

Shamelessness

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W

e've all heard it often enough: as the art of the mid- to late '80s had as its key metaphor *the commodity*, so the art of the '90s has taken up the theme of *the body*.

Then we had Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach. Now we have Robert Gober and Kiki Smith. Like most stereotypes, this one is indefensibly simplistic, even as it touches on certain truths. The age of the leveraged buyout is, chronologically, not entirely distinguishable from the age of AIDS, but in the public consciousness—and the art public's consciousness—is as fickle as any other's—they constitute two distinct eras.

One of the interesting things about the commodity and the body as key terms for art—and perhaps the reason why they often seem, however falsely, to present themselves as mutually exclusive concerns—is that they both lend themselves to being realized as concrete, three-dimensional entities, as sculpture. But there has been something oddly generalized, even abstract, about the recent talk of the body in art—and about much of the art as well.

At least so it seemed to me early this year when I discovered a remarkable exhibition by the French-born American sculptor Gaston Lachaise (1882–1935) at New York's Salander-O'Reilly Galleries. I'd never really given much thought to Lachaise, who'd always struck me as a kind of dead-end compromise between art nouveau and genuine modernism. Those who know as little as I did about Lachaise think mainly of his ballooning, voluptuous yet strangely delicate female nudes, like *Standing Woman* (1912–27). But in works dating from 1928 until his death in 1935, Lachaise took this woman—this society-matron-cum-Roman-goddess—and began doing primitive, irrational, even obscene things with her. The resulting sculptures have an intensity the Surrealists might have envied. Lachaise was clearly thinking of ancient fertility figures from the *Venus of Willendorf* on, but there is no communal feeling about these sculptures, nothing to suggest that they were part of a ritual that could be shared by anyone beyond the artist and the woman with whom he was obsessed (a real woman, the Bostonian Isabel Nagle, whom Lachaise married).



Opposite: Gaston Lachaise, *Torso with Arms Raised*, 1935. Bronze, 37 x 33½ x 16½ in. Courtesy Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York.

Above: Gaston Lachaise, *In Extremis*, c. 1934. Bronze, 15 x 10½ x 9½ in. Courtesy Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York.



Their extreme freedom of modeling puts Lachaise's works closer to works by Rodin, Matisse and, later, de Kooning in their violent manipulation of the figure. (Michael Kimmelman rightly noted that Lachaise's tumultuous drive to reshape the body "sometimes resulted in works that literally turned the body inside out.")¹ They are also reminiscent of the works of Hans Bellmer and Louise Bourgeois with their fetishization and manipulation of that most

fundamental female body part, the breast. In what for me was the most astonishing work on view, *Torso with Arms Raised* (1935), the "torso" turns out to be a pair of enormous breasts, whose cleavage is nothing other than the female sex itself. Headless, it is surmounted by wildly gesticulating arms that give the whole form the aspect of an animal head with antlers: one dizzying metamorphosis upon another.

