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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

THESIS : "EXCELLENCE HAS NO SEX "

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INTRODUCTION

"For a long time; certainly throughout the Happy Golden Age, only men were upon the earth, there were no women. Zeus created these later, in his anger at Promenthus for caring so much for men.

He made a great evil for men, a sweet and lovely thing to look upon, in the likeness of a shy maiden and all the Gods gave her gifts. Silvery rainments and a broidered veil, a wonder to behold and bright garlands of blooming flowers and a crown of gold - a great beauty shone out of it. Because of what they gave her they called her Pandora; which means 'the gift of all'. When this beautiful disaster had been made, Zeus brought her out and wonder took hold of the Gods and men when they beheld her. From her, the first woman, comes the race of women, who are evil to men with a nature to do evil" (1)

I am writing this thesis as a woman, from a woman's point of view - not as a 'Feminist', nor as a 'Chauvinist', but to try and evaluate the biological and social factors which determine a woman's position in society both now and in the past.

This is an age-old struggle and one that has become more prevalent in recent years, when women, because of the increase in the availability of education and equal voting rights, can now stand back, evaluate their position and question their circumstances.

By attempting to write this as a woman, I hope to assess the situation with as little bias as possible. I am taking this standpoint because during the past year or two, I have become aware of my freedom to express, through my art, the things which are important to me. Also because of this awareness I realise that not all women are in as fortunate a position as I am (take for instance those involved in issues of equal pay etc.)

In this thesis I shall include a brief historical account which conjures up the reasons why women are in the position they are today. I have decided to ignore the Irish art scene as it does not relate to the circumstances of the art scene abroad; but to deal with countries such as Germany, France and America. In Ireland women have been fortunate to enjoy equality with male artists and have played as important a part in 20th Century art.

I have chosen to deal with the American, French and German experiences - discussing such artists as Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Rebecca Horn - because these particular artists epitomise the past and the present of the women's art world. It clearly indicates the slow but subsequent evolution of which this thesis is based. Eva Hesse had many difficulties working through the 1960's and up until her death in 1970 constantly referred to the hypercriticism which she had to fight; as with Louise Bourgeois, she too had many battles to fight. However, to discuss Rebecca Horn's work, or Rebecca Horn as a professional artist is to indicate the alleviation of social constraints and thus allowing more freedom to speak.

However, while skills and training cannot be denied women, male privilege is often guarded by rigid enforcement. In nineteenth-century England, literary critics chose to consider even the greatest women writers as women first and writers second. They stigmatized what in a man might have been considered 'sensitivity' as feminine weakness, and, at the same time, attacked as 'unwomanly' and immoral the masculine vigor of any woman writer who ventured beyond the spiritual confines of home and family. They refused women participation in the larger world of masculine affairs and then claimed that woman's scope as a writer was forever bounded by her lack of experience. When a woman's accomplishment was beyond question - as George Eliot's was, they attacked her on personal grounds as unwomanly and unnatural.

Women artists, like women writers have been more harshly judged and more quickly consigned to the storage rooms of history than their male counterparts. In "Why Are There No Great Women Artists ?" (2) Linda Nocklin shows that women artists have not only been given less serious attention, but have been faced with serious handicaps that have been denied special education to the extent of being unable to avail themselves of such necessary conventions as nude models. In the period extending from the Renaissance until near the end of the nineteenth century, a simple, but critical issue was the availability of the nude model to aspiring women artists - a period in which careful and prolonged study of the nude model was essential to the training of every young artist. As late as 1889³ female students were not admitted to life drawing and even when they were admitted after that date, the model had to be partially draped. The study of the nude was of the utmost importance to the development of an artistic career. To be denied/deprived of this ultimate stage of training meant in effect, to be deprived of the possibility of creating great works of art. Women were isolated from the mainstream of artistic production and their choice of subject was restricted.

Although they painted subjects such as landscape and still-life, which of course men also painted, they had less chance to paint the nude figure and grand history paintings. So their work was viewed as being trivial. The important point was that men had a choice in what they painted. Women tended to paint at home.

Whereas in the realm of art-making of the 1980's, women have much more scope to deal with issues of concern and which affect their lives. This 'freedom' releases the shackles of suppression and allows for more expression of thoughts, dreams, fears and to deal with controversial issues of today such as contraception, abortion etc..

This new-found freedom was gained through much struggling against the ancient patriarchal restraints. The militancy of feminism may have been necessary in the late 1960's when the feminist movement was initiated by Germain Greer, author of the "Female Eunuch", Betty Friedan and others. In some sectors of the community a strong degree of militancy must still be enforced to deal with the ever present chauvinism of - a man's world.

"The Jews of Biblical times had much the same customs as the Arabs. The patriarchs were polygamous and they could put away their wives at will; it was required under severe penalties that the young wife be turned over to her husband a virgin; in case of adultery, the wife was stoned; she was kept in the confinement of domestic duties, as the Biblical portrait of the virtuous woman proves; she seeketh wool and flax...she riseth also while it is yet night...her candle does not go out by night... She eateth not the bread of idleness". (3)

Although women now have the right to vote - these civil liberties remain theoretical as long as they are unaccompanied by economic freedom. A woman supported by a man is not emancipated from the male because she has a vote; the negative freedom implied has not profoundly modified her situation and she remains as ever - confined.

It is through gainful employment that woman has crossed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice. Once she ceases to be dependant, the system based on her dependance crumbles and so the intervention of the male is no longer required.

However, that is not to say that the mere combination of the right to vote and a job constitutes a complete emancipation. The social structure has not yet been modified by the changes in woman's condition - this world, always belonging to men, still retains the form they have given it. The emancipation of women is spectacularly new. As with what we call the "Black Revolution", it is clear that emancipation does not instantly result in achievement. Enlightenment must follow. And the enlightenment has for women, and especially by women, not yet occurred.

"Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance".

19th Century, Anonymous

Women could not be considered simply as a sexual organism, only those have importance that take on concrete value in action. Woman's awareness of herself is not defined by her sexuality; it reflects a situation that depends upon the economic organisation of society, which in turn indicates what stage of technical evolution mankind has attained.

oOo

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

If one were to look back in history, much physical power was needed to survive - to hold a club, ward off wild beasts etc., in this capacity women were physically weaker than men - but on the contrary, technique may annul muscular inequality of man and woman. Thus the control of many modern machines requires only a small part of the masculine resources, and if the minimum demanded is not above the female's capacity, she becomes, as far as this work is concerned, man's equal. Today, of course, vast displays of energy and power can be controlled by pressing a button. This widens experiences for everyone and equalizes the physical endurance of men and women.

Engels retraces the history of woman according to this perspective in "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", (4), showing that history depended essentially on that of techniques. In the Stone Age, when the land belonged in common to all members of the clan, the rudimentary character of the primitive spade and hoe was suitably adequate to the woman's strength for gardening. In this primitive division of labour, the two sexes found an equilibrium - while man hunts and fishes, woman remains in the home; but the tasks of domesticity include productive labour - making pottery, weaving, gardening in consequence woman played a larger part in economic life.

"As long as a woman refrains from unsexing herself let her dabble in anything. The woman of genius does not exist; when she does she is a man."

19th Century, Anonymous.

