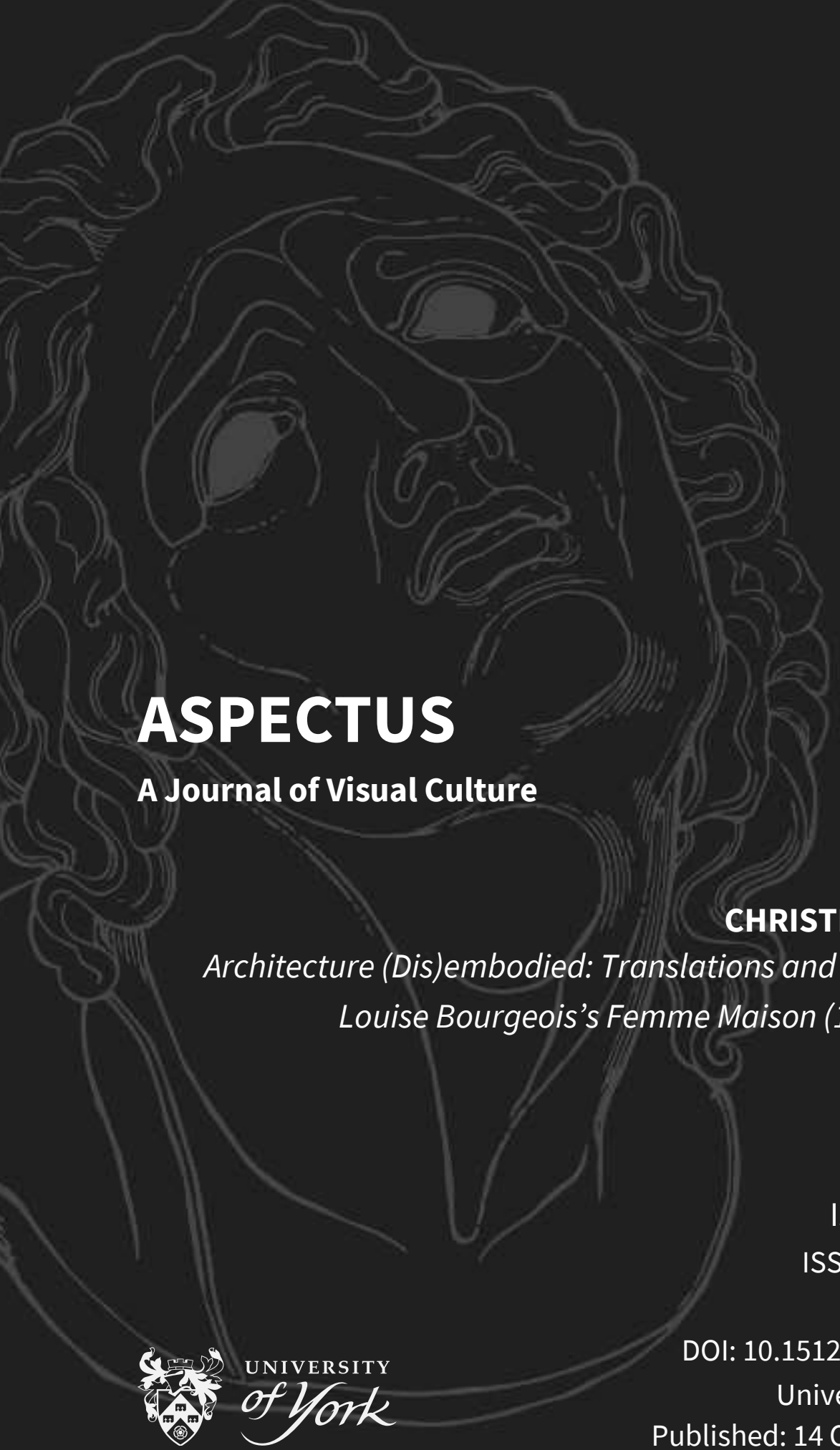

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Architecture (Dis)embodied: Translations and Tensions in Louise Bourgeois's Femme Maison (1946 - 1947)

CHRISTIANE MATT

INTRODUCTION

It was in the immediate post-war years in the United States of America that Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) first produced works exploring the relationship between the female body and its architectural surroundings. The *Femme Maison* (Fig. 1, 1946-1947) belongs to a series of eponymous paintings which the artist executed between 1945 and 1947. Lucy Lippard has argued that these *Femmes Maisons* were a product of Bourgeois's fascination with, but also alienation from New York, the city which became her second home after her emigration from France.[1] Since their rediscovery by second-wave feminists during the 1970s, the *Femmes Maisons* have also taken centre stage in the feminist reception of Bourgeois' work. Consequently, the artist herself has often been heralded as a proto-feminist and has been canonised as one of the 'Great Women Artists'.[2] However, the label of feminism has only been applied retrospectively to Bourgeois's work, while the artist's own statements about feminism were often ambivalent and contradictory. Despite showing her work in a number of feminist exhibitions in the late 1960s and 1970s, Bourgeois never verbally committed to the project of feminism.[3] Her complex positioning in relation to feminism therefore has to be taken into account in the interpretation of her work.

