
INTRODUCTION

*The question of history is yours, not mine. I fit into history like a bug in a rug.*¹

Aged seventy, a French-American artist with historical links to the surrealist avant-garde and to feminism, Louise Bourgeois received her first retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1982.² She embodied the “woman artist,” assuming this role punctually at the moment when such a figure was needed, when the investigation of women’s art, instigated by feminism, seemed to demand a focus. Bourgeois, whose art had begun, by her own account, as a “rebuttal” to surrealism, was, in the language of the time, a pioneer, a role model, and a foremother for feminism.³ And this historical circumstance, by which Bourgeois came to symbolize the woman artist and to act as a figure of transference for feminism, galvanized the belated historical reception of her art.

“It is difficult to define a framework vivid enough to incorporate Louise Bourgeois’s sculpture,” the feminist critic Lucy Lippard had observed in 1975, pronouncing a defining problem for the study of this diverse body of work, in which “shapes and ideas appear and disappear in a maze of versions, materials, incarnations.”⁴ In staging the MoMA show, curator Deborah Wye also underscored

the uneven rhythms of Bourgeois's art—its abrupt shifts of scale and shape, its ahistorical conception in terms of positions and topographies rather than periods—contending that it contradicted the expectations of viewers schooled in the aesthetics of modernism, and belonged instead to a postmodern milieu.⁵ And that claim led one critic and Bourgeois scholar, Daniel Robbins, to declare the retrospective that season's "most important exhibition of contemporary art in New York"—a backhanded compliment intended to expose its failure to deliver a properly historical assessment of the artist's work.⁶ In one sense, it was a prescient remark. The extensive body of work Bourgeois has produced since 1982 not only outstrips the previous oeuvre in scope and scale; it also recasts her contribution to modern art. Today, the decentered, fragmented subject of postmodernism seems perfectly at home in Bourgeois's sculptural world, and she remains, more than two decades after her first, long-delayed retrospective, a contemporary artist. Yet the "problem of history" in Bourgeois's art, and the quest for theories adequate to engage it, persist as compelling challenges for any viewer.

Too often, the variety and discontinuity of Bourgeois's art have given rise to strict biographical interpretation. For the default position of criticism remains, as Michel Foucault encapsulated it in his landmark 1969 essay "What Is an Author?," "the belief that there must be—at a particular level of an author's thought, of his conscious or unconscious desire—a point where contradictions are resolved, where the incompatible elements can be shown to relate to one another or to cohere around a fundamental and originating contradiction."⁷ Where the trend of an artistic practice is toward the decentering of subjectivity, as it is in Bourgeois's work, the "principle of unity" that authorship conventionally secures for an oeuvre seems especially resilient.⁸ In much of the critical literature devoted to Bourgeois's art, it is as if, in compensation for an unbinding at the level of sculptural form, there is a countervailing appeal to unity at the level of biographical interpretation. How, then, to construct a framework flexible enough to incorporate Bourgeois's sculpture, but also to tease out and trace the narrative threads now so firmly woven into the history of her art?

Any matrix of interpretation for Bourgeois's art must surely be drawn along the axes of feminism and psychoanalysis. Her art's determined resistance

to patriarchal patterns of genealogy and influence, and its cardinal themes of feminine aggression and desire, demand a political analysis informed by feminism. And its disavowal of formal criteria of consistency and consecutive development, coupled with its intensive focus on the dynamics of sex and violence, point to the work's psychoanalytic logic. This book conceives Bourgeois's art as participating in the history of feminism and psychoanalysis, as well as in the history of modern art. For if, as the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has written, feminism is a movement "that has been shadowing psychoanalysis since its inception," in modern art it is the work of Louise Bourgeois that has borne most active and abiding witness to their complex interaction.⁹

Concentrating on the development of Bourgeois's art from the 1940s, when she turned definitively from painting to sculpture, to the early 1980s, when her sculpture enjoyed a new beginning following the MoMA show, I hope to demonstrate that her challenge to the Oedipal narratives of late modernism is grounded in a distinctive psychoanalytic feminism—with its own historical bases. For if Bourgeois's art seems, in retrospect, to anticipate the postmodern, its dissident logic emerged from the cultural and intellectual force fields of Paris in the 1930s and New York in the 1940s–1970s. Or at least that is the suggestion of this book, which considers her work in relation to artistic and theoretical discourses of those times, including some historically neglected trends in psychoanalysis that have survived to take on renewed significance in recent art.

Mother was a feminist.