However, through the discovery of copper, tin, bronze and iron and with the appearance of the plough, agriculture enlarged its scope and intensive labour was called for in clearing woodlands and cultivating the fields. Man had recourse to the labour of other men, who he eventually reduces to slavery. Private property appeared, master of slaves and of the earth, man also became the proprietor of woman. This was the great historical defeat of the feminine sex. It is to be explained by the upsetting of the old division of labour which occurred in consequence of the invention of new tools. Thus this induced the female role to housekeeper, namely, the restriction to household duties - a trifling auxiliary. Then maternal authority gave place to paternal authority; property being inherited from father to son and no longer from woman to her clan. Here we see the emergence of the patriarchal family founded upon private property.

"The emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so as long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to household, which is private. The emancipation of woman

becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large social scale, and when domestic duties require attention only to a minor degree". (5)

Biologically speaking - two main characteristics of the woman are :-

1. Her grasp upon the world is less extended than man's.
2. She is more closely enslaved to the species.

As for the burdens of maternity, they assume widely varying importance according to the customs of the country, they are crushing if the woman is obliged to undergo frequent pregnancies and if she is compelled to nurse and - raise the children without assistance; but if she procreates voluntarily and if society comes to her aid during pregnancy and is concerned with child welfare, the burdens of maternity are light and can be easily offset by suitable adjustments in working conditions.

CHAPTER TWO

So why are there so few great women artists ?. Where do we hear of the female contemporaries of Michaelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cezanne, Picasso or Matisse? Until the early 1960's women artists were held in reverie of their peers. Very little if nothing has been recorded on the work that they may have produced. I say may, as there is little evidence of their work which I'm sure was being produced.

One of the few female artists I care to mention is Gwen John, 1876 - 1939. A woman who ignored convention , living most of her life in self-indiced isolation. Although John's work concentrated on portraiture of women, she is also known to have painted some female nudes (self portraits); perhaps this was die to the strict moral and ethic codes of society, as I have pointed out it was not until the late 19th, early 20th Century, could women participate in the study of the human form.

"One thinks one can do so much in a week - if one can do a square inch that pleases one - one ought to be happy, for alter all to do in a year something beautiful would be splendid" (6).

The fact of the matter is that there were few great women artists as far as we know, although there have been many interesting and good ones who have not been sufficiently investigated or appreciated.

My main concern is the position of women post world war II. Their position changed with the arrival of the war. Women suddenly came into altered roles of bread-winner etc., due to the lack of a male workforce, all of whom were on the battlefields; and so the workforce composed of women, who ran the factories and organised supplies. However, with the end of the war and the return of the men, women were encouraged back to the homestead to resume their previous role of housekeeper. This can be clearly seen in the advertising of the epoch.

At this stage woman started to question her position in society and draw some parallels with her successful position while working. It was perfectly natural for the 'future' woman to feel indignant at the limitations imposed upon her by her sex, thus these restrictions were easily transformed into revolt due to the inadequate compensations offered her by society; and so this is precisely what happened. In advertising, as I have already mentioned, where popular fantasy reigns most freely, the picture of women is even more fanciful. Adorable in her not - so - bright submissiveness,

THEN



NOW



WHEN?

Reflection of the past—projection into the future. Will you be a very different woman when the lights go up again and the peace you've worked for and deserved come back again to earth? Different in some respects perhaps, changed opinions, a deeper understanding of more serious things, but outwardly unchanged! Today Elizabeth Arden is a synonym for the rare and precious, yet your observance of the simple beauty regime devised by Miss Arden will have enabled you to retain the youthful freshness and distinction that has always been yours . . . you will have bridged the years triumphantly.

Elizabeth Arden

25 OLD BOND STREET, LONDON, W.1. ★ MAYFAIR 8211

charming in her childlike delight in shiny floors
even forgivable in her spiteful competition for the
whitest brightest wash, Madison Avenue's girl-next-door
is all the male could wish for - unless by some
miscarriage, he should fancy human companionship. In
"The Image of Woman in Advertising" Lucy Komisar takes
on the image-makers, lays many a 'Shining Knight' to
rest and concludes in the process that advertising's
blatant distortions can serve to raise rather than
obscure woman's consciousness of her low status.

oOo

CHAPTER THREE

And the Lord God said unto the woman, what is this that thou has done ? And the woman said - the serpent beguiled me and I did eat.

GENESIS 3:13

Unto the woman he said - I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

GENESIS 3:16

There is not necessarily any discernible difference between the work of male and female artists, neither in appearance, application, nor even in approach - provided its content is bland, commonplace and not too deeply personal. As soon as the uniquely personal vision of the uncommon artist emerges, the differences will be apparent. To paraphrase Germaine Greer : the woman artist who is obviously so in a male society will usually fail unless she suppresses or disguises this aspect of herself. (7)

I have tried with this brief historical background to cover some of the reasons perhaps why women are in the situation they are in today. It is unlikely that Van Gogh could have been born a woman. A woman would not have been sent on a mission to the Belgian coal mines in Borinage, she would not have felt the misery of the miners as her own crime, she would therefore never have painted Van Gogh's "Potato Eaters". Not to mention the style of life of the painter - women were more protected and chaperoned, so would never have experienced his solitude at Arles, his frequent visits to cafés and brothels, all that nourished Van Gogh's art would have been forbidden her.

This of course can be seen as an extreme example and one could say that such raw experience does not necessarily produce great art. Kathe Kollwitz for example is one of the few not-so-sheltered female artists who lived and worked to achieve a socialism of action, but I think it fair to mention that Kollwitz was one of the rare female exceptions and this could also have been induced by her working/home environment.

At the age of twenty-four she married Dr. Karl Kollwitz a doctor who had started a practice in North Berlin, the slum area of the city. Kathy's style was influenced by Naturalism, a movement which rejected the social conventions of the time and aimed at portraying nature and people as they really are, without any false pathos or idealisation. Kollwitz's environment played a major role in her life and was a decisive influence on her choice of motifs.

" As long as she still has to struggle to become a human being, she cannot become a creator ". (9)

As for the argument drawn from history, we have just been considering what to think of that, the historical fact cannot be considered as establishing an eternal truth, it can only indicate a situation that is historical in nature - precisely because it is undergoing change. How could women ever have had genius when they were denied all possibility of accomplishment - accomplishing a work of genius or just a work ?.

Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different - and this is crucial. Implicit in all the gender identity development which takes place through childhood is the sum total of the parents', the peers' and the cultures' notion of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture and expression. Every moment of the child's life is a clue to how he or she must think to attain or satisfy the demands which gender places upon us.

"More inhibiting seems to have been and still is today, the taboo against women in male bonding places - bars, bistros, studios, artists's clubs, even whorehouses of the turn of the century - where night-long liberated

conversations take place out of which new ideas come. I envied them, but I wasn't a part of it -of that sort of social life in New York of the 1920's" says painter Isabel Bishop. (9).

Louise Bourgeois - "I had the feeling the art scene belonged to the men, and that I was in some way invading their domain. Therefore, my work was done but hidden away. I felt more comfortable hiding it - but nowadays I am making an effort to change". (10).

After her debut as a sculptor in 1949 Bourgeois had only four solo sculpture shows in New York in the next thirty years. By 1978, however, the artistic atmosphere had changed and Bourgeois's individuality and intensity became widely appreciated. In the highly politicized atmosphere of the late sixties and early seventies, feminism was gathering strength, sometimes as a militant force. Bourgeois took part in many of the meetings, demonstrations, exhibitions and panel discussions which resulted. In fact, Bourgeois's work, even pieces made twenty years earlier, became a rallying point for some feminist artists.