In this article, I shall construct a reading of Bourgeois's *Femmes Maisons* that draws on critical theory, especially Walter Benjamin's and Mark Wigley's work on translation. I shall argue that architecture itself can be read as a form of translation which engages the human body in various ways. I shall use the concept of translation to map out the complex exchanges which take place between architecture and the female body. Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny is brought into dialogue with these theories of translation, as it is concerned with the multifaceted connotations of the notions of home and the domestic. Freud also uses linguistic translation and etymology as methods in his attempt to define the uncanny, or *unheimlich*. To bring his work on the *unheimlich* in relation with architecture, I shall draw on the work of Anthony Vidler. Vidler argues that architecture has since global antiquity been conceived of as an embodiment or abstract representation of the human body.[4] However, this body is not just *any* body: architectural theorists such as Vitruvius and Filarete have cited an idealised male body as a model for architecture.[5] By contrast, the relationship between

the female body and architecture has often been conceived of as one of containment and control. My reading of Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* aims to bring the work in dialogue with theories of architectural embodiment in order to shed new light on the relationship between the female body and (domestic) architecture. By evoking the theoretical frameworks of translation, embodiment and the architectural uncanny, this essay offers an alternative to the often biographical readings of Bourgeois's work which are still prevalent in scholarship today.

Eva Keller and Mignon Nixon approach the *Femmes Maisons* from a biographical perspective, reading the works as expressions of Bourgeois's struggles with motherhood and domesticity. In 1938, Bourgeois emigrated to the United States with her husband, the American art historian Robert Goldwater.[6] Nixon postulates that Bourgeois's early years in New York were dominated by motherhood, as she was raising three young children at the time.[7] She describes these years as a period of personal struggle in which the artist grappled with the dilemma of reconciling her art practice with her responsibilities as a young mother and wife.[8] Keller writes that Bourgeois's early paintings were actively influenced by this experience and expressed the dreams, fantasies and desires of the young artist, woman and mother.[9] These biographical analyses of Bourgeois's work are partly due to the artist's large body of autobiographical writings and her many strategic references to her childhood in France in interviews and conversations. In biographical accounts of Bourgeois's work, the artist's biography serves as a key to the interpretation of her work. Such interpretations, while certainly important for the discussion of the personal history with which Bourgeois grapples in her work, often tend to be oversimplified because they operate on the premise of a causal relationship between the artist's life and her work. In such cases, the complexity and critical potential of Bourgeois's work is often disregarded. Moreover, biographical interpretations of Bourgeois's œuvre often tend to reduce her work to mere expressions of her anxiety and trauma, thus effectively pathologising her. Griselda Pollock argues that these biographical narratives often situate the artist in the realm of hysteria. According to Pollock, in a phallocentric society, those women who do not conform to societal expectations and norms are often branded as hysterics.[10] Once branded a hysteric, the woman ceases to be taken seriously. Consequently, her rage and fear are attributed to her presumed illness or childhood trauma. While in some cases reductive, the use of psychoanalytic theory has simultaneously led to interesting and productive interpretations of Bourgeois's work. One example of this is Pollock's analysis of Bourgeois's œuvre which carefully examines the importance of memory and trauma for her work.

Another avenue of interpretation taken up in scholarship is the comparison of the *Femmes Maisons* to the Surrealist game exquisite corpse. Both Rosalind Krauss and Nixon compare the stylistic discontinuity of the *Femmes Maisons* to this practice. Exquisite corpse is a collaborative game in which each participant draws one part of a figure, folds it over, then hands it to the next participant who repeats the action. The

Figure 1. Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison,* 1946-1947, oil and ink on linen, 91.4 x 35.3 cm, Collection Louise Bourgeois Trust, New York. © The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020.

result is an amorphous, heterogeneous conglomerate of body parts.[11] Elisabeth Lebovici too shares the interpretation advanced by Krauss and Nixon.[12] While such a stylistic analysis is interesting because of its nods to notions of hybridity and translation, it is not sufficient for the purpose of my study, because it does not take into account the conceptual implications of the conjoining of body and architecture. It is not enough to explain the appearance of the *Femmes Maison* as a result of a certain artistic style or influence, because such a verdict reduces them to mere illustrations of a Surrealist trope. Instead, by deploying the concept of translation, I intend to take seriously the *Femme Maison's* exploration of the complicated relationship between the female body and architecture in all its idiosyncrasies.

