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Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art by *Mignon Nixon*
The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2005, 312 pp., 103 illus., £25.95,
ISBN 0262140896 (hardback)

The first image in Mignon Nixon's new study of Louise Bourgeois is a photograph of the artist taken in 1947 in a New York apartment. She is kneeling on the floor in a gesture of mock homage to Joan Miró who is enthroned in an armchair and cloaked in a painted robe with each bare foot resting on a pile of books about Picasso. A note tells us that the photograph was originally published in *Artforum* on the occasion of the 1994 Miró retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The re-publication of the photograph, this time at the beginning of an art historical monograph devoted to the work of Louise Bourgeois, provides a neat visual condensation of the framework that structures this study of her practice: surrealism, psychoanalysis and feminism.

The comedic play for the camera between 'father'/master and 'daughter'/disciple sets the scene for the first chapter of the book, entitled 'Discipleship: Deference and Difference,' in which Nixon undertakes a sustained analysis of the historical, social and psychic roots of Bourgeois's fundamental challenge to the Freudian Oedipal narrative of the avant-garde as it played out in the work of André Breton and the men of the surrealist circle. As a student in 1936, Nixon tells us, Bourgeois, 'moved into the Rue de Seine building where Breton operated the Galerie Gradiva and there suffered her first, stinging professional rejection. Finding that she did not rank among Breton's protégés, she underwent, Bourgeois recalls, a 'crisis of resented authority.'¹ Resented authority might well describe the little girl's stance towards her father in an image from Bourgeois's 1982 photo essay, *Child Abuse*, which is the key case study in the opening chapter of the book. Nixon argues persuasively for making a connection between *Child Abuse* and Freud's study of the case of Dora in which the daughter of a bourgeois household – not dissimilar to the setting of the artist's own childhood – is used as a pawn in the father's sexual game. Nixon points out that by the time Bourgeois made this work at the age of seventy, in the year of her retrospective exhibition at MoMA, Dora's case was emerging as a classic site of feminism's engagement with psychoanalysis. The belated acknowledgement of the status of Bourgeois's work in the story of modern art coincided with the investigation of women as art makers by feminism; an image from her *Femme maison* series of drawings on canvas, made in the mid-1940s, was used in 1976 on the cover of Lucy Lippard's ground-breaking work of feminist criticism, *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, and the series title provided the name for Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse* project. Belatedness, *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action) is key to Freud's conceptualisation of psychic temporality and causality. Thus framed, not only did Bourgeois come to be a figure of transference for feminism, but also feminism in the 1970s and 1980s provided Bourgeois with a meaningful context for reworking unassimilated psychic material from much earlier experiences involving crises of positioning both as a daughter in the family in childhood and as a young woman in her profession as an artist in relation to the surrealists.



If we read with Freud, then, Bourgeois's history in modern art could be defined as traumatic. *Fantastic Reality* has an elegant and beautifully controlled double structure which develops chronologically as a series of case studies of work by Bourgeois from 1947 to 1997. These case studies are framed for analytical purposes by a psychoanalytical concept in each of Chapters one to six thus defining the artist's work in relation to psychoanalysis as an archaeology of the unconscious. The structure is indebted to Freud's formulation of psychic time which for feminist scholarship in art history has been valuable precisely because it disrupts the temporal orthodoxy of the critical discourses that had difficulty making sense of Bourgeois's artistic propositions for decades.

Chapter three is a compelling study of the portfolio of nine engravings with text published in 1947 entitled *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*. It is the most satisfying section of the book distinguished by Nixon's close attention to the material process of engraving, which is pivotal for her assessment of the status of the series as the beginning of Bourgeois's reconfiguration of relations between surrealism and psychoanalysis. Bourgeois calls sculpture 'cutting.' The action of the burin on the surface of the metal plate in the 1947 series of engravings prefigures the artist's work in three dimensions and signals a search for a greater 'level of reality' in which she could 'express much deeper things.'² Bourgeois's term for the intersection of the material and psychic dimensions of her work provides the title for the book: 'fantastic reality.' Nixon's achievement in this chapter is to lay a solid foundation for the proposition developed in the rest of the book: that Kleinian psychoanalysis played a crucial, enabling role in Bourgeois's project as an artist. Cutting also functions as a metaphor in Nixon's argument. In her discussion of *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* she writes that Bourgeois begins cutting herself off from surrealism by echoing in the work's narrative an image from André Breton's account of a waking dream published in his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*. Whereas fantasy for Breton is *surreal*, an effect of the unconscious mind arising as an image in the mind's eye, for Bourgeois fantasy is connected to a bodily unconscious materialised as the action of physical cutting in the process of engraving.

