

PERSONAL SEXUAL NARRATIVES IN THE WORK OF LOUISE BOURGEOIS AND TRACY EMIN

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Inspired by the utopian ideals of twentieth-century activist and modernist movements, feminist artists sought to change the world around them through their work. They focus on disrupting the established art world, the art historical canon, as well as everyday social interactions. Issues of female sexuality and identity are addressed by concentrating on the works of two prolific contemporary female artists, Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin. It discusses the recurring themes prevalent in feminist art and marks a shift from second to third wave feminism.

Louise Bourgeois, recognized as the creator of confessional art,¹ is considered one of the most influential contemporary female artists. Her work is mostly autobiographical and frequently confronts feminist concerns through reference to the male and female body. These themes are examined in the work, *Mamelles* (Fig. 1), which express concerns around societal perceptions of the body. Like Bourgeois, the work of Tracey Emin, considered the inheritor of Bourgeois' legacy, concentrates on subjects such as sex, abortion, and rape, seen

through a feminist lens. This analysis focuses primarily on Emin's *Suffer Love XI* (Fig. 3). Finally, a collaborative piece, *I Wanted to Love You More* (Fig. 4) serves as both the literal and contextual connection between the two artists. Although Bourgeois and Emin are of different generations, their art is charged by similar personal experiences as well as thoughts on the gender and sexual landscape of their time.

"Confessional Art"—a category created by Bourgeois, and carried out by Emin -- focuses on an intentional revelation of the self, encouraging an intimate analysis of the artist.² It emerged in the late 20th century and is considered a consistent approach for producing art that mimics, reconsiders and departs from the conventional modes of confession used in the Roman Catholic tradition, autobiographical literature and psychoanalysis.³ When considering the popularity of confessional art in contemporary culture, it is evident that this phenomenon has prompted individuals to create their own truths.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS BIOGRAPHY

In an attempt to overcome the past, emotions inherent in Bourgeois' work is emotion. Her goal was to provoke reactions rather than reference intellectual theory.⁴ Each artwork poses questions for the viewer to consider, as her imagery often appears ambiguous. Bourgeois was ahead of her time, introducing gendered metaphors within her work well before gender issues were considered in the public arena. She was a pioneer in the visual field of exploration of gender-based stereotypes initiated by second wave feminism beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking book, *The Second Sex*, of 1949.⁵ These stereotypes included the shifting social roles and status of women, the power of the phallus in conjunction with the male gaze, and the examination of the female body and sexuality for the first time by a female, as an individual.

A Paris native, Bourgeois moved to New York in 1938 and began to focus primarily on sculpture. Although her work was exhibited alongside that of her male counterparts in the New York art world of the 1940s and 1950s, she was often overlooked and criticized for not following the popular trends of the Abstract Expressionists.⁶ In a time when white American male painters were creating large and aggressive works, her work deviated in express-

ing a disregard for the symbolic order of patriarchal society.⁷ Bourgeois' oeuvre is heavily inspired by her childhood memories and experiences. Her struggles are, in a way, controlled when simplified into a work of art.

BOURGEOIS AND EMIN: A SHARED PEROGATIVE

Bourgeois' purgative way to turn her traumas into creative acts that at the same time give her additional strength makes it possible to link her to Tracey Emin. She is also considered one of the few artists capable of revealing the intimate details of her life in an extremely powerful and honest manner. Emin presents the viewer with her hopes, failures, success, and humiliations that contain both tragic and humorous elements. This level of vulnerability connects with the audience in a way other art cannot. While honestly revealing controversial and often alarming truths about society through her narrative, she exposes the struggles of forming an identity in today's world. Her unashamed audaciousness with regard to female sexuality, as well, as its deeply personal reference points, may be aligned with the ideas and issues associated with third wave feminism beginning in the 1990s. In this context, no issue of the body is off the table, and is presented without artifice or humiliation.