Em—dash—Bourgeois's *Femmes Maisons* depict nude female bodies whose heads have been replaced by architectural forms such as houses. In this article, I focus on the darkest painting out of the group (Fig. 1), both in mood and colour. It is also the painting in which most of the female body—the entire torso, in fact—has been replaced by a house. This *Femme Maison* is an eerie monochromatic painting which depicts a strange hybrid between a female body and a tall, phallic building. This building can be read as resembling either a skyscraper or a New York brownstone townhouse. Through this visual conjoining, the *Femme Maison* allows me to explore the conceptual implications of conjoining the female body and architecture. It also allows me to explore the tensions of what Lucy Lippard calls "uneasy spaces" in her discussion of Bourgeois's work.[13] These 'uneasy spaces' reveal the ways in which notions of violence and oppression can be inscribed into the concept of domesticity, where the domestic house is sustained by violence.[14] Architectural theory has sometimes considered the human body—especially the female body— as a threat to the integrity of buildings.[15] By drawing on theories of the architectural uncanny, I will demonstrate that the *Femme Maison* reveals these anxieties around the relationship between the female body and architecture.

The painting was created around the same time as Bourgeois's small illustrated book *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* (Figs. 2-3, 1947), in which the artist juxtaposed engravings depicting architectural forms—often skyscrapers or other urban architecture—with short texts. One of the texts, which is accompanied by an image captioned as *Plate 7*, tells the gruesome tale of a femicide; an angry man murdered his wife, cut her body into pieces and then served her remains to his friends in a stew. The corresponding image shows two figures, possibly representing the husband and wife. The upper body of the figure on the left is hidden by the house, only the legs protruding from it. The most striking feature of the right figure is its upper body, which can be interpreted as either a vulva or an eye. In this early work, Bourgeois has already begun to investigate the relationship between the female body, the domestic house, domesticity, domestic labour and violence. This work also serves as a point of comparison to the *Femme Maison*, because it explores the power dynamics inherent in male-female relations.

Figure 2. Louise Bourgeois, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence, Plate 7,* 1947, book of nine engravings and letterpress text on paper, 25.4 x 35.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020.

