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Polymorph: Female Embodiment in Louise Bourgeois's Sculptures

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Many thanks to Mansi Hitesh, Dayuan Jeong, Clara Sánchez Trigo, and Mahé Wajnblum who never failed to lift my spirits even from afar and taught me many things during the last year. I am also grateful to Bernhard Seidler and Georg Starke, who discussed the topic with me on several hikes during the first lockdown, and to Beatrice Beressi for reading the essay and brilliantly putting the finishing touches on it.

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Polymorph: Female Embodiment in Louise Bourgeois's Sculptures

By Cécile Huber¹

Abstract

Artistic works provide unique ways of understanding the gendered and sexual subject. Bringing together a feminist psychoanalytic materialist approach inspired by Rosi Braidotti with the work of the artist Louise Bourgeois, this essay highlights how sculpture in particular can show the polymorphy of female embodiment. It thereby moves beyond previous interpretations of Bourgeois, which mainly drew on Freud's and Klein's psychoanalytic theory. Focusing on three works by Bourgeois, *Torso/Self-Portrait* (1963–64), *Janus Fleuri* (1968), and *Maman* (1999), I argue that these sculptures show amorph, ambiguous, and hybrid modes of embodiment. All three examples thus illustrate the lived polymorphy of the subject's body. I read *Torso/Self-Portrait* as an example of what Braidotti calls the state of 'Becoming-Woman' and, thereby, as deconstructing phallic identity. *Janus Fleuri* can be seen as further breaking with the Oedipal logic and as depicting the subject's profound sexual ambivalence – which importantly is not merely situated in the realm of discourse but in embodied materiality. Finally, I interpret *Maman* as an example of what Braidotti calls 'Becoming-Insect', or in another formulation, a 'posthuman'. As such, *Maman* shows how one can escape the Freudian/Lacanian fate of being a woman confined to the Pre-Oedipal state of lack. My essay concludes that sculpture is particularly suited to show the subject's lived polymorphy, i.e., the ability to have different morphological forms simultaneously. By virtue of its three-dimensionality, sculpture allows the embodied viewer to experience the polymorphy of the gendered and sexual subject by encountering it as another body.

Keywords: theory of sculpture, feminist psychoanalysis, posthuman theory, Rosi Braidotti

Introduction

In an iconic portrait of Louise Bourgeois by Robert Mapplethorpe from 1982, Bourgeois, who is dressed in a black hirsute coat, holds her sculpture *Fillette* (1968) smilingly under her arm. At first, *Fillette* seems to represent an erect human penis with testicles, which lends her portrayal an ironic dimension. When installed, the sculpture hangs from the ceiling on a metal string, which is somewhat violently pulled through the glans (figure 1). It is made of plaster covered in latex, which is colored dark brown fading to light. In places, the latex is smooth, and in others it is folded and shriveled, thus making a quite realistic impression of skin. Confusingly, the title, *Fillette*, means 'little girl' which we would not think of when we first read the object as a phallus. In one interview, Bourgeois even refuses to accept the notion of phallus for it and calls it a doll or "little Louise" (Nixon 1995, 49). Indeed, when seen in another angle, *Fillette* starts to appear as a human figure: The spherical curves turn into legs or feet, the shaft into the coat, out of which neck and head protrude. The round spheres can also be taken for female breasts, depending on one's point

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of view. Alternatively, the space between the spheres/legs starts looking like a Mound of Venus, like a female sex. Following this perspective, the retracted foreskin no longer appears as such but can be seen as a vaginal entrance.



Figure 1: Louise Bourgeois, *Fillette* 1968, latex over plaster, 59,7 x 28 x 19,1 cm. Gift of the artist in memory of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. New York: The Museum of Modern Art. Digital Image 2021: © Photo SCALA, Florence. The Easton Foundation/ VG-Bildkunst.

The brown skin-like leathery latex coating helps to create the effect that different aspects of human sexual anatomies alternate in front of the spectator's eyes. The more one looks at *Fillette*, the more bodily ambiguities come to the fore. The male genital becomes a body, becomes a female sex, both sexes appear simultaneously and melt fluidly into each other, and back again. Possible and impossible bodily states emerge.