Bourgeois's relation to the surrealist who, she said, 'could have been my father,' is more ambivalent.³ Nixon reads plate seven of *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* as a 'comic gloss on,' but also a 'tribute to' Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*, which marked his own move out of the illusionism of painting. Nixon takes her cue from Rosalind Krauss's description of the texts in the series of prints as 'schizo-stories, the litanies of the bachelor apparatus' to propose that Bourgeois 'reauthored' the *Large Glass* in terms of aggression rather than sexuality, a proposition that has historical support.⁴ The schizoid subject had been a focus of cultural interest after World War I, when Hans Prinzhorn studied art made by psychiatric patients. Melanie Klein worked on the same subject in the late 1930s and 1940s. Nixon's insight in this context is to observe that while surrealism in the 1920s identified with the outsider position of these individuals, and in so doing exoticised them, 'Klein, by contrast, draws psychosis into the pattern of everyday reality.'⁵ This is precisely Bourgeois's crucial point of



contact with Klein's psychoanalysis. It produces Klein, a creative thinker in her own field, and like Bourgeois a mother, as a figure of identification and productive transference for Bourgeois's artistic project that in turn led back to her own mother who, in the artist's own definition, 'was a feminist.'⁶ The argument of the chapter is consolidated in a convincing concluding reading of the 1947 series of engravings in terms of Klein's 1930 case history of the four year old child Dick who, so inhibited by fear of his own aggression that he cannot play or speak, disappears into complete silence. In analysis with Klein the child finally manages to act out his own aggression incising little pieces of black wood from a toy coal cart with a pair of scissors, an action that recalls both the process of engraving a plate, and its inked-up state in preparation for printing. Nixon offers Klein's case study as a way of making sense of the 'alternation between an affectless, objectless milieu and a manic and electric one' that characterizes *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, and the choice of engraving as the medium of the work.⁷

In Chapter four, the *Personages* and the untitled cut and stacked sculptures of 1950 are read in terms of relations between the psychic economy of loss and reparation that characterizes the Kleinian depressive position. Nixon links this psychoanalytical idea to the historical circumstances of Bourgeois's wartime separation from her family in France and the simultaneous raising of her own children in New York. The idea of maternal aggression and ambivalence is introduced in an earlier chapter under the heading of fetishism, which makes fascinating use of Robert Mapplethorpe's contact sheets for his 1982 photograph of Bourgeois with *Fillette*, revealing an attitude towards the object that is both castrating and protective. Here it is here developed in relation to the *Portrait of Jean-Louis*, Bourgeois's young son, whittled and gouged from the thin block of wood at a time, we learn, when she was angry with the child. According to Melanie Klein 'overcoming emotional adversity of any kind entails the work of mourning.'⁸ Nixon interprets *Personages*, not as 'memorials,' portraits of figures from Bourgeois's past, but as the material residue of the work of mourning, which stresses that above and beyond individual, personal loss they represent the cultural work of living with the guilt of being alive after the war. By contrast, Nixon's interpretation of the stacked and assembled sculptures of 1950 in terms of Freud's description of mourning that unfolds bit by bit as a process of reality testing, seems overly literal. But maybe literalism – actual bits and pieces – is a formal weakness of the sculptures themselves that inevitably limits potential readings...which brings us to the death drive.

'Surrealism split over the death drive: for Bretonian surrealists, the death drive risked shattering the symbolic itself (risked the death of art, and of the subject), while for Bataillean dissidents it plunged art to the level of the low, to the depth of subversion.'⁹ In Chapter five of the book, 'The Death Drive Turned Against Death,' we enter territory familiar from Hal Foster's study of surrealism in *Compulsive Beauty*, and also from the interest shown in the inscription of the *informe* in contemporary art by writers associated with the journal *October*. One of the revelations of the book is the information that in the early 1960s Louise Bourgeois considered training as a child psychologist. The original turn in



Nixon's own take on what she sees as the 'evocation' of the *informe* in Bourgeois work around 1960, is to relate the schism in surrealism over the effect of the death drive to the 'controversial discussions' between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein over the implications of the death drive within child analysis that threatened to destroy the institution of psychoanalysis itself.