According to Bourgeois, the underlying motivations for her art lie in unresolved psychological conflicts originating in her childhood years in France rather than in the psychological fabric of her adult life. By the time

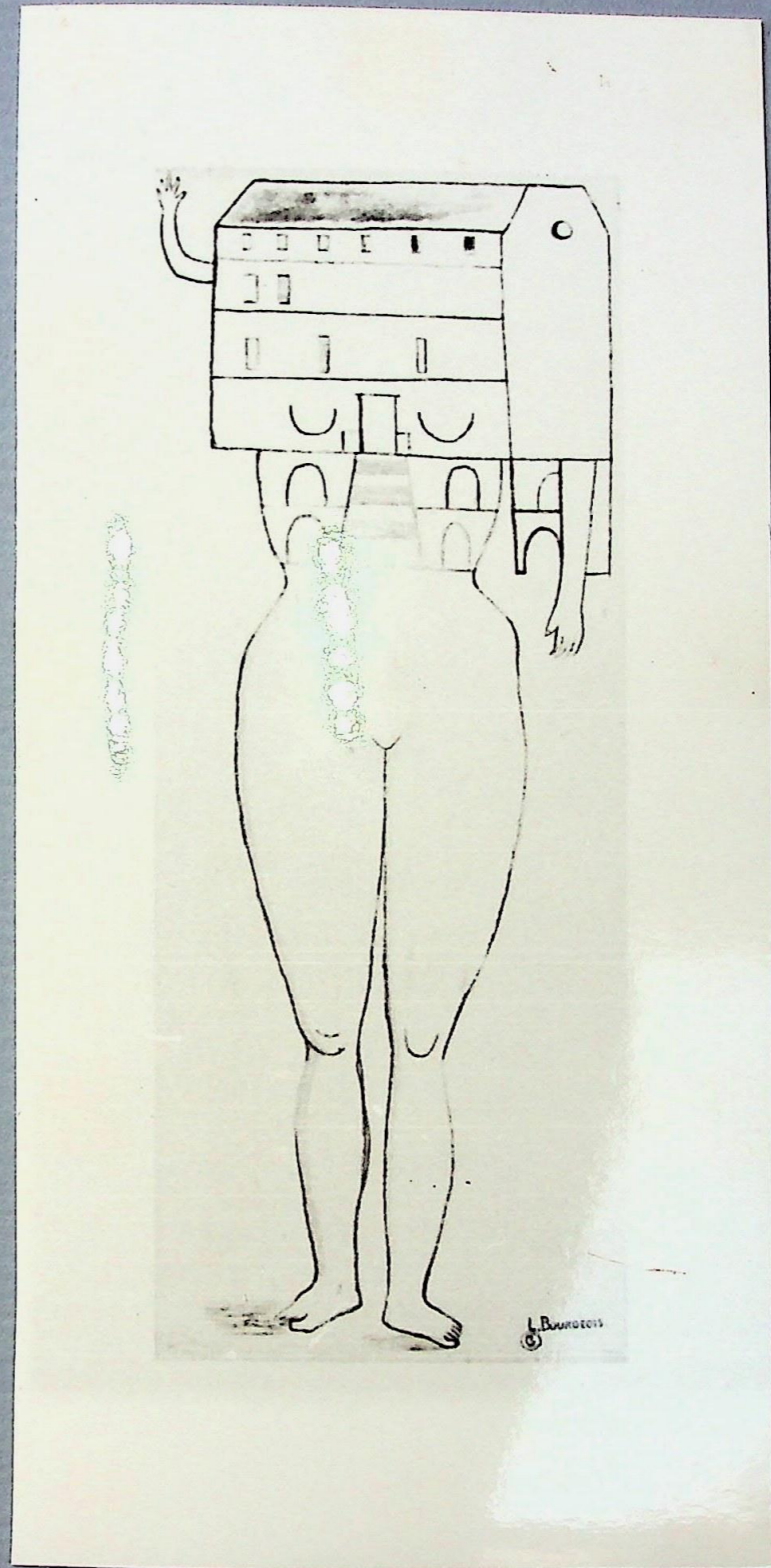


'Femme - Couteau'

of her second show, in 1947, Bourgeois's subconscious motivations had begun to emerge fully in her imagery. One reviewer at the time pointed out the works' feminist aspects : "Her's is a world of women. Blithely they emerge from chimneys, or terrified, they watch from their beds as curtains fly from a nightmare window...a whole family of females proves their domesticity by having houses for heads" (11) Another of her works, 'The Femme -Maison', portrays women with houses perched on their bodies in place of heads. In them, a woman's most obvious sign of identity, her face, has been replaced by a house. The implication is devastating.

Domesticity becomes the very definition of these women, since they have no other means by which to speak. They are prisoners of the house and also hide behind its facade, thereby both denying and defining their female identity through this challenge to, as well as determination of their wholeness. The generally feminist dimension of this early imagery was recognised thirty years later. A 'Femme-Maison' was used on the cover of a book of essays by Lucy Lippard on women and art in 1976, and again, on the poster for an exhibition of women in architecture in 1977. (12)

"Several years ago I called a sculpture 'One and Others'!" This might be the title of many since then , the relation of one person to his surroundings is a continuing pre-occupation. It can be casual or close,



Drawing - 'Femme-Maison'

simple or involved; subtle or blunt. It can be painful or pleasant. Most of all it can be real or imaginary. This is the soil from which all my work grows. The problems of realization - technical and even formal and esthetic are secondary; they come afterwards and they can be solved". (10).

As with her variety of concepts, Bourgeois encompasses many forms, be it large or small, shapes and mediums.

She began her career in New York in the early 1940's as a painter dealing with pure line, form and colour. It was not until the latter part of the decade Bourgeois paintings began to move towards a more personal, quasi-figurative imagery, where her work responded to the surrealism of the artists from war-torn Europe. As opposed to her earlier use of geometric abstractions, she now began to acknowledge her affinity with Surrealism, which stressed the exploration of subconscious reality, thus encouraging her to use her personal experiences as a source for her work.

Bourgeois began to feel limited by two-dimensional work and so started to explore the possibilities of the three-dimensional medium. She has said "I could express much more deeper things in three-dimensions" She held her first solo sculptural show in 1949. Whereas her work circa 1949 was quite primitive in execution, by 1950, it had started to evolve into a more refined and elaborate process. A growing fluency with her vocabulary

wood forms allowed Bourgeois greater structural as well as thematic complexity. Whereas earlier on, rough planks and pieces of wood represented isolated figures, she then started to crowd a large assemblage of unusual and subtly individuals of various shapes and sizes - huddling in mutual support and interdependence. Since her introduction in the fifties of clustering and crowding elements set on a base, Bourgeois, was experimenting with plaster, cement, laytex, plastics as well as marble and bronze - in relationship to the variety of materials, Bourgeois's imagery of this period was equally varied and reflected a deepening complexity in her interpretations of the basic themes she began with - the self and others; themes including woman and self-image, pregnant woman; and human body shaped as weapon.

In the mid-sixties. Bourgeois isolated from her groupings a single oval ('Cumul', - from cumulus, the term for the massy, rounded cloud form, a major feature of Bourgeois formal vocabulary) form and created her most openly sexual image to date, firstly in plaster and then in 1967 in marble.