But what specifically can a sculpture like this and sculpture in general teach us about the sexed and gendered subject? Is it merely an illustration of gender fluidity or is there more that this branch of visual art has to offer us? Focusing on three examples by Louise Bourgeois, *Torso/Self-Portrait* (1963–64), *Janus Fleuri* (1968), and *Maman* (1999), I contend that sculptures can show amorph, ambiguous, and hybrid ways of embodiment and thereby illustrate the lived polymorphy

of the subject's body. I suggest that sculpture does so in a unique way because, due to its three-dimensionality, the embodied viewer encounters it as another body. To show this, I will employ a feminist psychoanalytic materialist approach that is inspired by Rosi Braidotti's book *Metamorphoses* (2002).

Embodied Material Subjects

Louise Bourgeois's life story has been told countless times by herself and by others, and it forms the main axis for the interpretation of her works. The artist's parents had a company for the restoration of Gobelin tapestry in Paris. The memory of her father is associated with fear, as he betrayed her by taking her governess as his mistress. Bourgeois considers this to be her life's trauma (Crone/Schaesberg 2008). Her mother, unlike her father, is a positive figure for her, but passed away early. In many interviews, Bourgeois asserted that her sculptures are a way of dealing with this past. From 1951 onwards and for many years after, the artist underwent a psychoanalysis and was accordingly familiar with psychoanalytical theory. Psychoanalysis, therefore, forms the second axis for interpreting her work (Nixon 2014).

Braidotti offers a materialist theory of the body that aligns well with Bourgeois's sculptures. Central to Braidotti's work is the claim that the subject is always embodied and not formed through discourse alone. She emphasizes the material side of subjectivity, without reducing everything to materiality. For her, unconscious processes are linked to the body, and the body in turn influences the psychic (Braidotti 2002, 20–21). She writes:

The embodiedness of the subject is a form of bodily materiality, not of the natural, biological kind. I take the body as the complex interplay of highly constructed social and symbolic forces: it is not an essence, let alone a biological substance, but a play of forces, a surface of intensities, pure simulacra without originals (Braidotti 2002, 20–21).

Although Braidotti's theory has not yet been applied to Bourgeois, her work on materiality provides new insight for thinking about Bourgeois's sculptures and, from there, for the theory of sculpture—a notoriously neglected part of art theory (Getsy 2014). While some authors have noted that sculptures by Bourgeois such as *Fillette* illustrate gender fluidity (Nixon 2014), using Braidotti's theory highlights the hitherto underappreciated depths of Bourgeois's work.

Braidotti employs psychoanalytical theory but does not stop with the classical psychoanalytic approach by Freud and Lacan. They claimed that women are confined to the pre-Oedipal state of lack because girls do not fully separate from their mothers. In their view, women can, therefore, not be represented in the phallic logic of sameness, and are as a result merely 'the Other sex'. Inspired by feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, Braidotti, by contrast, thinks about ways how to make space for female transformation and how to move away from Oedipal stagnancy. For this, she combines Deleuze's concept of 'becoming' with Difference feminism. The concept of 'becoming' encompasses moving towards a female imaginary, where the logic of sameness does not apply, where girl and mother are separated but do not have to deny their female subjectivity. Serving as a point of identification, a female imaginary is something like a metaphor for the envisioned change (Braidotti 2002, 143). She says:

I believe that [...] a concretely embodied and embedded reading of the subject as a material, vitalistic, anti-essentialist but sustainable entity can be a profoundly sane reminder of the positive virtualities that lie in store in the crisis and transformation we are currently going through. This is a question of style, in the sense of a political and aesthetic sensibility. [...] I plead for working with an idea of the subject as the plane of composition for multiple becomings (Braidotti 2002, 211).

Transformation is also an important aspect for the artist Louise Bourgeois, who said that her sculptures help her to deal with the past and transform it into something new: “Fear is a passive state. The goal is to be active and take control. The move is from the passive to the active” (Bourgeois in Meyer-Thoss 1991, 44). Most importantly for this essay, Bourgeois explained that the experience of fear, a feeling that is associated with her philandering father, is embodied, memorized, and then materialized in sculpture:

Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture (Bourgeois in Meyer-Thoss 1991, 44).