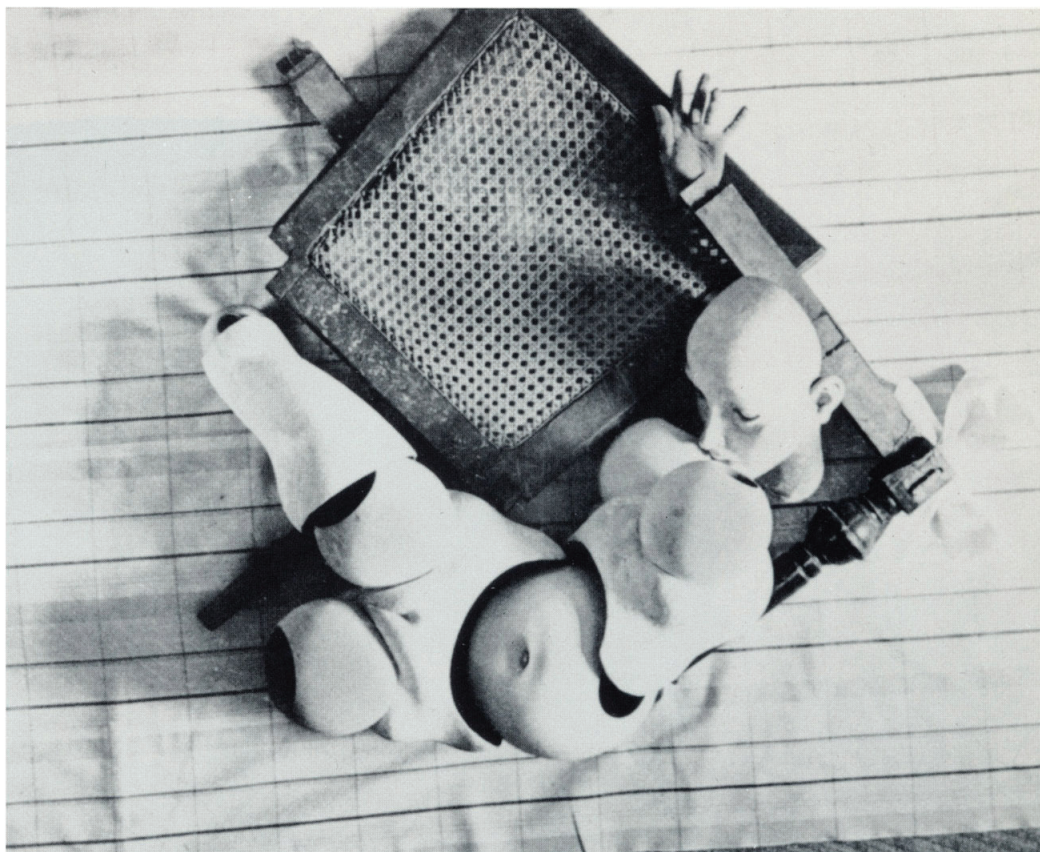
What impressed me most about the late works of Lachaise was the immense *license* he allowed himself, the liberties he took with the representation of the female body. I don't know of anything so extreme in modern art. Though intensely expressive, these are not the emotive distortions of expressionism nor the constructive displacements of Cubism and its offshoots. These distortions and displacements are more physical and impulsive than visual, which is why they are so sculptural. There is also something comic about their extremity; they know their own absurdity, and their pleasure is more joyous than "serious." Personal as they are, the sculptures also attain a kind of mythic impersonality. They tell us less about the man who made them than about the plasticity of the object of his desire, which is the same yet always changing, protean. Yet what we share by experiencing these works is not the desire for that object but rather the desire to be able to manifest one's own desire so fully, so shamelessly.

In contrast to the frankness of Lachaise's work with its sculptural bent toward pure extroversion, the work of Hans Bellmer (1902–1975) represents a coolly and knowingly perverse freedom that intentionally goes against the grain. It is significant that his famous *Poupées* (dolls), which are actually sculpture and have been exhibited as such, existed in order to serve as two-dimensional images, as photographs. Bellmer's own account of his intention is clear enough: "I shall construct an artificial girl whose anatomy will make it possible physically to re-create

the dizzy heights of passion and to do so to the extent of inventing new desires.”²² The mixture of nostalgia and transgression could not be clearer: the Doll is a figure that he literally re-members. It is notable that whereas Lachaise’s *Woman* (the capital letter is very much his)³ is mature, powerful and conceived as possessing a greater degree of being than the artist himself, Bellmer’s Doll is young and is, in his own words, a “mobile, passive, adaptable, and incomplete object.”⁴ (This “youth” is conveyed as much by metonymy as by metaphor: not only does this particular doll resemble an adolescent, but dolls in general are associated with young girls.)

In an image (plate 13 of his 1938 book *Les Jeux de la Poupée*) that recalls the displacements in Lachaise’s work, Bellmer has joined two pairs of legs into a single set of extended limbs with feet at either end. Leaning against a chair, they suggest an attitude of expectation. The crossing of the two sets of legs suggests—only a bit less literally than Lachaise’s *Torso with Arms Raised*—the female sex. On the print I have seen, it has been hand-colored, and this “sex which is not one” (in the phrase of Luce Irigaray) has been given a rosy tinge that transforms it into a mouth as well. It is easy enough to say that Bellmer has “objectified” his image of female sexuality, and there is obviously some truth to this, given his use of the Doll. More importantly, it is also the image of a complex subjectivity, of an erotic investment so intense that one’s entire consciousness seems to have embodied itself as an aroused part of the body, in this case the legs. Bellmer uses his Doll not just to show how he sees a woman, although he certainly does that, but also to try to imagine a feeling that might be hers.