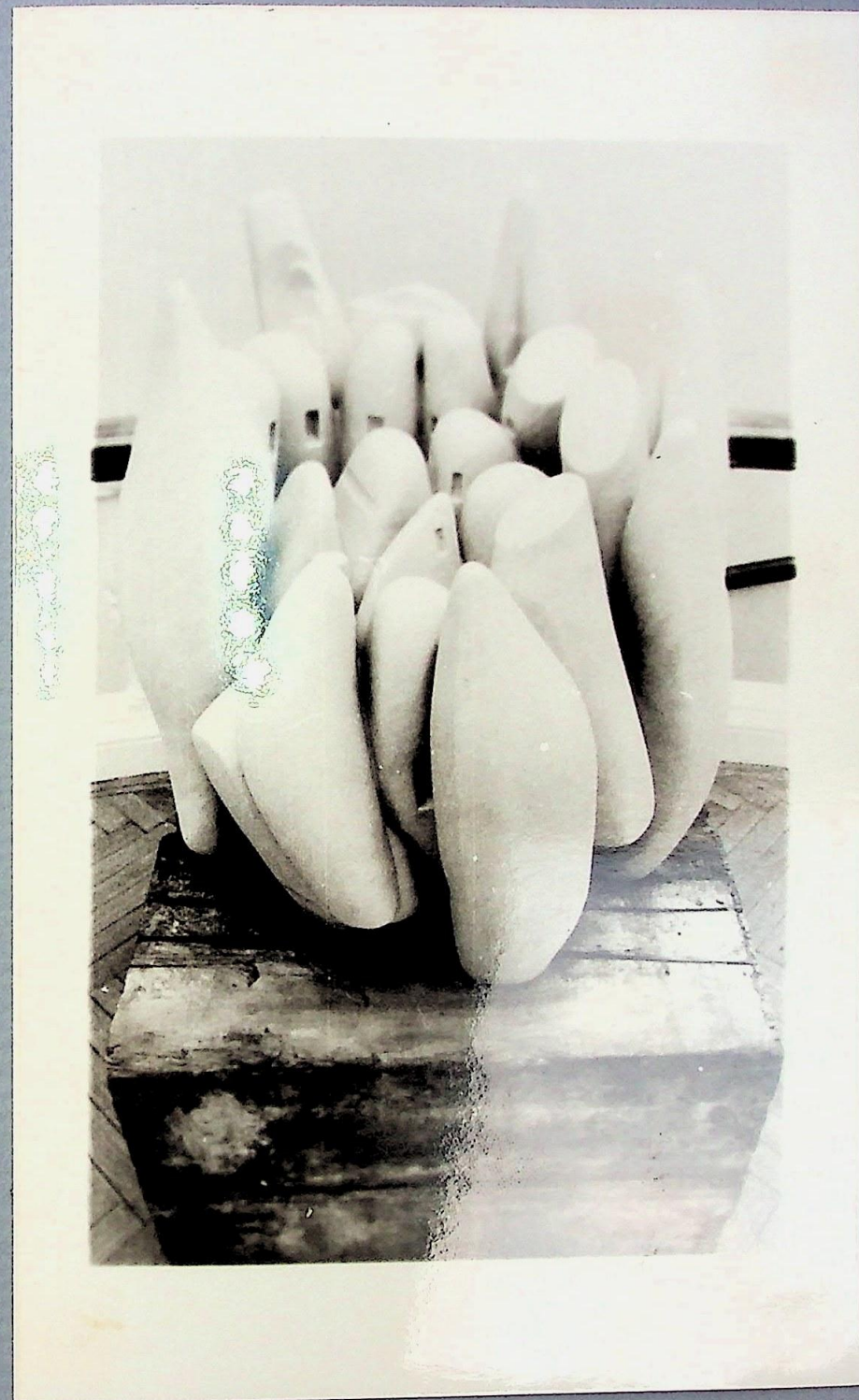
At that time, as I have mentioned, sexuality finally emerged explicitly in her work and Bourgeois, being a strong supporter of the Feminist movement exhibited at several exhibitions. Part of the feminist movement was to deal with a free examination of sexuality, which is the level on which Bourgeois's work should

understood. One of Bourgeois's most elaborate pieces and one I find expresses a clearly personal and autobiographical content is that of 'The Destruction of the Father' 1974, later to be called 'Confrontation'.

This environmental piece includes many of her bulbous forms, laytex coated plaster which is painted in various reds and browns, colours that induce an internal and angst ridden setting. On the table, what could be fleshy bits of human anatomy at closer range appear to be food in different stages of decay, as if leftovers from some unimaginable feast. Bourgeois's poetic combinations of food, death and sex is stirring and provocative. Other aspects of 'Confrontation' are also reminiscent of Bourgeois's earlier works. The sliced-off, angled boxes, gathered together side by side are similar to other unconnected grouped elements. The laytex terrain on the central bier is made up of the familiar soft landscape that suggests the surface of the human body. On one occasion, when asked about the meaning of her 1974 environmental tableau - 'The Destruction of the Father', Bourgeois told a long and fantastic tale of her childhood dinner table. She described a burdensome and self-important father holding forth to his captive family audience night after night. She fantasized that finally the family pulled him onto the table, dismembered him and devoured him. After that, we felt better ". "This is an act of exasperation and justice...with the Destruction of the Father , I wanted to relive and make others relive that experience (11).

Louise Beorgeois belongs to the line of twentieth century sculptors that include Brancusi, Arp, Giacometti, Moore and Hepworth. I like the simplicity of form in her work, she deals with certain ambiguities of shapes, but not of content, for the work holds great energy and vitality which is instantly recognisable of desired meaning.