Becoming-Woman: Torso/Self-Portrait

The wall piece *Torso/Self-Portrait* (1963–64) presents us with an unusual depiction of a body (figure 2). Its upstanding oval to triangular shape distantly recalls *torsi* familiar from antique sculpture and, like many of them, this *Torso* is made of white plaster, and another version of white marble. At the tapered upper end, two spheres emerge from the ground, resembling female breasts. Below them are five symmetrically arranged pairs of smaller flat conic shapes, which can be read as ribs or organs. Towards the lower end, two big roundish volumes with a slight indentation between them resemble buttocks or the thigh stumps. The smaller appendages make room in the middle for something that can be identified either as a vulva with an edged two-armed clitoris or as a kind of drooping penis. Considering the alternative title, *Self-Portrait*, one could also identify a face where the smaller shapes are like multiple eyes or wild hair with a nose between them and a mouth underneath it. The overall form of an upstanding triangle with broad hips and small shoulders, and the fact that Bourgeois considered it to be a self-portrait indicate that it is the rearranged body of a woman.



Figure 2: *Torso/Self-Portrait*, 1963–64, plaster, 62,3 x 40,5 x 18,8 cm. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Slifka Fund.
New York: The Museum of Modern Art. Digital Image 2021: © Photo SCALA, Florence.
The Easton Foundation/ VG-Bildkunst.

From conversations with Bourgeois, Lucy Lippard aptly observes that Bourgeois's sculpture in general, and *Torso/Self-Portrait* in particular, are portraits from the inside, portraits of what the body feels like, that are not identical with the 'natural' body image from the outside (Lippard 1995). Lippard also points to the piece's ambivalence. It is ambivalent because "it is armless and legless, centrally armored in heavy rib forms, but soft at top and bottom" (Lippard 1995, 16). In a similar vein to Lippard's thought of portraits from the inside, Rosalind Krauss argues that Bourgeois's sculptures represent 'part-objects'—and not partial figures as we find them in Rodin's or Brancusi's sculptures (Krauss 1995, 24). Krauss takes the concept of 'part-objects' from Kleinian psychoanalysis, where it refers to the earliest phase of childhood when the child conceives the world as part of itself and as not yet separated. The most famous example by Klein is the mother's good and bad breast. Both Lippard's and Krauss's interpretations seem plausible as the body organs in *Torso* are rearranged in abstract ambivalent shapes. This rearrangement points to the search for an adequate form.

In *Torso*, Bourgeois deals with the female form and with finding a representation for herself. Even if we do not strictly follow all of Kleinian object-relations theory and only agree with Krauss that *Torso* is a part-object, the sculpture appears to be a reconstruction of a more primitive state, because the body is so amorph and different from what it 'usually' looks like. The state of the part-object is the pre-Oedipal state, which women according to classical psychoanalysis do not fully leave. A pre-Oedipal configuration could be reflected in the ambiguous shape in the middle, which is neither phallic nor lacking something.

For feminist psychoanalysis, finding a woman identity, finding the own style of writing—or in this case sculpting—oneself is essential. If we look at *Torso/Self-Portrait* with the feminist theory of Braidotti one could see it as a material depiction of this aim. Braidotti speaks of the mode of 'Becoming-Woman' (a Deleuzian term Braidotti further develops). Becoming-Woman for her encompasses dealing with the past and, thereby, undoing its effects on the present:

‘Becoming-Woman’ triggers off the deconstruction of Phallic identity through a set of deconstructive steps that retrace backwards different stages of the historical construction of this and other differences so as to undo them (Braidotti 2003, 50).

In this sense, Bourgeois tries Becoming-Woman by finding a fitting arrangement for the female body. The indecisive slashed title *Torso/Self-Portrait* gives a hint on the difficulty of this endeavor. On the one hand, as Lippard points out, a torso is incomplete or even mutilated, missing the extremities. On the other hand, a self-portrait searches for an independent expression.