Again it is feminism that provides Nixon with an interpretive framework for Bourgeois's *Lairs*, *Soft Landscapes* and *Portraits*. She points to the work of Juliette Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose in the 1980s and their turn away from a strategic engagement in the 1970s with Freud and Lacan's theories of sexual subjectivity and their social implications for women, towards Klein and her emphasis on the destructive tendencies of human subjectivity and society. Nixon quotes Rose to the effect that Klein put 'fundamental negativity...at the basis of subjectivity.'¹⁰ 'What is it like to be at the beginning of life? – Klein's answer is unflinching: it is the stuff of nightmare. Early life is lived, she contends, in the grip of the death drive.'¹¹ What is it like, Bourgeois appears to ask with objects like *Portrait*, the near-formless latex wall piece of 1963, to be at the beginning of sculpture? Equally nightmarish: Nixon quotes Lucy Lippard in 1966 when she described such works as 'mindless, near-visceral identification with form.'¹² Thus is the beginning of subjectivity equated with the beginning of sculpture at the level of its materiality, and Nixon's claim for Bourgeois's sculptures in the 1960s is that they soften the boundaries 'between the symbolic and the drives,' opening onto the possibility of generating symbolic effects from the body inscribed at the level of process.¹³

The artist's 1967 piece entitled *The End of Softness* marked a 'return to sculptural materials and techniques,' and it heralds the theme of 'art object as part-object' that occupies the following two chapters of the book.¹⁴ Departing from an observation by Annette Michelson, Nixon demonstrates that not only in the work of Bourgeois, but through much of American art production in the 1950s and 1960s, 'the representation of a "body-in-pieces" ... runs, like an insistent thread.'¹⁵ These representations are responses of various kinds to the precedent set by Marcel Duchamp's body moulds *Objet-dard* (1951) and *Feuille de vigne femelle (Female Fig Leaf)* cast from the breast and vagina of the figure in *Etant donnés*. This thread runs from Jasper John's *Target with Plaster Cast*, (1955), evoking the archetypal part-object, the breast, as an object both of love and hate, through Eva Hesse's phantasmatic breast-penis conflation in *Ringaround Arosie* (1965), to Yayoi Kusama's compulsive accumulations and aggregations of protuberances in which the phallus proliferates to the point where, as Nixon argues, it is lost.

The most interesting, and theoretically productive section of this chapter is Nixon's framing of Bourgeois's *Femme couteau* with Klein's case study of Rita in, 'Psychological Principles of Child Analysis' (1926), wherein a little girl 'insisted on being tightly rolled up in the bedclothes,' before going to sleep at night as protection against something that 'might come through the window and bite off her booty (genital).'¹⁶ Nixon's succinct commentary on Bourgeois's 'wrapped and enfolded' knife woman (Lucy Lippard's description) is worth quoting:



Femme couteau offers a representation of female genitalia as the object of narcissistic affection and solicitous concern. It also suggests that the very possibility of thinking about female sexuality is compromised by the absence of such representations. Freud for example, contends that for the child entering the genital stage, only one genital, 'namely the male one, comes into account.'¹⁷

This promising reading ends with an uncharacteristic, and for me refreshing 'what if' in this at times too seamlessly argued book, in the form of a quotation from Jane Gallop's 1988 essay 'Beyond the Phallus': 'it remains an open question whether there truly exists any adult sexuality, whether there is any masculinity that is beyond the phallic phase, that does not need to equate femininity with castration?'¹⁸ At the end of *Fantastic Reality* this is still an open question. Melanie Klein's emphasis on the death drive and aggression developed from the perspective of her work as a child analyst, and Nixon argues that the part-object logic of the art of Bourgeois and others in America after World War II can be aligned with a feminist politics on the basis that it has been 'effective in eroding phallogentrism from below, or before – from a subsymbolic or presymbolic position.'¹⁹ She maintains with Jaqueline Rose that a return to Klein has freed feminism from being trapped in 'a post-Lacanian orthodoxy' evidenced by the turn to the part object and the drives in recent feminist art practice.²⁰ To which recent feminist art practitioners does Nixon refer I wonder? She herself defines the 1994 exhibition *Bad Girls* as '(post)-feminist.' The artists associated with *Bad Girls* may indeed have 'reopened the question of how psychoanalysis came to be synonymous with sexuality and the symbolic, and so alienated from theories of aggression and the death drive,'²¹ but isn't this to side-step the ongoing task of theorising feminine sexuality that defines the feminist project? In *Femme couteau* Bourgeois proves to be more of a feminist than the new bad girls, or for that matter than Mignon Nixon herself.