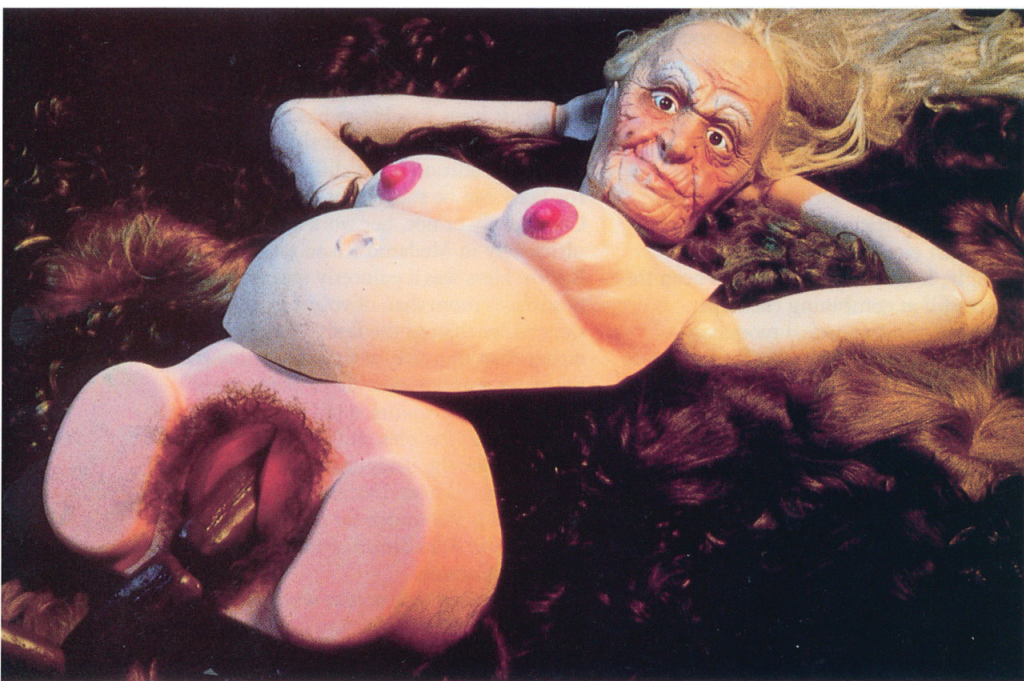
For both Lachaise and Bellmer, the subject of art was the object of desire. What they shared was a remarkable willingness to manifest the truth of their desire through the making of objects—and to let that willingness, at times, carry them outside themselves. It is hard to think of any male sculptor today capable of exposing his desire with such openness while at the same time demanding so little complicity of the viewer. If I try to think of a prominent male sculptor who has tried to follow in the footsteps of Lachaise, ardently expressing his involvement with the female form, I can think only of Alain Kirili and his works in modeled clay and concrete, which, for all their vivid sense of flesh wrestled now violently, now tenderly, into form, remain completely abstract and never risk a literal representation of their imagined object. The reasons for this are undoubtedly to be discovered less by means of art criticism than sociology, on which I am hardly an authority.



Opposite: Louise Bourgeois, *Fillette*, 1968. Latex, 23½ x 10½ x 7¾ in. Photo: Allan Finkelman, courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Above: Hans Bellmer, *Les Jeux de la Poupée*, 1949. Courtesy Swann Galleries, Inc., New York.





what one reviewer wrote about Lyons, that “she can eroticize any piece of industrial hardware known to man.”⁹

Sculptors like Bourgeois, Pondick, Lyons and de Monchaux are using imagery of the female body with a boldness and insouciance that seems impossible to their male contemporaries. Ironically, these women’s precursors are men like Lachaise and Bellmer. However, they rarely reverse the traditional equation by using the male body as their subject. Rather, they are interested in the female body—by definition, their own body—as the site of pleasure and desire. Recently, in a debate over pornography, the writer Pat Califia called for women to “demand, control, exploit and explore sex with the same intensity and sense of entitlement that [men] take for granted.”¹⁰ In sculpture women’s “sense of entitlement” has surpassed that of men, and this has only been to the benefit of their art.