Polar Sex: Janus Fleuri

The small bronze *Janus Fleuri* was cast in 1968 and is named after Janus, the two-faced ancient Roman god for beginnings, endings, and passages (figure 3). The compact sculpture is crescent-shaped and symmetrical, with a wire attached to the top of the outer arch, from which it hangs from the ceiling and can rotate. Its shape can be divided into three parts: two roundish spheres with a smooth golden patina on the sides, which then more inwardly each form a bulge, and a middle part, whose surface is restless and raised in contrast to the outer ones. The outer, slightly drooping parts are strongly reminiscent in shape and surface of the glans of a penis with the foreskin pulled back. When the sculpture is viewed from the side, the raised central section looks like the male abdomen on which the penis sits, which is so wrinkled or hairy that it has a restless fleshy surface.



Figure 3: *Janus Fleuri*, 1968, bronze, gold patina, 25,7 x 31,7 x 18,8 cm. London: Tate. Image: © Christopher Burke, Tate. The Easton Foundation/ VG-Bildkunst.

However, at the position of the symmetry axis, there is a thin irregular depression around the entire shape. At the upper end, mass piles up to roundish volumes at the right and left side of the axis, and at the lower end, the slit becomes deeper, thus giving a labia-like impression. This gives the irregular part in the middle a different quality—it evokes the idea of a female vulva. *Janus Fleuri* is one of six different Janus sculptures, five in bronze and one in porcelain. All of them have two phallic ends but the middle part varies. It is the ‘blooming’ one whose middle part most vividly recalls a female genital.

Similar to *Fillette*, *Janus Fleuri* presents the body as sexually ambiguous. Bourgeois herself says:

Janus...is a reference to the kind of polarity we represent...The polarity I experience is a drive towards extreme violence and revolt...and a retiring. I wouldn't say passivity...but a need for peace, a complete peace with the self, with others, and with the environment (Bourgeois in Wye 1982, 75).

Bourgeois here presents her personal experience as connected to the sculpture. It shows how *Janus* is again a portrait from the inside where the body is sexually and psychically ambiguous. In an interview with Lippard, Bourgeois ties this ambiguity to the experience with her father and mother: "the problem of survival, having to do with identification with one or the other; with merging and adopting the differences of the father" (Bourgeois in Lippard 1995, 16). Lippard concludes that her "phallic images are at times benign" and at times cruel because they concern "the presexual perception of the dangerous father and the protective mother" (Lippard 1995, 16).

Using the example of *Fillette*, Krauss introduces the concept of the 'informe'. Taken from Bataille, the 'informe' is something that breaks up binary differences. Krauss uses it to describe the visual shifting between male and female in the sculptures, which she says is also apparent in *Janus* (Krauss 1995, 28). The 'informe' in *Fillette* thereby becomes a nearly Deleuzian anti-Oedipal move, as Krauss says, because it breaks up the logic of the phallus (Krauss 1995, 28–29). However, *Janus* works a little differently than *Fillette*. The latter (and *Torso* too) involves a *double entendre* that functions like Wittgenstein's rabbit-duck-illusion, but with impressions shifting between male and female. In contrast, *Janus Fleuri* shows the two sexes in parallel with a boundary between them. The axial symmetry and the mirroring provide this effect. While *Fillette* and *Torso* confront us with a fused sexual ambiguity, in *Janus*, the female is added to the male. Therefore, *Janus Fleuri* is not so much about going back to an earlier feeling of the self, as in *Torso*, but rather about combining two different things.

Even though its name is masculine, *Janus Fleuri* is, therefore, not a male figure. Instead, it treats the problem of women's identification with men or with male tendencies in women. According to Bourgeois, the sculpture represents how she deals and identifies with polarity. The god Janus is looking backward and forward: This *Janus* is looking backward to Bourgeois's past, where she needed to identify with her father for survival, and forward to revolt and finding "peace", as she said. Finding peace might mean finding her place. *Janus* represents how a woman deals with the other sex through putting it next to herself. If *Torso* is more directed to the past, *Janus* also deals with the present.