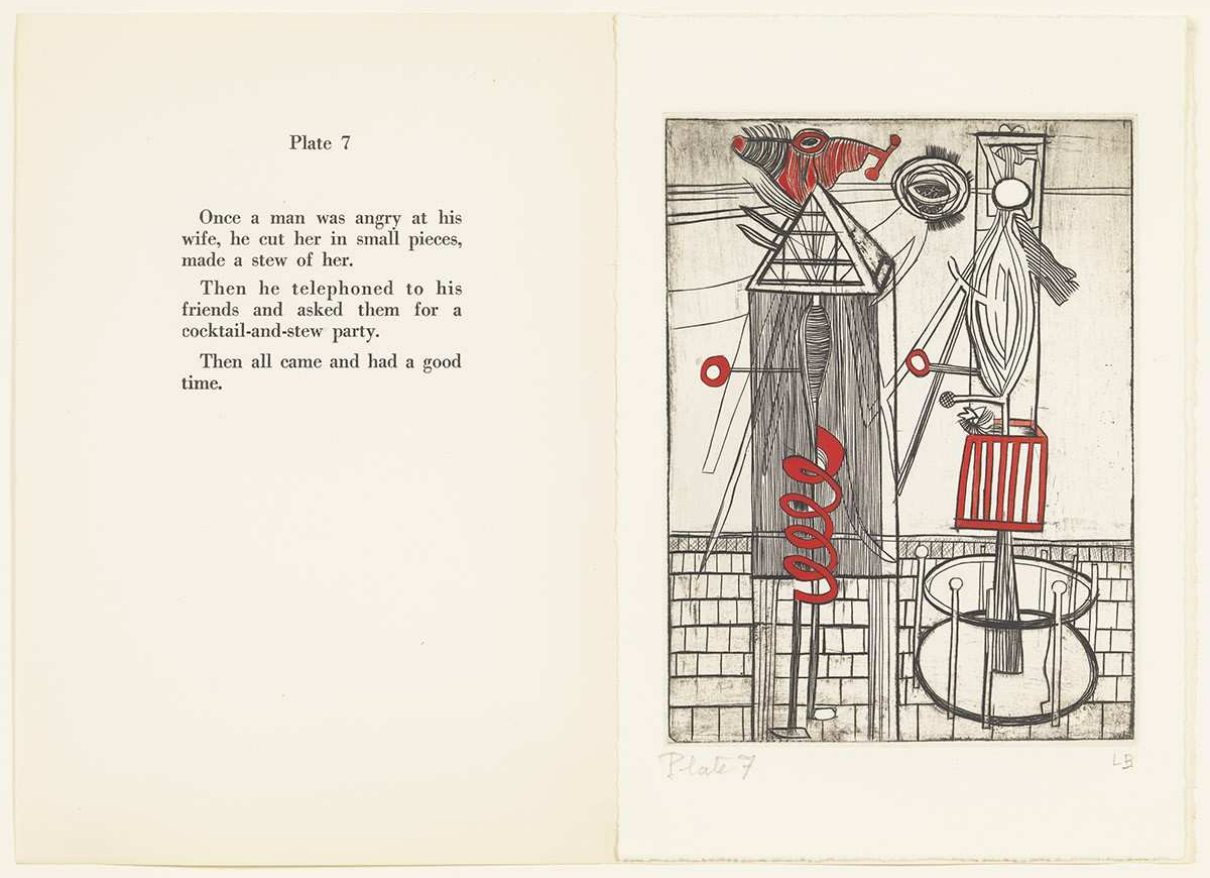

Figure 3. Louise Bourgeois, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence, Plate 7,* 1947, book of nine engravings and letterpress text on paper, 25.4 x 35.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020.

Significantly, Bourgeois also used an image of one of her *Femmes Maisons* to promote her painting exhibition at the Norlyst Gallery in New York in 1947. The opening line of the advertisement brochure reads: "These are paintings of a city dweller … brown stone houses and jails [...]."[16] This text sets the scene for Bourgeois's engagement with architecture as it situates her artistic practice in the urban realm, but it simultaneously makes reference to the domestic. Moreover, the text juxtaposes the domestic house with the jail, thus setting up a dualistic notion of architecture as both shelter and prison. According to Lippard, notions of ambivalence and contradiction are characteristic features of Bourgeois's œuvre.[17] Keeping this in mind, I will demonstrate that the *Femme Maison* presents the relationship between the female body and architecture as a relationship of translation as well as of tension. I shall argue that the *Femme Maison* takes the traditional association of woman with the domestic house as a point of departure for a critical enquiry into the very notions of domesticity, architecture, and the female body.

THE *FEMME MAISON* AND WALTER BENJAMIN'S THEORY OF TRANSLATION

Multiple translations occur simultaneously in the *Femmes Maisons*: the translation between the French and English languages, the translation between title or text and image, and the translation between body and architecture. By translation I mean not only linguistic translation, but translation as a process of reciprocal exchange and transformation that occurs between (at least two) entities. According to Esra Akcan, translation can also be understood as a form of cultural transfer or transportation.[18] But in what ways is the notion of translation related to architecture? In his essay *The Translation of Architecture, The Production of Babel*, Mark Wigley addresses this question as follows:

> Architecture—architectural drawing—is neither simply a mechanical art bound to the bodily realm of utility, nor a liberal art operating in the realm of ideas, but is their reconciliation, the bridge between the two.[19]

Architecture, to Wigley, is inextricably connected to the concept of translation—it is in its very nature a process of translation. He postulates that architectural theory envisioned architecture, and especially the architectural drawing, as a mediator between the immaterial idea and the physical building. The architectural drawing thus communicates the conceptual idea of the building, the drawing giving the idea a physical form. Despite its association with the problematic Cartesian distinction between the immaterial and the physical realm, the mind and the body, culture and/versus nature, Wigley's concept of architecture as translation is nevertheless interesting. I want to particularly use his metaphor of the bridge to analyse the *Femme Maison*, since it points towards the difficulties as well as the possibilities of translation. While the bridge facilitates passage over the river, it remains forever an artificial prop that cannot make the fissure created by the river disappear. By contrast, both Akcan and Mieke Bal have pointed out the productive associations of translation with transportation and transfer.[20] Writing on the etymology of the Latin word *traducere*, literally 'to conduct through', 'to lead across', 'to transfer' or 'to pass beyond', Bal argues that translation is a process of renewal and liberation.[21] Akcan points to the multifaceted nature of translation when she lists " [p]rocesses of domesticating or estranging, assimilating or foreignizing [...]" as all forming part of translation.[22] Moving forward, I shall use Wigley's concept of architecture as translation alongside Walter Benjamin's essay *The Task of the Translator* as interpretive devices for the *Femme Maison*.

In his essay *The Task of The Translator*, Benjamin writes, "[w]hereas content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds."[23] According to Benjamin, each translation stages the complex relationship between the supposed original and its translation. Most importantly, however, translation unlocks a potentiality previously hidden in the original, which he calls its "translatability."[24]

According to Benjamin, "translatability" is the potential for translation in a work of art, it is that which "calls" for the work to be translated.[25] Whereas in the original, meaning and language are closely connected, Benjamin postulates that in the translation, language and content exist in a relationship of tension. The translation often remains alien, overpowering, and ill-fitted. However, likeness to the original is not what makes a good translation, quite the contrary; to strive for likeness hinders the process of translation.[26] Therefore, Benjamin is interested not in what he calls the transmission of inessential content, but rather in that which cannot be reproduced in translation, such as emotional connotations of words.[27] These remarks become salient when considering the relationship between the body of the *Femme Maison* and the house. The relationship between the body and architecture in Bourgeois's *Femmes Maisons* suggests a complex relationship, an extended process of negotiation and tension. Body and architecture are grafted onto each other in a somewhat uneasy fit. The brownstone townhouse which has taken the place of the figure's torso vaguely resembles a body, yet simultaneously it contrasts starkly with the fleshy arms and legs of the female figure. In the painting, architecture violently maps itself onto the female body and aims to shape it, however it cannot fully replace the body.