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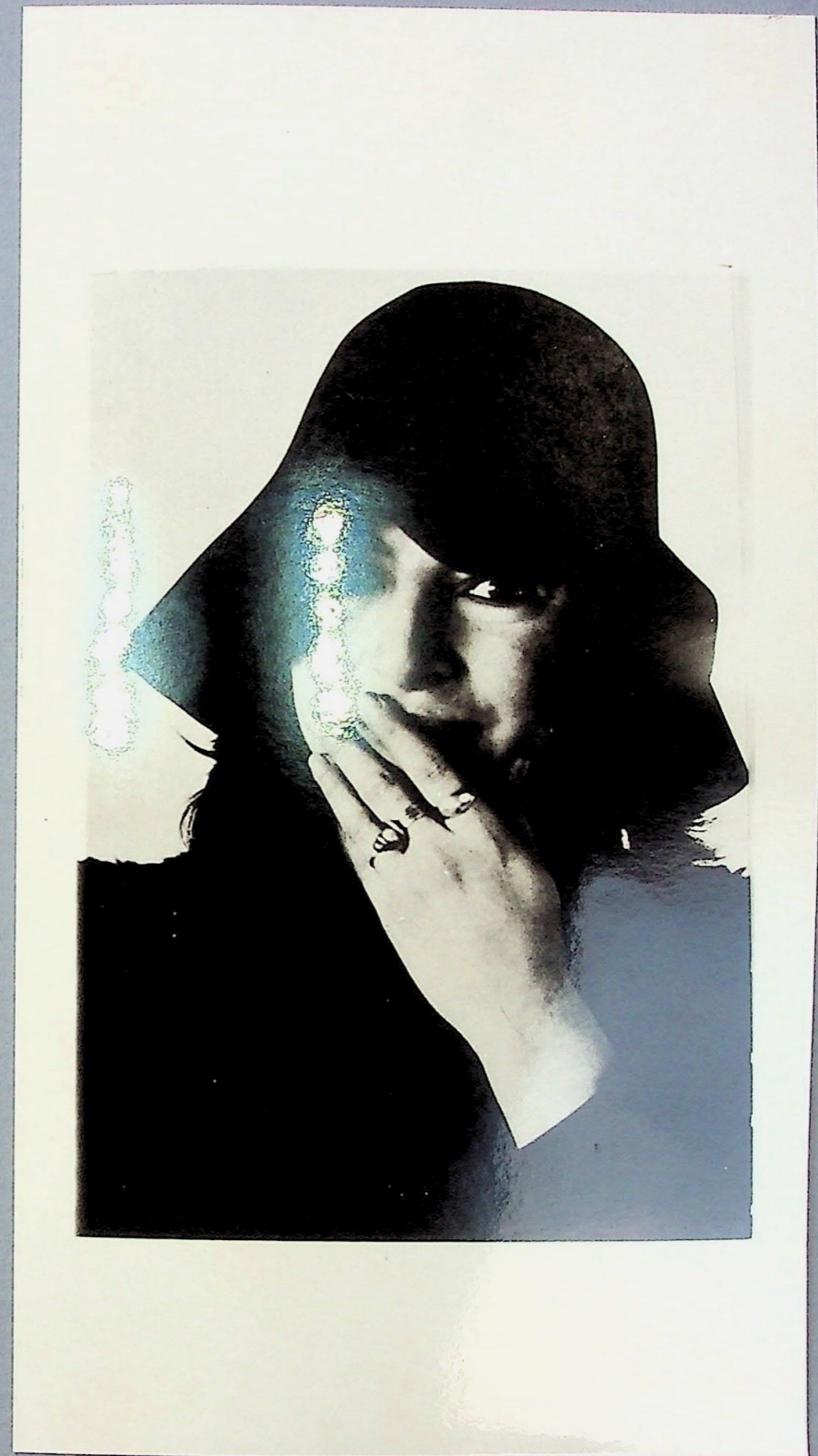
Cumul Series.

CHAPTER FOUR

The work of Eva Hesse, a prolific artist, tends to deal with the abstract - although one can feel a awareness of the sensual from her pieces. She tends to wrap (not unlike Christo) - as the wrappings draw more attention to the shapes used. I think Hesse was aware of her position in this world as a woman/artist and this can be seen in the questioning in the pieces with the use of penis-like shapes, breasts etc..

Hesse felt that even her best male friends did not take her seriously when other men were around and her contradictory feelings about where she stood are reflected in a diary entry : "Mel Bochner describes and highly praised my work. Necessary because (1) I am relatively unknown (2) am woman. I am sure that exists for all however, I must drop that thought as totally meaningless". (12)

Her friend Dorothy James, who lived in the studio below Hesse remembers that "Summer '67 seemed to be a crucial time for her - attempted emancipation of thought from old and fairly recent 'scars', the possibility of looking forward assertion of herself as an individual artist. She had cut off her long and beautiful hair which seemed symbolic of a 'new image'; a fresh start" (13)



Eva Hesse 1934 - 1970.

Hesse's first one-woman show opened on November 16th 1968, Hesse wrote : "I would like my work to be non-work. This means that it would find its way beyond my preconceptions. What I want of my art I can eventually find. The work must go beyond this. It is my main concern to go beyond what I know and what I can know. The formal principles are understandable and understood. It is the unknown quality from which and where I want to go. As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logic self. It is something , it is nothing." (14).

The critical neglect of Hesse's achievements and refusal to take her seriously as other artists can probably be ascribed to the fact that as a woman, she could'nt be the 'New Pollock'.

"She was very hurt by this first confrontation with art politics and anti-feminist, which was so obvious"

Sol leWitt (14)

Originally Hesse started her career as a painter in Yale, but had great difficulties trying to express herself in a two-dimensional way. She married Tom Doyle, a sculptor, and almost unawares to herself, started to use found pieces of Doyles' to develop her drawings (her drawings were always a very important aspect of her work, on which she relied heavily), this way of working her drawings slowly developed into three-dimensional sculpture. She always allowed the element of chance to occur - never constructing with too finite a control on her pieces. The

materials she used such as laytex, ropes, resins - are difficult mediums to work, especially in so far as she never cast them, but worked directly on to the fabrics concerned - thus allowing them to hang in an irregular fashion. Her notes indicate : "Hung irregularly tying knots as connections really letting it go as it will allow it to determine more of the way it completes itself" - 'The Knot Piece' (15).

The inevitable comparison to Jackson Pollock's painting is not unreasonable and she herself was quoted in 'LIFE' as saying : this piece is very ordered. Maybe I'll make it more structured, maybe I'll leave it changeable. When its completed its order could be chaos. Chaos can be structured as non-chaos. That we know from Jackson Pollock.

One of my favourite pieces of Hesse's work is 'Expanded Expansion', 1969, fiberglass and laytex on cheesecloth. It reminds me of Christo's hanging curtains - soft in colour and fabric, which has a great tactile quality. The fabric is coated with laytex then hung on fiberglass poles which look like little legs, it looks like a curtain possibly hiding something.

Most of Hesse's sculpture has a feeling of vulnerability. She has spoken of this many times, her use of materials is senseous, using phallic-like forms , net bags with plastic balls and strings which raise associations i.e. octopus, hairy head, hairy testicles.