In the above quote cited in Lippard, Bourgeois expresses her "merging" with the father and her "identification" with him. In a psychoanalytic framework, merging and identification point to the entry into the Oedipal logic. Yet, *Janus* is not one phallus but two flaccid ones! One could, therefore, make an Irigarayan twist and say that two phalli run counter the phallic logic of 'the One and Same'. This would also take note of the one (two-lipped) vulva between them. In *When Our Lips Speak Together*, Irigaray argues that because the women's two labia are always in contact, speaking, that they are refusing the order of the same (1980). Applying this idea to Bourgeois's work, the power of the penises in *Janus* seems broken.

A sculpture like *Janus Fleuri* makes visible that a subject experiences sexual ambivalence not only psychically but also bodily. In this sense, art can help us to understand the sexual subject as something profoundly ambivalent. This is different from what Judith Butler would call 'gender

trouble' because it is not only in the discourse but an embodied feeling. Braidotti writes of this: "Butler takes the linguistic turn, I go nomadically the way of all flesh" (Braidotti 2002, 47). This, for her, means that "we need to consider the *co-presence of morphological and social power-relations* and their joint impact on the positioning of the subject" (ibid., 44, my emphasis).

Posthuman Bodies: Maman

The series of giant filigree spider sculptures titled *Maman* (1999) traveled around the world. These seven arachnid sisters (one in steel, six in bronze) are the largest sculpture by Bourgeois, with a height of roughly ten meters, and have been shown outdoors and indoors in a variety of museums and public places. Eight long thin legs form a kind of dome in tension that holds the spider's body, the hovering center of the sculpture. At the lower end of the body, the spider carries several marble eggs in an oval cage-like container. Despite the slenderness of the spider's body, the sculpture takes up a lot of space and has architectural dimensions. It is made of many individual brazed tubular sections and the cast bronze ones possess a metallic shining surface (figure 4). Once set up, the viewer can walk underneath the sculpture (figure 5).



Figure 4: *Maman*, 1999, bronze, marble, and stainless steel, 895 x 980 x 1160 cm, in front of Lake Zurich in 2011. Image by anonymous, licensed under public domain via Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maman_ZH.jpg> [Accessed 26 Apr. 2020].

Generally, spiders are thought of as fear-inducing animals, sometimes even causing poisonous death, and this particular specimen, too, might at first be abhorrently daunting; Julia Kristeva might call them 'abjects'. However, for Bourgeois, the spider has positive connotations as it represents her mother, the repairer of the family, and not the monstrous creature that inhabits nightmares.

The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother (Bourgeois in Tate 2008).

Bourgeois's spider, therefore, is a hybrid, part animal, part woman. While the artist does not explore cyber-technological discourses, I propose that *Maman* can nevertheless be understood as posthuman.



Figure 5: *Maman*, 1999, bronze, marble, and stainless steel, 895 x 980 x 1160 cm, in front of the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City in 2013–14. Image by Alejandro Linares Garcia, licensed under CC BY 3.0:

<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Maman_\(Mexico_City\)#/media/File:MadreAra%C3%B1aBellasArtes_03.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Maman_(Mexico_City)#/media/File:MadreAra%C3%B1aBellasArtes_03.JPG)>
[Accessed 26 Apr. 2020].

In *Metamorphoses*, Braidotti writes not only about ‘Becoming-Woman’ but also about ‘Becoming-Insect’ as a means for women’s transformation, which is ultimately an alternative formulation to the posthuman (Braidotti 2002, 124). With ‘Becoming-Insect’ she further develops a Deleuzian concept called ‘Becoming-Animal’. Hereby, Braidotti stresses the ability of insects to metamorphose and that, although they are small, they can have enormous power.

The dual aspects found in Bourgeois’s spider which oscillate between defense and positive connotation, are reflected by Braidotti as general characteristics that apply to both insects and women. The insect “dwells between different states of in-between-ness, arousing the same spasmodic reactions in humans as the monstrous, the sacred, the alien” (Braidotti 2002, 149). Insects and women—and in the next step, technology—are all the ‘Others’ of culture because they are different (ibid., 150). Insects, however, are beings of “radical otherness” who can change forms and have different sensory and bodily abilities (ibid., 149). Braidotti wants to move past Kristeva’s abject because in Kristeva’s theory, the abject cannot be overcome (ibid., 170).

