob-smacked. We wandered out dazed after two hours there and vowed to go back again. She stood me for a beer and, as it was the cocktail hour, free jazz was on offer in the foyer of the Festival Hall. So we sat our numb brains down along with our tired feet and well endowed bottoms and let the music flow over us. Our peace was not to be however as I spied a former student that was looking at me with a 'don't I know you' look that I tried to dispelled by putting on my shades and slumping down into the chair. I told G. to move over blocking his view of me. I have taught a few interesting students in my life but it is truly only a few. This was not one of them. Luckily he seemed to lose interest and we were able to listen to the music in peace.

FRIDAY

What a week! I have three part time jobs which just about bring in an in adequate income. No I lie. I have FOUR. I believe the phrase used these days to describe such a situation is 'Flexible Employment' - a euphemism for not having a proper paid job.

When I started out long ago as a young art student in 1967 I had only male lecturers. Some were okay and took you seriously (I can't remember which ones though) but most tolerated you. They gave the male students longer tutorials and took their ideas and work just that little more seriously. But I didn't notice this until I asked my personal tutor for a reference for a Post Graduate Fellowship so I could continue my art career. To my surprise he said no. When I asked him why he causally ascertained that I would be getting married soon and would waste the opportunity. This was said in all seriousness to a student that put in over eight or ten hours each day in the studio when she wasn't holding down a part time job. I was an 'A' student. I do remember shouting at him that just because his wife made that mistake it didn't mean the rest of womankind would be so stupid.

Years later at a conference I bumped into him and reminded him of his excuse. 'Well, it sure spurred you on. See! I helped your career by making you so mad that you went out and proved me wrong.' Not only did I pour the contents of my beer glass down the front of his trousers but the woman next to him poured hers over his head.

However why I remember all this is because I have been asked to do some teaching for eight weeks (one day a week) and after my initial visit to pick up the proper pay claim from the office I noticed that on the staff roll there was hardly any women tutors. Just like the old days!

Sometime in April.

Work in the studio has been very slow. This new batch of work is difficult and needs a lot of drawing before starting onto the paintings and prints. Sometimes it gets just like that with it being a really hard struggle and lots of false starts. Especially if your days are so fractured from all those blessed part time jobs.

The assistant is as nutty as a fruit cake but extremely well mannered and pleasant. His time keeping is rather creative. I think he occupies a parallel universe. We are gradually getting the work done. It's just getting him there while there is still daylight and before I have to go off and teach my evening classes.

THURSDAY

Easter has come and gone along with a great time in the studio. I got so much work done. It's wonderful having an assistant and not having to work. He's gradually getting the hang of things. Sort of. He's even managed to make it to the studio by 11 a.m. which gives us a good run before he has to go at 5. However I have taken to bringing him sandwiches so that we can work through lunch otherwise he gets very distracted. I found out that he hasn't long left residential care and is living in a shared house where there is a lot of smoking of grass but says he doesn't participate. He is still prone to depression but he is a quick learner after you repeat yourself for the fifth or sixth time. He says its his tranquillizers and that they need to be changed. I told him to get hip and take prozac. Everyone else seems to be on it.

Wednesday

Went to Tracy Emin's opening last night at the South London Art Gallery or SLAG to those who know. I had been teaching at the new Brighton University so with the every so convenient London link going through Elephant & Castle I thought there was no reason for me not to go as it was then only a short bus ride away. Despite the fact that I had been up since six a.m. and caught an early train down in order to set up the slide projector before anyone else booked it, I was feeling okay. I couldn't miss this opportunity to network because everybody would be there. It was a short bus ride from the station but so many taxis filled with trendies blocked the road outside the gallery that I and several other irate residents got out a block before the right stop. The art posers obviously felt unsure about civilization reaching that far south of the river.