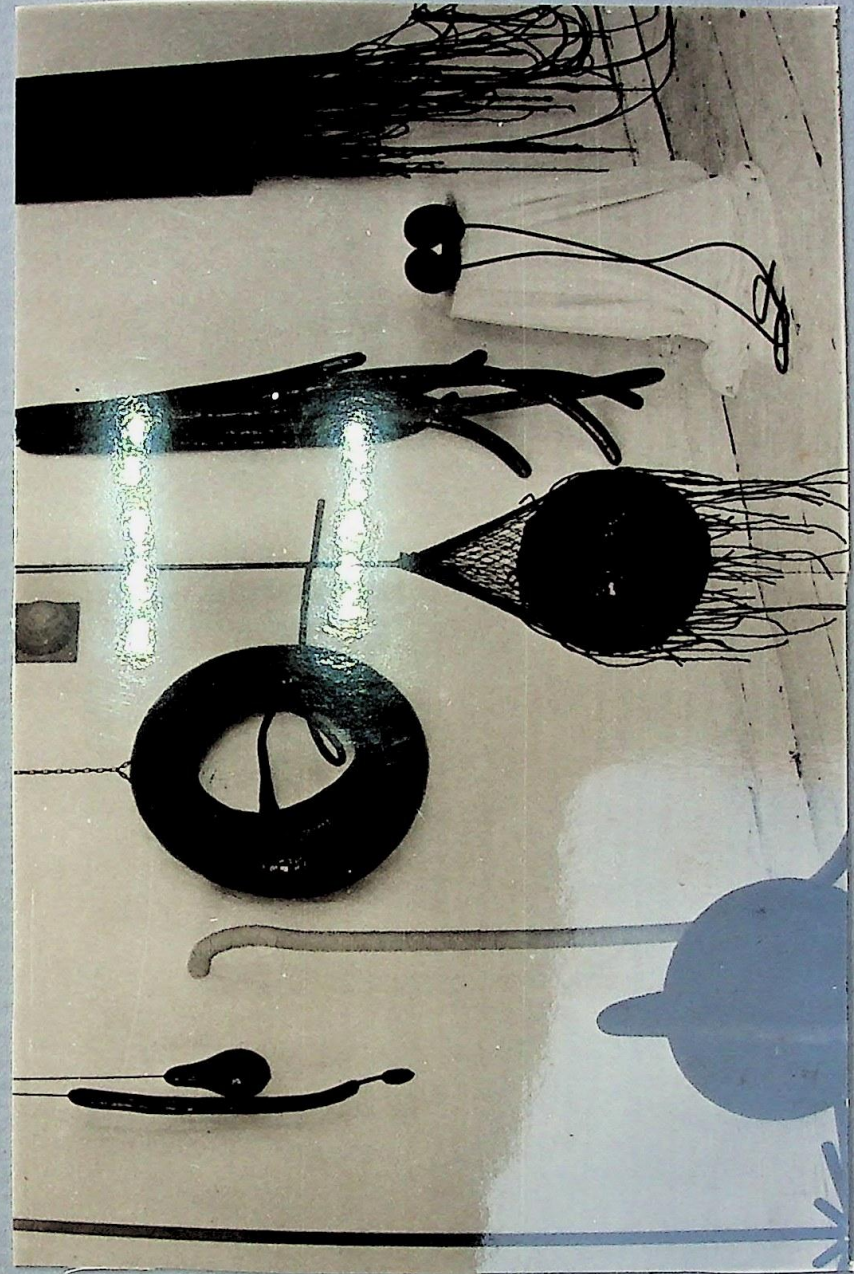


Untitled, 1970

Eva Hesse's works can be simultaneously experienced as humorous, oppressive, whimsical, pathetic, calm, frantic, grand or sad is a measure in some contradictory manner of the seriousness that lies at the core of her art. She compared her love of absurdity to 'Waiting for Godot', "where the main thing is waiting. Those people are there and they are doing nothing and yet they go on living. They go on waiting and pushing and they keep saying it and doing nothing. And it really is a key to understanding me. Only a few understand that my humor comes from there, my whole approach." (16)..

Although Hesse had many variants within her works as she also had media - her existential humor and her eroticism meet and merge not so much in the shapes themselves (which in the earlier pieces overtly resemble breasts, limp phalluses etc.) but in the combination of shape and highly sensuous textures, the way forms swell or sag, lie or lean, the way in which one can feel one's own body assuming those positions or relating to those shapes as to another body..

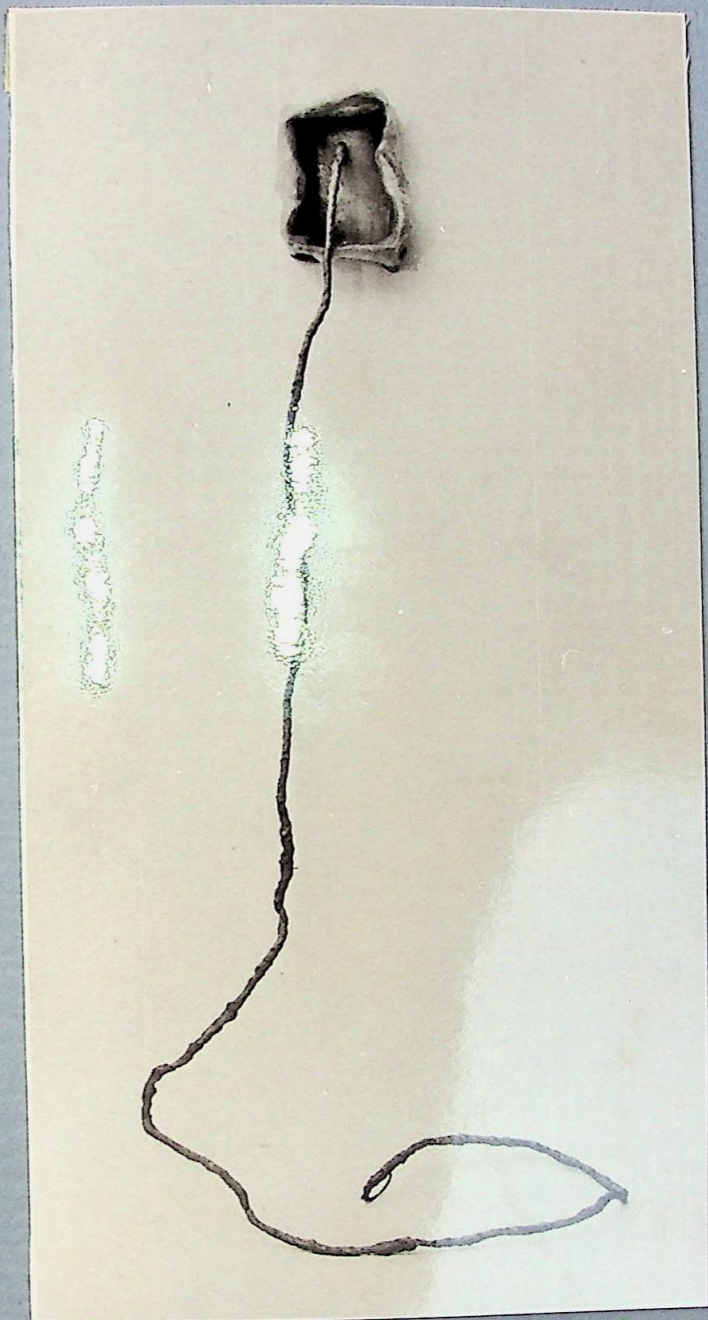
Most of Hesse's work has the freedom of a very strong image, her use of a single unit repeated is also a pictorial device - which could reduce the three-dimensional into an optical experience - but Hesse, however, by making each of her modules unique, makes them less a flat field and more sculptural. At the same time a large number of her works depend on the floor or the wall as the counterpart of a gridded or rectangular



Sculpture photographed in Hesse's
Bowery Studio , 1965/66

two-dimensional armature. 'Contingent' although also made of quasi-rectangular panels, escapes from its armature and hangs freely, as with most of her work. Another example is that of 'Addendum', neater and more ordered to start - reaches the floor only to coil in luxuriously rubbery confusion.

Hesse died just before the Woman's Movement gained a broad impact on the art world and she considered herself one of the unique ones almost a 'freak', since there were so few women artists at all visible at that time. She was very aware, however, of the injustices she herself had suffered and she expressed often to both male and female friends her conviction that she was not being taken as seriously as her male colleagues, because she was a woman. For the most part she kept her complaints private as did most women then, given the additional struggle implicit in making a public issue of them. In January 1969 she wrote across the bottom of a letter : "The way to beat discrimination in art is by art. Excellence has no sex". (17)



Untitled, 1966.

CHAPTER FIVE

REBECCA HORN

Feminism or at least the self-consciousness of 'femaleness' has opened the way for a new context within which to think about art by women. So far, such thinking/ and feminist criticism itself is only tentative.

One is accustomed to male artists with the veneer of self-confidence, jargon, articulation of formal problems etc., in comparison with which much women's art, not only forged in isolation, is deprived of a historical content. Many female artists have opted for a realist or conceptual celebration of female experience in which birth, motherhood, rape, maintenance, household imagery, menstruation, autobiography, family background and portraits of friends figure prominently.