Becoming-Insect is an anti-anthropocentric move for Braidotti as it involves stepping towards the non-human beings around us, especially the small ones (Braidotti 2002, 153). Important for her is the inter-connection with the Other (ibid.). Becoming-Insect means becoming ‘the other of the Other’ (a term by Irigaray), which means “a post-Woman embodied subject cast

in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis” (ibid., 12). Accordingly, *Becoming-Insect* follows the process of *Becoming-Woman* (ibid., 150).

Next to their high sensibility and their superpowers—an example would be the fly’s eye—, insects display multiple queer forms of sexuality, are very reproductive, and they lay eggs even though they are not mammals, so that they “point to [the] post-human” (Braidotti 2002, 149, 153, 158–59, 228).

The spider *Maman* takes up space, goes out into the world, and becomes an active part of her surrounding landscape. She interacts with her environment as humans come close and stroll between her legs, and she is shielding them in a protective motherly way. She makes herself comfortable in whatever habitat, but of it she is also dependent. She is huge and yet filigree, vulnerable and yet dangerous. With her body, she weaves incredibly strong webs that connect distant places (and what are webs other than rhizomes?). In her belly, *Maman* carries the future, the coming generations. However, she is not alone also because her sisters are splattered all over both hemispheres. They carry their eggs, ready to infect the world.

It is remarkable that Bourgeois conceived this sculpture when she was nearly 90 years old because the spider is so generative and reproductive, and thus pointing towards the future. With *Maman*, Bourgeois gives us a female imaginary that does not abandon the (M)Other but explores her possibilities.

Since the spider’s metal surface shines like armor, she even has something of a cyborg, which nicely matches the term ‘meta(l)morphoses’ that Braidotti uses for the posthuman who becomes machine. I would, therefore, argue that Bourgeois was, so to speak, a proponent of the posthuman *avant la lettre*. If *Torso* and *Janus* were closer to classical Freudian or Kleinian psychoanalysis and went back to earlier states, *Maman* has more of feminist psychoanalytic posthumanism where the sexually differentiated body is in a state of becoming.

But how does the process of *Becoming-Insect* work? In short, Braidotti says that it consists in “de-familiarization” with traditional schemes, routines, and orders (Braidotti 2002, 170). She writes:

Becomings are the sustainable shifts or changes undergone by nomadic subjects in their active resistance against being subsumed in the commodification of their own diversity. Becomings are un-programmed as mutations, disruptions, and points of resistance. Their time frame is always the future anterior, that is to say a linkage across present and past in the act of constructing and actualising possible futures (Braidotti 2005).

In her focus on matter, Braidotti interestingly also stresses the motherly aspect of it as in ‘mater-ialisation’: All living beings are born of mothers, and as such the subject’s origin is the material (Braidotti 2002, 23).

Sculpture and Polymorph Bodies

Sculptures, in contrast to pictures, are generally defined as three-dimensional (with reliefs lying somewhat in between the two categories). As three-dimensional entities, they necessarily have a kind of body that takes up space—this can even be purely conceptual or extend in sound or smell. Further distinctions could be made to architecture or performance, however, the sculptures

I consider here are quite classical in the sense that they are stable, unitary, physical objects that have boundaries. They are material objects with a certain weight, surface, and age.

All three sculptures negotiate the female body and pose different questions in relation to it: how to become a woman, what to do with a phallic order, and finally, how to design a female imaginary. They do not merely refer to the discourse around female bodies but highlight that body and psychic are deeply interlinked. In the case of Bourgeois, early childhood experiences and the unconscious affect the body, the affects then come back through the body, and can finally be transformed through expressing them in bodily sculpture. At a young age, Bourgeois also tried her hand at painting, but was unsatisfied with its expressive power, as Mignon Nixon takes from an interview with the artist (Nixon 2014). Nixon points to the lack of materiality in painting, which, unlike sculpture, cannot express the fantastic reality of the body: “As the five decades of Bourgeois’s sculptural production clearly demonstrate, the reality that painting failed to materialize was this: the experience of the body in the grip of fantasy” (ibid.).