The artist's early life in a prosperous bourgeois family evokes the social milieu of early psychoanalysis, with its stories of charismatic, philandering fathers, passive, retiring mothers, and sensitive daughters. Except that Louise Bourgeois's mother, who was her husband's partner in the family's tapestry restoration business, was a feminist. Of her introduction to feminism, Bourgeois remembers, "Mother was a feminist and a socialist. . . . All the women in her family were feminists and socialists—and ferociously so!"¹⁰ So when, as an art student in Paris in the 1930s,

Bourgeois met the surrealists and confronted the sexist culture of a sexual liberation movement, she arrived equipped with a maternal feminism.

This early encounter with surrealism was staged through the dynamic of discipleship, the defining model of surrealism and psychoanalysis alike, but also of the atelier, where Bourgeois, like most French artists of her generation, received her artistic training. In the circle that gathered around André Breton and the surrealist gallery Gradiva, an Oedipal form of transference prevailed, reproducing the psychoanalytic culture of brotherhood on which surrealism itself was based, but also the patriarchal culture of authority against which it rebelled. Bourgeois's negative transference to surrealism and her recasting of discipleship through the comic gesture and the hysterical pose is the subject of chapter 1.

The artist's second encounter with surrealism came in the early 1940s, when, having moved to New York with the American art historian Robert Goldwater in 1938, she soon found herself part of a surrealist community in exile as the wartime exodus of artists and intellectuals from Paris to New York began. In a series of paintings on the theme of the *femme maison*, or woman house, she initiated a critical reworking of surrealism in relation to feminism that was to be sustained for over forty years, into the period of her active involvement in the feminist movement. A rejoinder to surrealism's jokes at the expense of women, the *femme maison* also lays claim to the figure of the mother, whose role, for the surrealists, was above all to be renounced as a symbol of patriarchal law. Only in the transforming social environment of the feminist movement of the 1970s, Susan Suleiman contends, were artists able to "revise and critique their negative attitude toward women—an attitude that . . . had its source in and was exemplified by their repudiation of the mother."¹¹ Bourgeois, exceptionally, overturned the patriarchal mother of surrealist caricature in surrealism's own time, laying claim to maternal subjectivity as a position from which to contest the gender hierarchies of patriarchy and of the avant-garde, an argument I develop in chapter 2.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the figure of the mother is strangely absent: that is, her absence is strange because psychoanalysis grounds the history of the subject in childhood. Freudian theory and its Lacanian elaboration, however, concentrate on the social development of the child away from the mother and toward the father,

toward language and the law. Another trend in psychoanalysis, object relations, conversely centers on the role of the mother in the phantasy life of the child. It is in this theoretical field, pioneered by one “woman analyst,” Melanie Klein, and contested by another, her rival Anna Freud, that Bourgeois’s rebuttal to Freudian-based surrealism is theoretically and culturally founded, as I argue in the subsequent chapters of this book.

The principal theorist of object relations is Melanie Klein (1882–1960) who, in the 1920s, devised a psychoanalytic play technique to facilitate the clinical treatment of children along the lines of free association adopted by Freud in the talking cure. “Often a toy is broken, or, when the child is more aggressive, attacks are made with knife or scissors on the table or on pieces of wood; water or paint is splashed about and the room generally becomes a battlefield.”¹² So Klein described the clinical scene of the play technique, which promoted the frank interpretation, directly to the children themselves, of violent phantasies enacted symbolically in their games. For infantile experience, Klein claimed, amounts to a brush with psychosis: “quite little children,” she insisted, “pass through anxiety situations (and react to them with defence mechanisms), the content of which is comparable to that of the psychoses in adults.”¹³

Klein began her psychoanalytic training with Sándor Ferenczi in Budapest. Her earliest writings interpreted the unconscious motivations of her young son (much as Freud had based some of his own speculations about the sexual theories of children on the observation of his grandson). In 1921, Klein moved to Berlin, where a new analyst and mentor, Karl Abraham, encouraged her to undertake actual analyses of young children. Four years later, she delivered a groundbreaking series of lectures at the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London, and she soon settled there, developing her clinical practice and theoretical writings at a distance from the Vienna and Berlin psychoanalytic societies, which, still closely identified with Freud, nurtured an alternative theory of child analysis in the work of Freud’s daughter.

Like Klein, Anna Freud (1895–1982) turned to child analysis as a field open to a lay woman analyst. And like Klein, she developed her theories from the study of children’s play. The publication, in 1932, of Klein’s *The Psycho-Analysis of*

Children and, in 1935, of Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (English translation 1937) cast the differences between the two analysts into relief. The crux of this debate, in theoretical terms, was Klein's insistence on the role of the death drive and the aggressive instincts, and Anna Freud's equal stress on the self-preserving role of the ego. For in contrast to Klein's psychoanalytic play technique, which encouraged patients to explore a negative transference to the analyst, Anna Freud recommended friendly instruction as a means to support the development of the young child's still-fragile ego.