A translation therefore contributes to the transformative processes of language as well as engaging both the original and its translation in a complex and ambivalent exchange. According to Benjamin, the translation "revives" the original by virtue of transforming it, but equally, the language of the translation is transformed through contact with the original.[28] Translation is thus never simply a more or less faithful transfer of meaning from one language to another. Rather than that, according to Benjamin, translation brings to the fore the relationship or "kinship" between languages.[29] Benjamin argues that this relationship is explicitly not one of likeness or resemblance of the translation to the original. Instead, this kinship between languages is suprahistorical and independent of individual words and their meanings. Instead, it focuses on the totality of languages and that which Benjamin terms their "intentions", which eventually give rise to the "pure language."[30] He postulates: "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages."[31]

Mark Wigley's account of the translation between architecture and deconstruction, while largely drawing on Benjamin's theory of translation, problematises the categories of original, translation and language. According to Wigley, translation brings to the fore the cracks and fissures of the (original) text and of language as a whole.[32] He argues that language is from its outset impure, ruptured and fissured and that this impurity pervades all forms of text. In fact, it is only through the act of translation that the original text is constructed as perfect and pure.[33] Furthermore, Wigley conceives of translation as a contract. However, this contract remains perpetually incomplete and unfulfilled. Through the peculiar conjoining of the female body and the house in Bourgeois's *Femme Maison*, the work makes visible the grafting

and work which takes place in the process of translation between the body and architecture. The body of the figure seems to be struggling against the architecture, yet simultaneously its torso has already become architecture. I shall argue that the *Femme Maison* is an apt visual metaphor for architectural translation.

Linking Benjamin's theory of translation back to Bourgeois's *Femmes Maisons*, I focus on the relationship of the female body and architecture. The title of the painting, *Femme Maison*, which consists of the French words *femme* for woman/wife and *maison* for house, roughly translates to 'woman house', 'house woman' or 'house wife', pointing towards the relationship between the female (body) and architecture.[34] It lends itself to a number of associations—woman/wife, housewife, marriage, reproduction, reproductivity, *domus* (Latin for 'house', 'home', 'residence'), domestic, domesticity, domestication.

The French *une femme*, already, has an interesting dual meaning, since it can refer both to a (sexually) mature woman as opposed to a girl, as well as to a married woman, a wife.[35] While in modern English, the words for woman and wife are clearly distinct, in Old English, they are part of the same word, *wīfman(n)*.[36] *Wīfman(n)* can also be translated to 'wife of (a) man'. The Old English word for man is *wǣp(n)man*, which is closely related to the word for weapon, *wǣpn*.[37] The prefix *wīf-* indicates a person of the female sex, whereas the prefix *wǣp(n)-* refers to a man, or, more precisely, a man-at-arms, a warrior. In Old English, the words distinguishing between the sexes are closely associated with the gendered roles that men and women assume in society, similarly to the French *une femme*. On the contrary, the French *un homme* can refer both to a man as well as to humankind in general.[38] However, the word for husband, *un mari*, refers exclusively to a married man.[39] The concept of marriage thus appears to be deeply ingrained in female identity on a linguistic level. This has also been pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. According to de Beauvoir, the relation between the sexes is not an equal one, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, whereas woman is represented as the absolute Other.[40] De Beauvoir even goes so far as to say that "humanity is male".[41] The consequences of the conception of humanity as male are far-reaching. If humanity is conceived of as male, de Beauvoir argues, this strips women of their autonomy. They are no longer regarded as individual beings, but rather as being in relation to man. More importantly, de Beauvoir argues that women are 'attached' to certain men such as fathers and husbands through "residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing [...]."[42]This observation becomes salient especially in the case of the *Femme Maison*, whose body has literally been attached to and replaced by the domestic house.

Scholarship has often literally translated *Femme Maison* to the English "housewife", but the terms 'housewife' and *Femme Maison* are fundamentally different.[43] Firstly, the correct French term for housewife is *femme/mère au foyer* or *ménagère*, though the latter can also be associated with a domestic worker. These words as well associate

femaleness with domesticity and motherhood. Further, *Femme Maison* refers to the relationship of translation between the female body and architecture, taking into account the complexities and idiosyncrasies of this relationship, whereas the word 'housewife' conflates femaleness with domesticity. In the English word 'housewife', the wife literally becomes married to her house. She is the wife of the house, not of the man. Her identity has been usurped by the house. Though Bourgeois alludes to this radical conflation of femaleness with domesticity in the title of her painting, the following analysis will show that this is not the only possible interpretation of the *Femme Maison*. By bringing the *Femme Maison* into dialogue with Freud's and Vidler's theories of the (architectural) uncanny, it becomes evident that the conjoining of architecture and the female body can lead to fragmentation and mutilation.