In the comparatively crude form of the review it is difficult to do justice to such a subtle and intelligent, elegant, scholarly and committed account of the development of the extraordinary body of Louise Bourgeois's work at the intersection of histories of surrealism and its legacies and those of the discourses of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century. About feminism however, Nixon writes like a bystander, a detached observer of, rather than an active participant in, the psychic life of its own structures of discipleship, deference and difference. Perhaps this is because in her own discipline of art history Mignon Nixon's 'mother' is not a feminist; in *Bachelors* (1999) Rosalind Krauss made it plain that the art made by women that she discussed in her collection of essays did not need the excuse of feminism to justify its quality and value. While Nixon draws upon the work of feminist cultural analysts in the discourses of psychoanalysis, Rose, Mitchell, Rozsika Parker and Mary Jacobus, the legacy of feminist work in art history – with the exception of Lucy Lippard, and a passing reference to Anne Wagner – is noticeably absent from the book. It is hard to read a chapter entitled 'Discipleship: Deference and Difference' without recalling Griselda Pollock's analysis of the Oedipal, patriarchal structure of the modernist avant-garde as one of 'reference, deference and difference,'



introduced in her Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture, *Avant Garde Gambits 1888-93: Gender and the Colour of Art History* (1992), and extended in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1999). In 'Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses' (2000) Pollock also considered Bourgeois's 'daughter's' struggle with Duchamp, an essay in which Nixon's research on the reception of the artist's work by feminists in the 1970s is acknowledged.

Considering *The She-Fox* (1985) and *Spider* (1997), Nixon brilliantly concludes *Fantastic Reality* with the proposition that these two sculptures are, in themselves, what Mieke Bal in her study *Louise Bourgeois's Spider: the architecture of art writing*, (2001) calls 'theoretical objects.'²² Nixon suggests that with these works Bourgeois extends Klein's work on the maternal-infantile relation as an effect of the death drive, switching the emphasis in the dyad from the psychic phantasies of the child to those of the mother. By so doing she redefines maternal ambivalence as a potentially creative, rather than a pathologically murderous position. 'The *Spider's* nest,' Nixon writes, 'holds the anxiety of aggression while holding it back': it is an image of nurtured ambivalence.²³

Psychic struggle always shows in the work of Louise Bourgeois, sometimes in an elegant way, as in *Femme couteau*, but more often the pieces are awkward, ugly, messy and even embarrassing. Throughout the book Nixon illuminatingly includes Bourgeois's own words about her work, like this quotation about making the *She Fox*, the aggressive material presence of which she associated with her mother:

At that point I had my subject. I was going to express what I felt towards her ... First of all I cut 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 couldn't live if I thought she didn't like me ...²⁴

There is no doubt that *Fantastic Reality* is a major contribution to the study of the work of Louise Bourgeois, carefully tracking the ways in which it materially tests and rethinks the Oedipal assumptions of surrealism and psychoanalysis. It is, as Anne Wagner rightly remarks in her book jacket recommendation, a critical 'tour de force.' Nixon's arguments are certainly subtle and elegantly wrought. In a book so concerned with psychic violence, however, her writing, unlike Bourgeois's art making, is strikingly affectless. I am reminded of Klein's case history of Dick, and wonder, is this in some part a symptom of Mignon Nixon's fear of aggression towards feminism in her own field of scholarly endeavour?

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- ¹ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 15.
- ² Louise Bourgeois quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 83.
- ³ Louise Bourgeois quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 15.
- ⁴ Rosalind Krauss, 'Portrait of the Artist as *Filette*,' quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 99.
- ⁵ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 101.
- ⁶ Louise Bourgeois quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 3.
- ⁷ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 102.
- ⁸ Melanie Klein, 'Mourning and Its Relation to Manic Depressive States,' (1940) quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 156.
- ⁹ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 186.
- ¹⁰ Jacqueline Rose, 'Negativity in the Work of Melanie Klein,' (1993) quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 187.
- ¹¹ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 187.
- ¹² Lucy Lippard, 'Eccentric Abstraction,' (1966) quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 188.
- ¹³ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 206.
- ¹⁴ Annette Michelson, "'Where Is Your Rupture?': Mass Culture and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*," (1991) quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 213.
- ¹⁵ Michelson, "'Where Is Your Rupture?'," quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 209.
- ¹⁶ Klein, 'The Psychological Principles of Infant Analysis,' (1926) quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 235.
- ¹⁷ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 235.
- ¹⁸ Jane Gallop, 'Beyond the Phallus,' (1988) quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 236.
- ¹⁹ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 249.
- ²⁰ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 265.
- ²¹ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 265.
- ²² Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois's Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*, Chicago and London 2001, xiv.
- ²³ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 276.
- ²⁴ Louise Bourgeois quoted by Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 270.