When, in June 1938, the ailing Sigmund Freud arrived as a refugee from Vienna, together with Anna and other members of the Freud family, to take up residence in London, the struggle for the radical legacy of Freud began. Though rivals, Melanie Klein and Anna Freud were now leading voices in a psychoanalytic discourse that was increasingly shaped by women analysts and in relation to the experiences of mothers and children. The historical construction of psychoanalysis as a theory and a culture of fathers and sons was to be altered even more dramatically after Freud's death in 1939, with public debates between the Kleinians and the Anna Freudians over child analysis. Known in psychoanalytic history as the "Controversial Discussions," referring to a series of monthly meetings of the British Psycho-Analytical Society held in London between 1943 and 1944, these debates returned to the very foundations of psychoanalysis, to the origins of the subject.¹⁴

Child analysis is seldom touched on in the history and theory of modern art. A field neglected even in the intellectual history of psychoanalysis itself, it nevertheless gave rise to the most radical and controversial theories of subjectivity to emerge after Freud. That Bourgeois's work not only draws on the psychoanalysis of children but also extends, and at times contests, this theoretical field is a central proposition of this book, which also argues for a broader exploration of child analysis in the history of modern art. In an autobiographical note dating to the 1960s, prepared in connection with an application for study at New York University, Louise Bourgeois described her interest in what she called the psychology of art. Her purpose in undertaking this training, she explained, would be a double one: "to enrich and deepen my own future artistic production" and "to acquire the necessary theoretical and experimental foundations so that I will be able to find a useful position in the field of diagnostic testing and

remedial care of children.”¹⁵ Although she did not ultimately follow this course, Bourgeois’s investigation of child analysis with the intention of becoming a therapist consistently informs the development of her art. For not only did Klein’s work in particular represent an intellectual challenge to the Freudian psychoanalysis of surrealism; it also influenced postwar parenting and early childhood education, questions in which Bourgeois had, from the 1940s, the close interest of a mother. As suggested by poet-psychiatrist Merrill Moore’s sonnet on the “arts of gently modified psychoanalysis,” published in the *New Yorker* in April 1947, the work of Klein and her rival Anna Freud found a receptive audience among educators and progressive-minded parents of the day:¹⁶

When the child begins to hack its mother to pieces
 Symbolically using a doll or a feather bed
 As a substitute, do not be alarmed and run;
 Read Anna Freud (or Melanie Klein) instead
 And ponder on the ways of nursery schools
 That run so smoothly without rules.
 Because a new mantle falls on Junior now,
 The bay leaf is archaic on his brow,
 Also the fig leaf on his nether parts,
 Thanks to the new science and its arts
 Of gently modified psychoanalysis.
 Little boys and girls, each with his curriculum,
 Matriculate together in these ways
 Bringing to New York, Boston, and Chicago
 The délicatesse of Old Vienna days.

In 1947, Bourgeois published a portfolio of nine prints paired with short texts under the title *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*. Depicting an urban landscape of machinic self-immural, in which skyscrapers and water towers, elevators and telephone poles take the place of human figures, this small, simply presented booklet has the status of an inaugural work. In it, Bourgeois offers her

blueprint for the construction of “fantastic reality.”¹⁷ In psychoanalytic terms, the distinction between surreality and Bourgeois’s fantastic reality is analogous to the difference between Freud’s theory of fantasy as a work of the unconscious mind and Klein’s concept of phantasy (always spelled with a *ph* to distinguish Klein’s theory from Freud’s) as an effect of the bodily drives. Constructing her model of subjectivity around the infant, and so in relation to an immediate and fragmented bodily experience, Klein contends that the subject first relates to its environment as a field of objects (called part-objects) to be fused or fragmented, possessed or destroyed, by means of phantasies of introjection, projection, and splitting that are themselves produced by the drives. And these phantasies, arising in primitive form even from earliest infancy, persist throughout life not as states into which the subject may regress, but as ever-present positions in which, as Juliet Mitchell has observed, “one is sometimes lodged.”¹⁸

Replacing the vivid internal realm of the surrealist imaginary with the alienated and reduced spaces of another psychic sphere, the schizoid reality of disconnection from the world, Bourgeois adopts the Kleinian point of view. Chapter 3 presents her break with painting and corresponding move into the more concrete domain of fantastic reality as a confrontation with two works—two monuments—of twentieth-century art: André Breton’s 1924 “Manifesto of Surrealism” and Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, known as the *Large Glass* (1915–1923). Reminiscent of Duchamp’s bachelor apparatus in its diagrammatic description of objects and machines, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, however, reinterprets Duchamp’s autoerotic machinery of part-objects as, instead, a demonstration of schizoid mechanisms of defense. In this way, Bourgeois exposes a latent auto-aggression—or death drive—in the part-object logic of Duchamp’s production.