(UN)HEIMLICH? FREUD AND THE *FEMME MAISON*

Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* presents the viewer with a sinister perspective on the relationship between the female body and architecture. The torso of the figure is replaced and unnaturally elongated by a phallic structure reminiscent of a New York brownstone townhouse. A steep set of stairs leads up to a narrow entrance or exit, above which a row of three window slits, two of which are illuminated, is positioned. Above this is a singular window which is topped by three smaller windows which are also illuminated. The alternation between light and shadow in the windows creates the impression of flickering lights, evoking the figure of the haunted house. Vidler notes that in nineteenth-century literature, the topos of the haunted house was immensely popular.[44] Indeed, the popularity of the haunted house was due to its associations with domesticity and family history. Its terror was believed to derive from the transgression of the thin line between the familiar and the ghastly. Similarly to Vidler, Freud's theory of the uncanny also evokes the comfort and familiarity of the domestic realm. I shall now draw on these theories to explore the uncanniness inherent in the *Femme Maison*'s representation of the relationship between the female body and architecture. Freud's theory of the uncanny is particularly useful for the analysis of the *Femme Maison*, as it is primarily concerned with the connotations associated with the notion of the home.

Freud prefaces his essay *Das Unheimliche* with the observation that psychoanalysis is seldom concerned with questions belonging to the realm of aesthetics, even though the discipline of aesthetics shares some common concerns with psychoanalysis, for example the examination of human emotions.[45] Freud then claims that while aesthetic theory generally focuses on discussions of positive and sublime emotions, it hardly focuses on their negative counterparts such as fear, shame and repulsion.[46] With his essay, Freud endeavours to examine these negative emotions and especially the notion of the *unheimlich*, the 'uncanny'. His essay can be read as a work of both aesthetics as

well as psychoanalysis, as he bases a large portion of his theory on the interpretation of works of poetry and literary fiction.

In a lengthy excursus, Freud discusses the etymological origins of the German word *Unheimlich*. He notes that *unheimlich* derives from the German expression *Heim*, meaning house or home, as well as from its corresponding adjective *heimlich* for homely or familiar.[47] *Heimlich* is thus associated with comfort and domesticity, and especially female domesticity, as Freud notes that it is also closely associated with the realm of the "sorgliche [...] Hausfrau (caring housewife)", whose domestic labour and care—perceived as a labour of love— imbue her house with a sense of homeliness and comfort.[48] However, the word *heimlich* also carries associations of secrecy and the occult. With her *Femme Maison*, Bourgeois represents the inherent ambivalence in the relationship of the female body and architecture. On the one hand, the *Femme Maison* conflates femaleness with domesticity, as the torso of the figure is replaced by the house. On the other hand, however, the painting also exposes the uncanniness inherent in this relationship.

Citing the dictionary produced by the brothers Grimm, Freud writes that *heimlich* can also be associated with sexuality and sexual shame when referring to the "heimliche Orte am menschlichen Körper", meaning the genitalia.[49] The meaning of *heimlich* is thus ambivalent from its outset. It contains the connotation of the *unheimlich* already within its positive form. It is significant that Freud's notion of the uncanny is so closely related to architecture, and especially to the domestic architecture of the house. Freud conceives of the home—and the homely—as highly ambivalent categories, oscillating between familiarity and comfort and the uncanny. Although Freud does not explicitly refer to the urban realm in his theory of the uncanny, he writes that darkness, shadow and night are predestined to evoke the *unheimlich*.[50] What appears familiar during daytime shows a new, unsettling face during nighttime. Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* plays on this observation, but places it in an urban setting. The profound and overpowering darkness of the painting, which is contrasted only by sparsely applied highlights in white paint, evokes a gloomy back alley in a city made of skyscrapers which threateningly tower over the lone walker at night. At night, windows of houses transform into eerily watchful eyes, following the walker's every step, and entranceways become gaping or screaming mouths which threaten to swallow her. The *Femme Maison* then appears monstrous, even violent. However, there is another element to the uncanniness of nightly urban space, and one which is specifically female. Most women express concerns for their safety when walking home alone at night. This is due to what Susan Edwards calls the "everyday reality" of violence against women.[51] However, as Gillian Rose notes, women are safe neither inside their homes nor outside of them.[52] Bourgeois explores the realities of violence against women most powerfully in *He Disappeared Into Complete Silence* (1947).