Similarly, it could be argued that Emin redefines what it means to be a maternal being, in addition to what it means to be a woman, through her artistic persona. On a superficial level, her personality rejects preconceived notions of feminine behavior. She is very vocal and opinionated, and often brutally explicit. Her dynamic personality can be seen as a rejection of the passive role expected of women in society, gaining her both endorsement and notoriety in the art world.⁸

BOURGEOIS BODY OF WORK

The subject matter of Bourgeois' work is almost always connected to human anatomy, and comments on gender roles and stereotypes. It is often categorized as biomorphic, evoking the sculptural shapes of living organisms. Bourgeois' suggestive organ-like contours and early use of unconventional materials such as resin, latex, and cloth, allude to the tension between quintessentially male and female forms (Fig. 2). This recurrent interrogation of the male and female dialectic aligns Bourgeois with the Feminist movement, but psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan heavily influenced her work as well as she pointedly embraced or rejected their ideas.⁹

Since the 1940s and 1950s, Lacan formu-

lated a theory suggesting the "patriarchal framework of language is a means to determine sexual difference."¹⁰ Bourgeois' work focuses on overcoming this patriarchal symbolic order. By combining imagery associated with the sexes, she undermines their symbolism. For example, the early work titled *Cumul I* (Fig. 2) appears overtly sexual but at the same time, maintains a certain degree of ambiguity. The viewer is confronted with a cluster of mounds that resemble breasts and penises emerging from a rippling fabric. Like these, imagery seen throughout the work of Bourgeois is neither entirely masculine nor wholly feminine. Nicoletta argues that through this deconstruction,

[t] his semiotic breaks all binary oppositions concerning power and possession within society, decentering the subject and destroying established cultural beliefs and institutions.¹¹

Bourgeois further implied that the Freudian concept of a traumatized childhood was the catalyst for her artistic motives. The artist has confirmed that all of her work found inspiration in her youth. Scholars have noted that the childhood traumas of having a sick mother and philandering father, who maintained an affair with her nanny, had a powerful impact on the young Bourgeois. References to Bourgeois' family and sexuality de-



Figure 1. Louise Bourgeois, *Mamelles*, 1991, rubber, fiberglass and wood.



Figure 2. Louise Bourgeois, *Cumul I*, 1969, white marble on wood base.

veloped over the span of her career into a personal artistic vocabulary.

Bourgeois has always been preoccupied with themes of motherhood and female sexuality through references to human anatomy. *Mamelles* (Fig. 1), for example, is explicit in its allusion to the female form. Made from rubber, fiberglass and wood, this eleven-foot relief runs horizontally across the wall. Linear in structure, the piece resembles a classical frieze. The sixteen pink breasts within the constructs of the form contradict the regimented and classical quality typical of this type of presentation. The tension between the lines of the structure and the curved undulations within them is indicative of the distinct tension within most of Bourgeois' work. These contradictions are exaggerated by the frank nature of the piece, as the breasts appear to be pouring out of the frame, imposing itself on the space of the viewer.

In this object, Bourgeois highlights the sexual objectification of the female body. By focusing primarily on a specific part of the female anatomy, reference to identity is eliminated and simplified to an object to be consumed. While the imagery of female breasts connotes the nurturing role associated with motherhood, the forms are presented in a vulnerable and exposed manner, alluding to the

masculine gaze implied in any objectified exposition of the female body. Bourgeois has stated that the work references the theme of female commodification:

[*Mamelles*] portrays a man who lives off the woman he courts, making his way from one to the next. Feeding from them but returning nothing, he loves only in a consumptive and selfish manner.¹²

In concert with the linear appearance of the work and the idea of consumption, *Mamelles* resembles a feeding trough, for livestock. The only purpose of these forms is to satisfy the pleasure of others. In addition to commenting on the traditional male perspective of the female body, the idea of male satisfaction is a prevalent theme used by Bourgeois that is usually associated with her childhood experiences. She frequently indicates the dichotomy between the role of women as mother or mistress:

In France, the woman is always the mother. Most men remain children and marry mother figures. For eroticism, they have mistresses. Physically, my father was too afraid or guilty to make love to my mother. My father was promiscuous and it had a profound effect on all of us.¹³

This personal struggle is personified in *Mamelles* and for that reason, it is important to note the impact of the extramarital affairs of her father throughout her childhood. In a passage about her upbringing, she acknowledges the tension within her parents' marriage after her mother contracted the Spanish influenza in 1918:

After that, maybe their sex life was not quite the same, not as it had been. It was then that my father looked at other women, looked. His behavior became very, very childish. Immature. Not childish, but immature. After the war, the First World War, he was desperately trying to find peace, and women were his way of doing so.¹⁴

By admitting to the struggles within her parent's marriage and her resentment for her father's behavior, it appears that *Mamelles* was a way in which Bourgeois was able to cope with such realities, and to contextualize it as a universal phenomenon in the context of her work. To paraphrase an important 2nd wave feminist observation, the personal becomes the political.