SLAG was heaving with wall to wall pretentious art types. You could barely see the work. But what I could see looked rather retro-feminist. However I heard my name called through the din and it was K. After the customary 'mawph! mawph!' on each cheek we started to catch up on each others progress. I hadn't heard from her for simply ages and had to thank her for some very useful networking she did on my behalf. We retired to the beer garden for a freebie but that was filled with grungy younger artists cadging all the free beer. We decided to wade our way back to the main exhibition quick and get out of the sea of free beer bottles that were by now past our ankles. Every step we took clanked from the hundreds of abandoned bottles as we waded through to the show. We poked about a bit more at the installations and read a few smutty extracts before I decided I was hungry and tired and wanted to go home.

On the bus back I realized I was decidedly underwhelmed by the exhibition. The seventeen year old's that I teach art would really like it a lot. Lots of angst and teenage confessions! It left me rather sad and as I looked out the bus window at the early evening sky the smell of spring blossoms filled the bus from all the trees in bloom and I saw the Hale-Bopp comet. I was out of my seat with excitement

'Look its the comet!!!!' I yelled and everyone tried to ignore me as one would at any maniac that starts yelling 'Look at the Comet'. But the chap in front of me stole a glance towards where I had pointed and saw it also. Then he stared to get excited at the smudge in the sky that was Hale -Bopp. 'Oh Wow! Its really great.' he said.

Suddenly everybody was craning their necks to see it before the city buildings blocked their view. Luckily the bus stopped at the next stop just then and they could get a good look. But afterwards everyone continued to chatter for a long while afterwards to their neighbours who had been complete strangers just minutes before. The bus ride was definitely a lot more exciting experience than the exhibition. I was still smiling about the pleasure that seeing the comet gave me and how everyone on the bus got so excited about it as I lay in bed at night.

25.4.97

Went to the launch of Helen Chadwick's memorial Scholarship fund at the Royal College of Art Senior Common Room. Everybody is looking so old these days. Doesn't anyone believe in moisture cream!

An important gallery owner A., who I had been trying to get to visit my studio, was there as was M. We immediately got into an interesting discussion about A's dress buttons always opening just across her chest. The buttons just wouldn't do up across her front and the dress was gapping. I told her she must have grown and hoped it wasn't because she was taking HRT. There just isn't enough research done into it before they shove it down women's throats. A. just giggled nervously.

My friend J. gave me a lovely kiss when we saw each other. I think older men look so handsome! I spied the director of the Serpentine Public Art Gallery and gave her a silent hello but she fanned unrecognition until I got closer. There sometimes comes across curators faces a certain look if they don't really want to see someone from the past. Especially if they are not famous or beneficial to them in the present. It is very like a look of 'I suddenly smell something unpleasant'. A few curators can be very rotviller like in their facial expressions. One such grimace was delivered my way by a real toughie who I was going to pass on a message to from a mutual friend who was going to be late meeting her but I thought 'Na. Let her wait at the restaurant for an extra hour'.

Also met another old friend who I hadn't seen for ages. She is now living in the wilds, somewhere in the middle of the country, having gone back to her roots with all her work in storage there - as well as her dead husband's work, since last year. She looks beautiful with a great tan and long flowing silver locks. She hasn't had a

job since the course she was working on folded and that was some time ago!!! She said she had become invisible now that she was a hag or a crone or whatever they call women who are over fifty who refuse to die their hair and still expect to exhibit current work. She was really getting into her stride and getting really pissed off about all the good women artists out there who are invisible because they are now older when I had to remind her that some of us never got visible in the first place.

‘Well’ I said to her ‘ it makes me really excited about getting to be a older woman artist.It looks even more exciting than being a younger woman artist.’ At that stage we both said suddenly ‘have you seen Tracey Emin’s Show?’and fell about laughing.

I got thrown off my degree for bringing a sewing machine into the studio to make this huge love letter /quilt out of fabric, neon and paint. Mind you it was 1971 in a small provincial city in the mid-west Canada. They were still in shock over Abstract Expressionism. I also called to mind the dozens of women who were derided for using ‘women’s stuff and crafts’ to make art - like the artist Joyce Wieland. Because she was a Canadian one might not have heard of her let alone remember the she sent a quilt to the then bachelor Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, that had the message on it REASON AVANT PASSION. But she was also married to the film maker Michael Snow until it broke up and he married a younger woman and had a baby. Now quilty things and applique is cutting edge but feminism is still an F word!

More to follow !!!

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