Perhaps the ideas men have formed in art do not easily fit the psyche of women. Susanna Torre suggests "that perhaps women, unable to indentify with historical styles, are really more interested in art itself, in self-expansion and its collective history and communication differing from the traditional notion of the avant-garde by opposing not styles and forms but ideologies" (18).

A perfect example of this is Rebecca Horn who is involved with contemporary issues using the most contemporary of media - video. She deals with her thoughts, dreams, ideals in a very clear, uncomplicated fashion - almost like one's image of the Germanic lifestyle - which of course is her country of origin.

Little of her work is as yet published; so although I have seen two of her videos, which in effect are only a snippet of the main body of her work^k - I will attempt to give my assessment of the main features of her work.

Art is about sensing the world, about feeling the emanations which flow between beings, between beings and things, between man and his surrounding. Literally and metaphorically an artist is usually somebody with more sensitive nerve endings than most of us, and all attempts at defining this role - for example - her 'Long fingers' or her unicorn headgear 'Antenna of Mankind' point to one's delicate nature as a guide into realities about the material and physical, into spiritual spheres, outside time and space - into another zone or into a fourth dimension.

Around 1970, after an illness which confined Horn to bed, a period marked by pain and physical constraints, she constructed the first of her devices, which were extensions of the senses and which enabled her to experience in a new way her environment, other people and

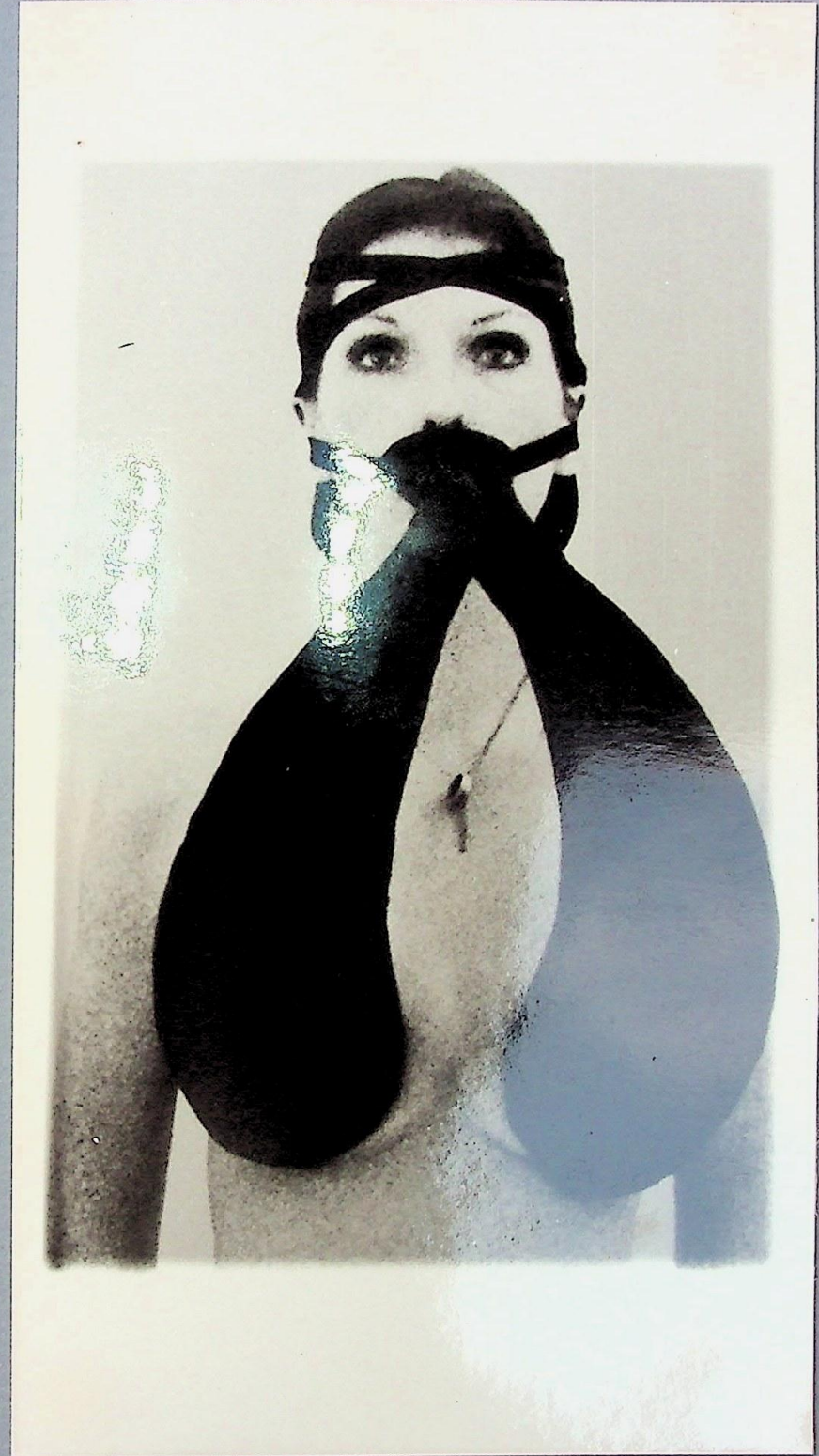


"Antenna of Mankind"

her body. In her notes (1972) Rebecca Horn wrote :
"Each performance has a central figure who functions as a starting point and the goal of the activity. What the central figure wears provides a means of communication among the participants. The performer's central position on which concentration is focused places him/her in a kind of 'initiation ritual' (19) The process begins before the actual performance. The performer's personality, his idiosyncracies, determine the shape of a particular performance. The basis of the performance, then, is a specific relationship. During this relationship a framework of desires, fantasies and projections become apparent, suggesting particular ways for presentation of the person. During this period, of the early 1970's Horn also produced a group of introvert devices, intended to focus attention on one's inner being, listening to the breathing and beating of one's own body.

In 'Cornucopia' (1970), twin horns lead from the artist's breasts to her mouth and create a sensation of communication with oneself, and because the breasts are isolated and also separated from each other, one's perception expands triangularly, allowing them their individuality as any two separate beings.

Rebecca Horn's body objects/props, were first made out of cloth and sometimes of hair or very light wood, but later feathers proved to be more appropriate " I was looking for 'vulnerable' material which can also be an



' Cornucopia ' 1970

extension of the skin, and I thought of feathers because they are second skin to birds " (20)

The first video I mentioned - Rebecca Horn, Berlin 1973, is a series of nine sketches - each sketch dealing with similar thoughts (of which I have already spoken) but dealt with on different levels, however, using her props throughout, which helps with the continuity for the viewer. In Horn's work the metaphor of the difficulties is an emotional involvement and of frustrated sexual desires plays an important role. In 'To hold your unfaithful legs' (1974/5), the artist and her partner both have one leg bandaged and covered with magnetic buttons, so that the legs are pushed away or drawn together by unpredictable magnetic forces. The only difference between the two legs are the male and female shoes.

The ninth sketch of Horn violently cutting of her hair, a symbolic act of castration of femininity while a man is monotonously reciting a zoology lesson about snakes' mating ritual. Eros is interpreted as the principle of self-destruction.

However, in a lighter vein, she directs an amusing sketch of two gold fish on sticks, swimming through a man's hairy chest : 'Two little fish who remember a dance', conjurers up notions of an early 1950 black and white movie, a romantic scene on a tropical beach, palm trees blowing in the breeze and the male superstar saqing - that sound is not the fluttering of birds, but the fluttering of my heart.....