Yet I am left with a certain reservation. To be sure, the fluidity of their imagination and their intense use of materials win my astonishment and admiration. Yet in Lachaise there is an ulterior degree of “entitlement,” of shamelessness, that none of these contemporaries can quite touch. I think it has to do with the sense of privacy, of intimacy, that is communicated by Lachaise, which is quite different from the theatrical provocation found in Bellmer and the others. With Lachaise, there is an engagement with the activity of sculpture so intense that it becomes an ecstasy of forgetfulness, a forgetfulness of the role of the “objective” viewer. Bourgeois and the others have a harder time forgetting to taunt, seduce and/or subvert the viewer. Their defenses are never quite down. They constantly teach us what Lachaise simply assumes: that there is no “normal” desire, that all desire is fetishistic, excessive, transgressive. Indeed, if there is any contemporary artist who has succeeded in attaining this same degree of shamelessness, it is not a sculptor but a photographer: Cindy Sherman. In her most recent work she has borrowed Bellmer’s device of constructing surrogate female figures out of artificial parts—mostly medical mannequins in this case. These images approach the mythic intensity of Lachaise’s sculpture. In an untitled 1992 work a mannequin with a crone’s head has a string of sausages emerging from her vagina, an image of sex, of birth, of disembowelment—of all the pleasure and horror and absurdity to which we are subject simply by living. There is no “correct” stance for the viewer to take in relation to an image that is so complex, that inextricably ties so many emotions together. It seems to exist beyond our participation in it, shamelessly offering us Lachaise’s kind of freedom.

Pondick may be the most notable among younger women artists following in Bourgeois’s footsteps—taking the sexualized female body and confusing its gender identification—but she is far from the only one. Marcia Lyons, who recently had her first exhibition at the Paul Cava Gallery in Philadelphia, combines everyday objects like Nerf balls and dog collars, inner tubes and leather belts to create concise metaphors for bodies in bondage or in altered states. The English artist Cathy de Monchaux, who has received considerable attention in Europe, although she is little known in the United States, has made shiny, aggressive structures of military-looking hardware that open up to expose lush velvet. These pieces seem to be “male” on the outside, “female” on the inside. One might say of de Monchaux

Opposite, top: Rona Pondick, *Loveseat*, 1991. Wax, shoes, plastic and lace, 17¼ x 21 x 26 in. Collection of Peter and Susan Straub, New York. Courtesy fiction/nonfiction, New York.

Opposite, bottom: Marcia Lyons, *What a Buster*, 1992. Float, leather belts, 3 x 3 x 1 ft.

Still, while the '80s saw the decline of abstraction in contemporary art, the decade also witnessed a rise in the importance of feminism, particularly within the art world. Male artists gained a (for the most part salutary) self-consciousness about their entitlement to use the female image, and today they rarely use it with complete ease.

With women artists it is quite different. Here one must cite Louise Bourgeois. Interestingly, it is Bourgeois who has been the most successful at combining the hyper-intensification of a traditional modeling—found in Lachaise and, earlier, in Rodin—with the quasi-Surrealist restructuring of the body out of its fragments such as found in Bellmer. She shares Bellmer's attitude of cool provocation. "I find puritans very sexy, because they're a challenge:"⁵ such a statement must be taken less as a personal confession than as a clue to the artist's imagined relation to the viewer of her sculpture.