Often enough women are killed not by strangers, but by their boyfriends, lovers, and husbands in their own homes. This becomes especially evident in plate seven of Bourgeois's *He Disappeared Into Complete Silence* (1947). This work radically subverts the notion of the home as a peaceful and safe space. Instead, the house becomes a space for violence against women. Furthermore, the work turns traditional gender roles on its head: the husband takes on both the role of the violent abuser as well as that of the generous dinner host which is traditionally associated with femininity. Price has argued that the ideological construction of the home as a safe space is in fact rooted in violence.[53] Price postulates that the notion of the home is constructed by those who live and work in it. Indeed, 'making' the home is a form of labour. It is also a task which often falls upon the woman, who in turn is constituted as the homemaker. According to Price, it is female domestic labour which produces the home as a space of repose for man.[54] Through her role as a homemaker, the woman's identity becomes intimately entangled with the notion of the house. Indeed, the woman embodies the notion of the home in the process of constructing her identity. Therefore, Price argues, when a woman becomes the victim of domestic abuse, she often blames the abuse on her presumed failure to satisfactorily carry out her duties as a homemaker.[55]

Bourgeois's *Femme Maison*, too, operates on the ambivalent relationship between the female body and architecture. Whereas on the one hand, architecture—especially the architecture of the domestic house—represents a space of comfort and refuge, on the other hand, it can also become a space of violence and fear. Urban space, as seen in the *Femme Maison* also maintains a conflicted relationship with the female body: it promises freedom from the conceptual confinement of women to domestic space, but simultaneously, the outside world is represented as alien and dangerous.

Moreover, Freud writes about the uncanniness of severed limbs or severed heads, especially when the severed body parts seem to move of their own accord without being connected to a body.[56] He observes this in works of Gothic literature, such as E.T.A Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1816) and Wilhelm Hauff's *Die Geschichte von der abgehauenen Hand* (1826). This sense of uncanniness, according to Freud, links back to castration anxiety. Viewed in this context, the mutilation of the female body in the *Femme Maison* could also be perceived as uncanny. This is exemplified especially in the mysterious appearance of three arms and the cramped legs which protrude from the architecture. Through the addition of anthropomorphic limbs to the architectural form of the house, the architecture appears animated. The formerly inanimate object appears to have gained a life of its own, which makes it highly disturbing.

Freud also states that some male neurotics express a fear of the female genitalia which, according to him, are the entrance to the 'first home' of man, the womb.[57] Freud postulates that the vagina reminds the neurotic of the lost comfort of his first 'home' and the separation from the nurturing mother, his object of desire. However, and this is what causes distress to the neurotic male, he cannot return to the womb. The womb

has become inaccessible to him. His fear is caused by contact with an originary experience which he has repressed. As Luce Irigaray has argued, woman has been defined by man in relation to place or space.[58] According to Irigaray, man defines the maternal body as a site of origin, as a container from which he enters into the world.[59] This conception of the female body renounces woman's subjectivity, it turns her into a passive object. Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* cleverly juxtaposes the genitalia of the female figure—her labia parting as if to release a scream of despair or, as Mignon Nixon has argued, resembling a smile—with the narrow entrance to the building superimposed on the body of the figure.[60] However, the desire for entry is frustrated, the body of the *Femme Maison* remains inaccessible.

How, then, does Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* comment on the relationship between the female body and architecture? Architecture, from its outset, is directly involved with the body. In fact, the house has often been conceived of as a representation of the human body. Filarete's fifteenth-century architectural treatise takes the analogy between body and building to the extreme. He argues that the building is a living organism which can fall ill or even die.[61] However, the relationship between architecture and the body is not always straightforward. Elizabeth Grosz writes: "Architecture, along with life itself, moves alongside of—is the ongoing process of negotiating—habitable spaces."[62] Grosz argues that architecture occupies an ambivalent position in relation to the question of embodiment: on the one hand, architecture is a mode of embodiment, on the other hand, however, architecture as a discipline repeatedly disavows its indebtedness to the body and embodiment. Architecture, especially in the form of the domestic house, houses the body, but simultaneously, the body is perceived as a threat to its integrity. Wigley's analysis of Leon Battista Alberti's *De re Aedificatoria* (1443-1452) reveals a similar anxiety about the relationship between the body and architecture.[63] Wigley describes how Alberti's treatise warns of the dangers of mismanaging the body and its fluids, odours and excrements and concludes that at the time of Alberti's writing, the body first emerged as a threat to the cleanliness and hygiene of buildings.[64]