In the main body of Horn's work - she constantly refers to the bird, be it an ostrich or the peacock - both beautiful feathered birds. She is emphatic about the bird's sensitivity to his environment, his sensitivity and vulnerability to people, places etc..

'Take the skin between moist ^otingues', is a sketch of great visual beauty. The sound of moistness, water flowing and the visuals - are shot through a blind like vegetation. One gets the feeling as though we, the spectators are spying on the underworld. A body slowly and sensuously comes into focus - it moves slowly, looking almost like a lizard or naked animal, her head turns slowly towards the camera - her eyes look like the sensitive searching eyes of the parrot, her hair resembles his (with clay) and her make-up exaggerates her eyes.

"The bird dies, the feathers live on - just like hair. Feathers can last for centuries like the fetishes of the shamans in South America, Oceania or Asia...The feather covering is a layer for protection and warmth and also becomes an object, a second body space that surrounds the person and hides parts of the body. With these wings, that are fastened to the body, the performer can wrap himself up, open them out, only to enclose himself again in the protective interior ".(21)

The presentation of the feather objects undergoes a dramatization however inconspicuous. In the afore-

mentioned examples the ceremonious offering of the respective male performer almost turns into a sacrificial act ; the bearer of the 'feathered instrument' delivers himself into the hands of two women who by pulling on long strings stand the feathers up and reveal the body beneath. In the performance with the 'Cockfeather Mask', when Horn gently brushes the feathers of the mask attached to her head across the face of the man standing opposite her, the continuous movement also gradually provokes aggressions in her ^apartner.

In almost all of her performances she uses an empty room, not sterile - but uncomplicated, there is always a mirror, through the use of mirrors the spacial limitations of the room are illusionistically opened up. In one of her sketches, the artist herself wears a kind of cuirass of small mirrors on her body - with the title 'Reflections of rooms encountering each other'.

The authentic quality of Rebecca Horn's work comes from the successful merging of two opposite principles which correspond to two diverging traditions of modern art - the 'male' i.e. technical, cool, and mechanical side of the work, with its roots in constructivism, Bauhaus and Kinetic art, is united with the 'female' that is, organic, vulnerable and fantastic aspects which springs from the Surrealist tradition,



'Reflections of rooms encountering
each other' 1973

(This of course is a generalisation, but there are always obvious categories, groups which make an allegation one way or another and individuals who don't. For example Claes Oldenburg or Henry Moore, although males, coincide much more readily with the latter group I mentioned, their work being much more 'organic' in shape and content than Brigid Reilly's optic paintings - which of course would be naturally categorized with the more technically, cool and mechanical work mentioned.

Not all artists can be accounted for individually but in general my experience has been that of a stronger identification of the female with the 'organic' than that of the mechanical and vice versa).

From video and film recordings of the performances she arrived at her first full length feature in 1978 - 'Der Eintanzer', 16mm, 45 mins. There is no linear logic in the creative process from her use of the same empty room and props, it is rather a cyclic rhythm of themes and motifs, things disappear, blend one into another and reappear - such as an earlier work can be incorporated into a film, a film sequence may inspire an object or an installation to be constructed later.

The story of 'Der Eintanzer' is constructed less around characters than their ambience, the things and sensations they provoke; sequences of a little ballerina gracefully balancing an ostrich egg on her head, or standing motionless while a feather fan envelopes her for a

moment, a blind man talking with erotic passion of the sensation of eating a peach, a Japanese cook who with a few deft strokes fillets a fish (as he describes the slimy sensations of cutting up the raw fish) - are all glimpses of mysterious rituals - which nevertheless take place in the everyday world. What emerges as the film's central motif is neither a blind gentlemen who is taking dancing lessons (who always carries white feathers in his hand, nor the ballet mistress and her pupils nor the intruders - the twin sisters, not even the mechanical four-legged table, a perfect 'dancing cavalier'.; but the abstract notion of sensitivity counterbalanced by the tension of lurking danger.

It appears as symbolic as the blind man is the only one of his gender allowed into the ballet class, as though, because of his visual handicap - or a broken -winged bird who cannot fly, the ballet teacher nurtures him to strength. The only other male in the film is quite aggressive in attitude and is a constant annoyance throughout; (almost threatening his interference can be felt) - the objects used are fragile, the characters vulnerable. "There is always this tension between something very soft and something very sharp, the feathers and the hatpins, or knives and eggs. Always something can easily be hurt or get destroyed. It goes through all my work" (22) This danger makes Horn's personalities awkward and potentially tragic participants in daily life.



'Der Eintanzer' 1978

'Der Eintanzer' was shot in a New York loft, which bore strong autobiographical traces. People are always 'caged' in these protective interiors and it is from there that they observe the world. The shots of the street life are only seen from a bird's eye view i.e. from the window of a ballet school, many floors above street level, which is protection and refuge and leaving the security of that womb may be fatal.

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CONCLUSION

The reason I have chosen to discuss the work of these three artists, Rebecca Horn, Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois, is to indicate the direction and advancements that women's struggles are taking. Eva Hesse was forever aware of the discrimination she suffered throughout her career - but was unable to completely overcome it because she had a tougher fight to convince the world of her sincerity due to her femininity - as I have already discussed - she was very hurt by the confrontation with art politics and anti-feminism. She didn't live to enjoy the freedom induced by the Woman's Movement.

Whereas Rebecca Horn, a more contemporary figure, now expresses more freedom, thus not having to deal with issues of trivia but importance. It illuminates the fact that she is a female, is secondary to the fact that she is a professional artist. This does not relate specifically, but to the present situation of women artists in general. However, while not implying that the longstanding problems have been eradicated forever more, a much less rancorous situation is now in existence.

In the radical feminist view the new feminist is more than just the revival of a serious political movement for social equality. It is the second wave of the most important revolution in history. Its aim : overthrow of the oldest, most rigid caste/class systems in existence, the class system based on sex - a system consolidated over thousands of years. lending the archetypal male and female roles an undeserved legitimacy and seeming permanence. In this perspective, the pioneer western feminist movement was only the beginning of the onslaught - the dawn of a long struggle to break free from the oppressive power struggles set by nature and reinforced by man.

Today it seems very clear that if a woman's experience in this society is entirely different from that of a man's, biologically, socially, politically and if "art is an essence, a centre" (23), as Hesse put it, coming from the inside of a person, then it would seem equally obvious that there are elements in women's art that are different from men's, not elements of quality but elements with aesthetic results, by that I mean the use of certain media, such as soft sculpture as opposed to steel, although certain women do specialise in steel works, in many cases they tend towards mediums that are physically more in keeping with their own physique, such as resins, latex rubber and woven sculpture.

Personally I feel that art is a reflection of our society and the movements within that said society. Because of the continuous struggles of the female to counterbalance the inequality which is still in existence, new forms of expression will be created to focus upon the development of feminism and the reaction to it.

Today, it is less difficult for women to assert themselves, but they have not as yet completely overcome the age-long sex limitation that has isolated them in their feminity.

It is for these reasons that I - not as a feminist but as an artist, who by biological chance happen to be a female, believe to be witness to the dawn of woman's emancipation.

However, in this year 1985, looking back I see there is a higher rate of acceptability of women's attributes today. I see this rate of growth as an exponential one - consequently, I look to the next twenty years with excitement in order that I might compare them to the previous twenty.

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