In Klein’s account, the psyche is structured by the interplay of two pivotal positions: the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the ego manically works off aggression, and a depressive position that arises from it, in which the ego confronts the damage done to internal objects in phantasy. Bourgeois’s first sculptures enact a similar interplay of aggressive and depressive trends, under the sign of mourning. First exhibited in 1949, the *Personages* are fragile posts of carved balsa wood representing, according to the artist, the family and friends left behind in France

during the war years. Her use of reclaimed materials and simple construction techniques to fashion these life-size figures implies, in contrast to the industrially based fabrication of much late modernist sculpture, a domestic wartime economy of sorting and saving, but also a psychic economy of salvage, separation, and loss. In chapter 4, I consider the *Personages* as a work of mourning, adopting the term Freud coined to describe the process by which a bereaved person severs the bond to a lost loved one, but in its extended Kleinian interpretation.¹⁹

Mourning is, for Klein, an expression of depressive anxiety. Experienced first in infancy, when the infant mourns the loss of the mother destroyed (in phantasy) by the agency of its own aggression, mourning is not only a response to death but is provoked in some measure by any loss. Any task of “overcoming emotional adversity” for Klein “entails a mental work similar to mourning,” but the anxiety of one’s own aggression is renewed with particular intensity in parenthood, when the infantile fear of destroying the mother reemerges as a fearful phantasy of annihilating the child.²⁰ The *Personages* include figures of children and guardian figures that can be viewed, both individually and in their collective arrangement, under the sign of a maternal depressive position. In this, Bourgeois’s first sculptures augment Klein’s thinking on the dynamics of maternal anxiety in crucial ways. For as Rozsika Parker suggests in her recent study of maternal ambivalence, a defining feature of Kleinian theory is its insistence that infantile phantasies persist in adult life: what remains is to understand not only why these phantasies recur but how they evolve.²¹ And this, as the later chapters of this book suggest, is a problem Bourgeois’s art invents for sculpture, turning time and again to the beginning, to the dynamic of the maternal-infantile relation.

*Bourgeois describes . . . “a change from rigidity to pliability,” saying of the earlier work that “rigidity then seemed essential. Today it seems futile and has vanished.”*²²

In Freud’s Oedipal narrative, the history of the subject begins with repression. The crisis of the Oedipus complex, an event occurring sometime between the ages of three and five, marks the subject’s entry into the social order, into language and loss,

the dimensions of experience Lacan would later call the symbolic. Klein, however, on the basis of her work with very young children, embraced Freud's metaphor of archaeological exploration to argue that the deepest strata of the psyche lie before and beneath the unconscious/conscious division. In this divergence from Freud—which Klein herself portrayed as a deepening of Freud's own investigations—she asserted the primacy of the infantile drives in the entire formation of the subject.

Chapter 5 considers a signal change that took place in Bourgeois's sculpture around 1960. Where before her work had consisted almost exclusively of upright figures made of wood, it now collapsed into a liquid field. Using fluid materials—plaster and clay, but also plastic and latex—she produced objects that appeared inchoate and in flux, including some so amorphous as to suggest less an object than a state of being, the condition of infantile helplessness in the stirring of a body that is little more than a blob. “This change from rigidity to pliability,” as the artist describes it, reconnects with a trend toward the unbinding of the drives, toward formlessness, that emerged in the dissident surrealism of Georges Bataille and returned in “anti-form” and process art of the late 1960s. Bourgeois, however, turns to this negative of surrealism in search of infantile experience, in pursuit of the subject on the threshold of existence that was also the focus of Klein's research.

The defining logic of Bourgeois's sculptural production is the part-object, or object of the drives, the term that, as Jacqueline Rose has observed, “inaugurates circular rather than sequential time” in psychoanalysis.²³ In its resistance to the Oedipal trend of renunciation and radical break, the part-object moreover cuts across the history of modernism and postmodernism. So perhaps it is not surprising that the two artists whose work is most obsessively concentrated by the part-object, Marcel Duchamp and Louise Bourgeois, share the distinctive fate within twentieth-century art of having both a modernist and a postmodernist history. (And it is perhaps only through the example of Duchamp, who so ingeniously exploited the principle of delay, that this singular feature of Bourgeois's history can be recognized.) The potential of the drives to grind away at master narratives—to disrupt the progressive trend of modernist history—is complicated, however, by feminist critiques of the part-object as a term that denies sexual difference. The role of the part-object in the gender politics of postmodernism is the topic of chapter 6, which compares Bourgeois's increasingly systematic rep-

resentation of the body-in-pieces in the 1960s and '70s to contemporary work by Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Yayoi Kusama, Eva Hesse, and Nancy Spero, among others, while also reflecting on the reemergence of the part-object in recent art.