EMIN SUFFERS LOVE AND LIFE

Much like *Mamelles* in its explicit nature, *Suffer Love XI* (Fig. 3) by Emin is an overt presentation of female sexuality, but taken to a confes-

sional extreme. This print is one still from Emin's flipbook style animated film of a woman masturbating called *Those Who Suffer Love*. Emin's earlier work often revolved around ideas of sexual excess. This piece, however, connotes the artist's realization of lack of fertility and lack of sexual drive, and her attempts to adapt as an aging woman. Although the image depicts a masturbation scene and immediately connotes ideas of sexuality, for Emin, masturbation is not only about the act of self-love but more about "self-loathing and being alone and for the act of being alone." While *Suffer Love XI* clearly exhibits the artist's naked body as she arches her back and pulls her legs apart, this does not serve to highlighting her sexual availability. Emin omits the head from the figure and presents herself from a foreshortened frontal view, emphasizing her vulnerability and ironically, objectification. She is alienated from herself, watching herself and her actions.

The sexually explicit nature of the image inevitably conjures ideas of the 'male gaze.' The emphasis on the crotch can be argued to function as a, "mirror that secures male subjectivity."¹⁵ The open-legged pose of the figure also mimics the posture of the body in childbirth and thus emphasizes the reproductive function of the woman. As this

gesture once signified the artist's sexual availability, it now connotes the loss and loneliness associated with failed procreativity. Like Bourgeois, Emin introduces her personal narrative into her art. She admits that her images are of herself and that their purpose is to show others what she has experienced:

The fact that I want people to look at the drawings is that I want people to confront what I've had to confront – what other people have.

Through the confrontation of personal experience and confession, her art pushes the viewer to challenge and reassess innermost thoughts, assumptions and perspectives that they might not otherwise entertain.¹⁶

In Betterton's analysis of maternal images in contemporary art produced by women, she postulates the reconfiguration of motherly embodiment through the field of visual studies.¹⁷ In reference to the way in which Emin expresses her sexuality, some scholars read these images as transgressive metaphors. Emin rejected the traditional ideal of a maternal being by choosing not to have children. Instead she focuses on developing her legacy through artistic creation and her oeuvre is a physical manifestation of that legacy. She acts

out her role as mother through the creation of her art. It is highly intimate and personal, and much of her most sexually explicit imagery, as in *Suffer Love*, evokes the notion of the viewer and the artist looking inside of her. By the continual reproduction of the self through her work, her maternal role is manifested through her artistic expressions, not through the act of bearing a child. Emin has publicly acknowledged that she will never be a mother, yet she adapts this role through an intimate relationship with her work, the viewer, and her sexuality.

THE COLLABORATION

The joint exhibition piece of Bourgeois and Emin, titled *Do Not Abandon*, was the result of a collaborative project directed toward the female body. Bourgeois initially reached out to Emin and handed over a set of sixteen-gouache male and female torsos for Emin to complete. After almost a year and a half, the torsos evolved into raw images adorned with Emin's trademark mirror writing. These images, depicting erect phalluses and inscriptions such as "You kept fucking me" express intimate female emotions attached to love and loss. The work titled *I Wanted to Love You More* (Fig. 4) pictorialize the dichotomy between overt sexuality



Figure 3. Tracey Emin, *Suffer Love XI*, 2009, monoprint on paper.

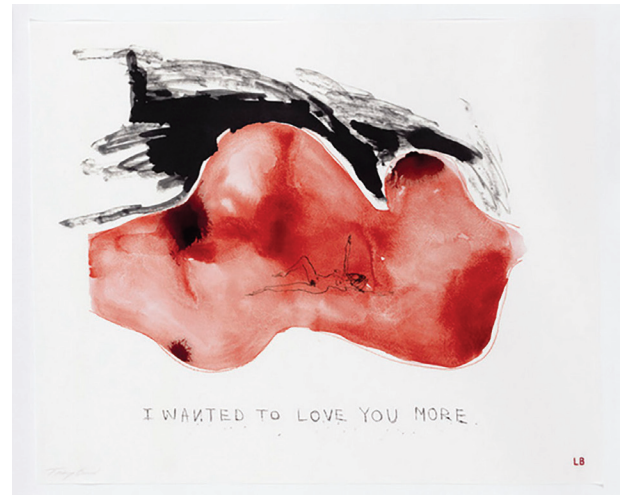


Figure 4. Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin, *I Wanted to Love You More*, 2009, archival dyes printed on cloth.

and eroticism with implications of life, death and the maternal. The works as a whole epitomize the intersection of both artists' confessional and audacious autobiographical styles.