Both, the embodied subject and sculpture, are made of matter. As accumulated and formed matter, sculpture can take any form of the body, even if it is a feeling, not permanent, or even utopian. Sculpture depicts the possibilities matter can take.

Or to use another term: Bourgeois’s works depict the body as polymorphous. Deriving from a zoological discourse, the term ‘polymorphy’ refers to the fact that some small animals are “occurring in different morphological forms (*at the same or different stages of the life cycle*)” (OED Online 2020, my emphasis). This can be applied to Bourgeois’s sculptures as they show different embodied morphological possibilities which her/the female body can take over time or even simultaneously—or in short: the body’s polymorphy.

While allowing for embodied experience to be expressed by the artist, sculptures also importantly have a bodily effect on the viewer. Unlike in painting, for example, where the image is the forefront, we meet sculpture also as a physical counterpart, as another body in the same space. We cannot only look at it but move around it and look around it. This is most evident in the case of *Maman*, where the viewer may be a little frightened or repelled by the spider at first, and then as they walk underneath and read the gentle title, *Maman* (‘Mummy’), possibly reflect on this feeling and feel protected by her. Art can directly affect us without necessarily needing reason or language also because it is connected to the unconscious. Unlike images, however, sculptures like *Torso*, *Janus Fleuri*, or *Maman* also bring haptic, spatial experience with them. The observer perceives the sculpture not only in their mind but also with their body.

Sculptures can make a latent feeling manifest, such as in *Torso* or *Janus Fleuri*, or they can open up a possible imaginary, such as in *Maman*. As works of art, sculptures can expand bodily perception or can lend an image to already existent bodily perception. As seen in *Janus Fleuri*, art allows to express contradictions which would not necessarily be accepted in discourse. Sculpture can express the psychic underpinnings of the body in a material way.

Conclusion

Quite in the spirit of *écriture féminine*, Braidotti suggests that the mode of ‘becoming’ can involve using new writing styles (Braidotti 2002, 120). However, as the analysis of *Torso/Self-Portrait*, *Janus Fleuri* and *Maman* has shown, sculpture, too, holds a transformative power. It can be transformative both for the artist and the viewer. In the three works considered here, the self already is or becomes something else. This is of importance to the condition of possibility of feminist change. The symbolic order, or in other words the world we live in, can only change if

the ‘others’ of culture are able to change. Feminist psychoanalysis explores ways and strategies of how to do so.

Although Bourgeois did not want to be completely appropriated as a feminist artist, she was sympathetic to the feminist cause (Nixon 2014). If one considers her work under a feminist psychoanalytical perspective, it becomes clear that the sculptures examined here, all break up phallogocentric logic. Bourgeois shuffles the organs and parts of the self-portrait, she undoes the order of the same by adding one to the other, and she reimagines an inter-acting subject that is powerful yet not dominating.

Moreover, Braidotti’s psychoanalytic materialist approach and her idea of the posthuman prove very fruitful for the development of a feminist theory of sculpture, an area of study where distinctively feminist frameworks and models are lacking. In particular, Braidotti’s emphasis on materiality and her non-reductive understanding of embodiment as a form of bodily materiality seems promising in relation to sculpture because, after all, sculpture always deals with matter. Further research could extend Braidotti’s approach to sculptors other than Bourgeois.

Unlike writing or painting, sculpture cannot merely describe or depict the polymorphous experience of embodiment but can make it physically tangible and understandable. Furthermore, Bourgeois’s work shows that sculpture, as one medium of art, not merely illustrates feminist theory but can itself be taken to build it. For example, the public sculpture of *Maman* engages with those who walk underneath and draws the viewer into conversations about gendered and sexed subjectivity, embodiment, and taking up public space. The physical experience of the sculptures can be transformative and pave the way for thinking in new directions.

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