*If psychoanalysis is the intellectual tabloid of our time (“sex” and “violence” being its chief objects of concern), then we have recently privileged—ought indeed to base the politicization of psychoanalysis on that privilege—the first over the second.*²⁴

The 1990s witnessed a return to Klein. It felt, as Mary Jacobus observed, “like eating one’s words.” Psychoanalytic feminism had been so thoroughly committed to Lacan for so long, Jacobus remarked, that taking Klein seriously seemed “to risk a kind of theoretical regression.”²⁵ Yet what made theoretical regression worth the risk for some (for others, it seemed, ante-Lacanian psychoanalysis was, by definition, pretheoretical) was the Kleinian theory of psychic negativity, the death drive. In psychoanalysis and in art, this period therefore saw not only a return to Klein, but a reemergence of the historical struggle within psychoanalysis between Eros and Thanatos, the libido and the death drive. In *Why War?* (1993), Jacqueline Rose argued that the repression of the death drive had given rise to the orthodoxy of “aestheticized psychoanalysis” in the humanities.²⁶ A theory “absolutely unassimilable to that idea of transgressive liberation which has been the most frequent radical political version of Freud,” Klein’s work, however, offered a vivid historical reminder that the “political import” of psychoanalysis lay with aggression as much as with desire.²⁷

“There is no shortage of text-centered studies of pleasure and desire,” the cultural theorist Kobena Mercer remarked in 1994, and asked, “but where are the analyses of pain and hatred as everyday structures of feeling too?”²⁸ Some have seen Kleinian theory itself as contributing to this failure. In *The Culture of Redemption* (1990), Leo Bersani delivered a passionate critique of the reparative trend in Klein, arguing that Klein’s emphasis on symbolic restitution fostered a false aesthetic morality, blunting the catastrophes of history by attempting to redeem reality in representation.²⁹ Within feminism, Klein also remains an

ambivalent figure, regarded as both a pioneering feminist theorist and a prefeminist mother-analyst trapped in the maternal role. Psychoanalysis, as Janet Sayers demonstrated in her 1991 study *Mothers of Psychoanalysis*, is a historical first, a field in which women took an active part in the founding of an intellectual discipline. Moreover, the role women analysts played was to alter the direction of the discourse away from an analysis of patriarchal power and toward “interpersonal issues concerning maternal care and its vicissitudes.”³⁰ For Sayers, this amounts to a revolution in psychoanalysis, with women as its architects. Yet, as other feminist critics have argued, Klein’s fixation on the mother is limiting, reinforcing the inscription of women as mothers within a patriarchal order of value, while also perpetuating the cultural myth of the mother as the object, never the subject, of aggression or desire. In their 1992 study of “psychoanalytic feminism and the search for the ‘good enough’ mother,” Janice Doane and Devon Hodges observe that for Klein the mother is all-important, but exclusively as a phantasy of the child. “Klein’s ‘mother’ is wonderfully difficult to place; she is both inside and outside; both male and female.”³¹ But because this figure is exclusively a projection of the child’s phantasy, the mother as subject remains in the shade.

Like psychoanalysis itself, the history of modern art needs a theory of the maternal subject, and Bourgeois’s sculpture plays a pivotal role in constructing it. From its beginnings in the 1940s to the present day, her art has explored what might be called the fantastic reality of the maternal role. The recent return to Klein in the humanities creates a context in which it is possible to see this development in a new perspective. For not only does this “theoretical regression” reveal a crucial point of reference for Bourgeois’s art; it also exposes cultural taboos on the representation of the maternal subject (especially the maternal subject of desire and death) that persist in art and psychoanalysis alike. For Klein, life is a circle, often a vicious one. Yet if, as Rose argues, “the value of Klein’s insights resides precisely in their negativity, in their own points of internal resistance to narratives of resolution,” the same might be said of Bourgeois’s art.³² Embracing the mother and the death drive at once, Louise Bourgeois’s dialogue with Klein, and with the history of psychoanalysis, shadowed by feminism, has radically altered the course of late twentieth-century art.