I Wanted to Love You More represents the birth of self rather than a reference to procreation. With a palette of reds, pinks, black, and blue on white cloths, the female bodies represented are not idealized or objectified bodies, but appear to be lived in, portrayed in a rough and quick formal style. Emin's additions to the images are coarsely drawn, wiry, miniature female figures and text that interact within and around the painted forms. Perhaps where the older artist, Bourgeois, has come to terms with the real complexity inherent in the inconspicuous dichotomies expressed in their work, Emin, is still grappling with them. She injects a more present sense of pain and longing into the pieces. Their artistic collaboration results in something more than the expression of sexuality so characteristic of both of them. Bourgeois, in the act of giving Emin her paintings, provides her with the space to articulate herself as a complex woman. In a paradigmatic parallel, Bourgeois signs each of the pieces by stitching her initials neatly into the works, while Emin leaves a quick signature in pencil.

CONCLUSION

Although the works of both Bourgeois and Emin are self-referential and inspired by personal experiences, they resonate with a large audience and reveal the human condition of modern life. Jabri argues:

The self portrayed is a troubled, fragmented being, aware of her place within the dominant matrices of social life while articulating a subjectivity, a form of self-expression that defies the limits of discourse and power.¹⁸

Both Bourgeois and Emin reject the passive female role in their use of confessional art and through a powerfully active voice. They assert themselves by using their own lives and bodies as subject matter, controlling their past experiences and altering the future. Although the works of Bourgeois and Emin appear to be self-centered, they are revelations of the realities that many women experience. By initiating conversation and pushing the boundaries of female sexuality and gender constructs, they question society's preconceived notions of female identity. The demystification of sexual relationships through the work of Freud and others eventually changed the way in which society viewed sex acts and contextualized them as expressions of identity and its formation. One could

conclude that through confessional expressions in art and other media, society is able to explore feelings surrounding controversial issues and move toward a greater shared understanding of the human social condition.

ENDNOTES

¹Richard Dorment. "Louise Bourgeois Invented Confessional Art." *The Telegraph*. (2010). N.p.

²Christine Fanthone. "The Influence and Treatment of Autobiography In Confessional Art: Observations On Tracey Emin's Feature Film Top Spot." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 29.1 (2006), 30.

³Michael Hogg, and Ronald L. Jackson. *Encyclopedia of Identity*. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 123.

⁴Julie Nicoletta. "Louise Bourgeois's Femmes-Maisons: Confronting Lacan." *Woman's Art Journal* 13 (1992), 22.

⁵Martha Rampton. "Three Waves of Feminism." *Pacific Magazine Fall* (2008), 1-2.

⁶The waves of feminism can be defined both in terms of generations and the concerns addressed by each specific "wave". The first wave of feminism took place during the 19th century and was mainly concerned with female voting rights. Second wave feminism happened mainly in the mid-20th century, the concerns addressed were usually bodily rights. Differing perspectives of cultural minorities were taken into consideration at this point, Bell Hooks is a notable person in terms of this shift. Third wave feminism is concerned mainly with equality and is the focus task of women coming of age in the 21st century. It was kicked off by the grrrls of the 1990s. There is of course crossover between the so-called "waves" and differing cultural perspectives.

⁷ibid 24.

⁸ibid 21.

⁹Outi Remes. "Replaying The Old Stereotypes Into An Artistic Role: The Case Of Tracey Emin." *Woman's History Review* 18.4 (2009), 11.

¹⁰Nicoletta Julie. "Louise Bourgeois's Femmes-Maisons: Confronting Lacan." *Woman's Art Journal* 13 (1992), 21.

¹¹ibid 21.

¹²ibid 24.

¹³Charlotta Kotik. "Louise Bourgeois: An Introduction." *Louise Bourgeois: Recent Work*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 1993.

¹⁴Louise Bourgeois, and Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans Ulrich Obrist. *Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT in Association with Violette Editions, 1998), 226.

¹⁵ibid 164.

¹⁶Hilary Robinson. *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*. (London: I.B. Tauris 2006), 58-59.

¹⁷Fanthome Christine. "The Influence And Treatment Of Autobiography In Confessional Art: Observations On Tracey Emin's Feature Film Top Spot." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 29.1 (2006), 42.

¹⁸Betterton, Rosemary. "Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, And Maternal Imagination." *Hypatia* 21.2 (2006), 80-100.

¹⁹Vivienne Jabri. "The Self in Women As Subject Of Art And Politics." *International Feminist Journal Of Politics* 4.1 (2002), 125.