Wigley concludes: "Before it can defend the body, architecture must defend itself against the body by ordering it."[65] Architecture houses the body, but it also appears to need to cleanse itself from the body. This cleansing is afforded by the production of purification rituals surrounding the relationship between the body and architecture. This ordering and management of the body through habits and rituals is meant to contain and control the unruliness and irrationality of human bodies. The existence of such purification rituals becomes especially pertinent when considering the specifically gendered nature of the threat the body is thought to pose to the house. Wigley demonstrates how Alberti's text constructs the female body and female sexuality as dangers to the boundaries of architecture, as well as the patriarchy by characterising female sexuality as overflowing and excessive.[66] Because women as constituted through architectural discourse are thought to be unable to establish clear

boundaries by themselves, Wigley shows that that same discourse argues that they need to be bounded by an external law, which is architecture.[67]

Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* critically comments on the ambivalent relationship between the female body and architecture. While at first glance the female figure appears trapped in the architecture, with the architecture becoming a smothering prison, at the same time, the figure pushes back against the boundaries within which it appears to be confined. Scholarship has often interpreted Bourgeois's *Femmes Maisons* as metaphors for women's confinement in domestic spaces and the conflation of femaleness with domesticity. However, the female figure in the *Femme Maison* is not merely a passive prisoner of her house; rather, she actively resists her confinement.

Christine Battersby offers an interesting perspective on the question of boundaries which is applicable to *Femme Maison.* In *Her Body/Her Boundaries* (1999), Battersby rejects the hypothesis put forward by the philosopher Mark Johnson that the human body is a three-dimensional container which protects the inner self from external forces.[68] In her essay, Battersby recounts her own failure to perceive her body as a container and then proceeds to dismantle Johnson's hypothesis of bodily containment. She objects to Johnson's theory of a universal experience of embodiment and argues for a theory of embodiment that is attuned to historical, cultural, sexual and gendered specificities.[69] Drawing on the work of Irigaray, Battersby argues that Western philosophy has tended to prioritise a concept of identity focused on unity and solidity in which the self is constituted through exclusion of the Other.[70] Indeed, Irigaray argues that woman is "indefinitely other in herself."[71] Her exploration of female pleasure desire leads her to the conclusion that female pleasure is non-linear and multiple, and that it cannot be defined in masculine terms.[72] Irigaray opposes the model of identity as fixed and unified and in turn proposes a model of identity which focuses on the fluidity and permeability of (bodily) boundaries and the interpenetration of self and other.[73] Bourgeois's *Femme Maison*, too, explores the question of boundaries through the conjoining of the body and architecture. The *Femme Maison* pushes back against the structures which trap her, both literally and figuratively.

The female figure in the *Femme Maison* raises her hands as if reaching towards the sky and her knees push outwards so that they collide with the frame of the painting. The frame of the painting then becomes a porous and precarious boundary which might eventually break under the pressure imposed on it by the female body. However, the blurring of boundaries in the *Femme Maison* is not only confined to the physical boundaries of the painting and its frame, it extends even further: the limbs of the female figure appear to grow almost organically out of the architecture. The transition between the legs of the figure and the house is seamless and the three arms emerge from the sides of the building as if they naturally form part of its construction. The work also breaks down the gender binary in its juxtaposition of the erect, phallic

architecture of the brownstone townhouse and the figure's gaping vaginal lips. Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* thus systematically does away with the notion of boundaries and binaries; the oppositions between body and architecture, mind and matter, stone and flesh, hard and soft become intimately entangled with each other and indistinguishable. The *Femme Maison* is both architecture and body, but at the same time she is neither of them, for binary oppositions can no longer account for her.

CONCLUSION

As this exploration of the *Femme Maison* has shown, Bourgeois uses the work to critically examine and comment on the relationship between the female body and architecture. Throughout her career, the theme of the *Femme Maison* remained a lasting concern for Bourgeois. After her initial explorations of the theme in drawing and painting, she returned to the *Femme Maison* in the 1980s to produce a series of small-scale marble sculptures. Most notably, Lebovici has argued that in Bourgeois's artistic practice, the home is figured as a quintessentially female space.[74] It is within the space of the home that Bourgeois explores questions of female identity and experience. The relationship between the female body and the house is figured as one of translation, of slippage between the two entities. Architecture can offer a safe space to the female figure, yet, it can also become a smothering prison; often it is both at the same time. Bourgeois's work takes as its starting point the traditional association of the female body with the domestic house, but then subverts and undoes it productively. The process of translation between the female body and architecture is an ongoing process of negotiation. As I have argued, this process of translation is never finished—the *Femme Maison* presents the viewer with infinite possibilities of translation and each viewer contributes to the process by offering their own reading of the painting. The painting explores and critically comments on the notions of the domestic, domesticity and domestication as well as on relationships of translation and (re-)production. By doing this, the work calls into question the very notions of the body, of femaleness and of architecture. It radically blurs the boundaries between the female body and architecture, thus becoming both architecture *and* body, but also neither body nor architecture. The *Femme Maison* subsequently becomes a fitting metaphor for the relationship between the female body and architecture, as it demonstrates the deep and intimate entanglement, but also the tensions and discord between the female body and architecture.

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