Bourgeois's works are based on the female body, especially early on, and we often find the spiral motif as a metaphor for a motion outward into the world (see for instance *Spiral Woman*, 1953), countering the rigidity of architectural forms that often imply constraint upon that body. In *Fillette* (1968) Bourgeois turns the tables on Bellmer. Her own "little girl" turns out not to be constructed of female body parts—instead it is nothing other than the masculine organ. The phallus is no longer powerful but vulnerable and tender. Ultimately, and paradoxically, it is an attribute or possession of a girl and not a man; it becomes a kind of primitive doll. This confusion between male and female attributes is common in Bourgeois's sculpture; her *Fragile Goddess* (1970) is at once an elongated neck above a pair of breasts and a penis with testicles. This effacing of sexual boundaries is not to be confused with Lachaise's ecstatic metamorphoses, however; it is a game of seduction she plays with the viewer, but (as the titles attest) the assignment of roles is always clear.

Of course, Bourgeois is not the only salient influence on contemporary women artists working with the body, although she has had the most intense effect on the current I want to discuss here. Eva Hesse has had, perhaps, an even broader influence, but she represents a different tradition and a different sense of how the body can be subject for sculpture. Consciously or not, her work's roots are ultimately in Medardo Rosso rather than in Rodin. Hers was a painterly sculpture, an art of surfaces more than of volumes, an art of the skin rather than of the flesh, of vulnerability rather than impulse, of suffering more than desire, of renunciation rather than excess.⁶ This is also the tradition of Giacometti, and pursued into the present (often diffused within a concern for the ready-made or the found object derived from Duchamp, Surrealism and Pop), this is the source for the work of artists as diverse as Kiki Smith, Petah Coyne and Maureen Connor.⁷

Hesse has shown artists who are otherwise closer to Bourgeois a way of bending—or even perverting—the "masculine" rigidities of Minimalism to more fluid, "feminine" ends. Among the most notable of these younger artists may be Rona Pondick. In works done some five years back, mounds of wax and other materials, incredibly fecal in appearance, were presented on stacks of pillows like objects of luxury or rare gems. The mounds on the pillows also evoked bodies in repose or expectation, like the many Venuses and Majas and Olympias who languorously exposed their nudity across centuries of Western art. The irony, if there is one, is not the metonymic reduction of the sexualized body to its most reviled by-product. Instead it is in the intense fascination aroused by taboo; the basest of substances acquires a sexual attractiveness.

In *Loveseat* (1991) and other recent works based on a chair form (and recalling Bellmer's images combining the body parts of his Dolls with chairs), the body has merged with the furniture that supports it. This work is diminutive in size, with a lacy surface embedded in plastic, and two of its feet wear shoes that are too big, like a child playing dress-up. Only these are men's shoes, while a third, smaller leg ends in a little girl's shoe. While this has been interpreted as an allusion to father-daughter incest, a reading that seems too narrow,⁸ I see it as suggesting a young girl's curiosity, or "incorrect" fantasy, about *being* an adult man ("wearing his shoes").

Notes

¹ Michael Kimmelman, "Sensual Sculpture of Gaston Lachaise," *New York Times*, 7 February 1992, section C, p. 26.

² Quoted in Stephen S. Prokopoff and Maarten van den Guchte, *Hans Bellmer: Photographs* (Kranert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1991, distributed by University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 5.

³ As quoted by Kimmelman: "Throughout my career as an artist, I refer to this person by the word 'Woman.'"

⁴ Quoted in Prokopoff and van den Guchte, p. 25.

⁵ Alain Kirili, "The Passion for Sculpture: A Conversation with Louise Bourgeois," *Arts Magazine* (March 1989), p. 71.

⁶ See Alain Kirili, "Ancestor of Arte Povera," *Arts Magazine* (April 1989), pp. 40-43.

⁷ For a fuller treatment of the influence of Eva Hesse on recent sculpture, see Elizabeth Hayt-Atkins, "The Anxiety of Influence," *Contemporanea* (September 1990), pp. 66-73.

⁸ Gretchen Faust, New York in Review, *Arts Magazine* (September 1991), p. 79.

⁹ Edward J. Sozanski, "Sculptures fashioned of sensuous shower curtains and such," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 31 January 1992.

¹⁰ Letters, *Harper's* (May 1992), p. 4.



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Opposite: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1992. Color photograph, 50 x 75 in. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

Above: Cathy de Monchaux, *Hunt*, 1988. Mixed media. Courtesy Studio Guenzani, Milan.