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REFERENCES

Jean Frémon, *Louise Bourgeois : femme maison*, Paris : L'Echoppe, 2013 (nouvelle éd.)
 Meret Oppenheim, *Worte nicht in giftige Buchstaben einwickeln*, Zurich : Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013. Sous la dir. de Martina Corgnati, Lisa Wenger
 Maria Martins : *metamorphoses*, São Paulo : Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 2013
 Meret Oppenheim: *Retrospective*, Ostfildern : Hatje Kantz, 2013. Sous la dir. de Heike Eipeldauer, Ingried Brugger, Gereon Sievernich
 Meret's Sparks : *The Collection of Contemporary Art, Part 2 = Merets Funken : die Sammlung Gegenwartskunst Teil 2*, Bielefeld : Kerber, 2013
 Meret Oppenheim: *Eine Einführung*, Bâle : Christoph Merian, 2013. Sous la dir. de Simon Baur, Christian Fluri
 Meret Oppenheim : *Gedankenspiegel = Mirrors of the Mind*, Bielefeld : Kerber, 2013
 Les Papesses : Camille Claudel, Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Jana Sterbak, Berlinde de Bruyckere, Arles : Actes Sud ; Avignon : Collection Lambert, 2013

- 1 The exhibition *Les Papesses*¹ on view at the Collection Lambert issues us with a powerful invitation to question the relevance of bringing artists together because they are women. Such an idea does not create unanimity, but this time round, at least, the demonstration does seem quite effective. In any event, this is a good opportunity, if not to embark on this somewhat biased debate, at least to describe a powerful female output which is underwritten and enriched by a beautiful series of books devoted to women artists at the end of 2013. After the Modern Women's Project (2005-2010) which led to the book *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art* (New York, 2010) and the exhibition *Elles@centrepompidou : artistes femmes dans la collection du Musée national d'art moderne*,

centre de création industrielle, bringing together works hailing from the Centre Georges Pompidou collections (2009), as well a whole lot of events in various countries,² it would seem that, after galleries and temporary shows, museums have undertaken to shed some light on an essential share of contemporary art that is often kept under wraps: the work of women artists. The publications which go hand-in-hand with this turnaround show quite well how the time has come to push forward with research in this area, in order to shatter the existing “glass ceiling” and combat the discrimination which is far from having disappeared.

- 2 The exhibition *Les Papesses* has as its brief an evident pretext: the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Camille Claudel’s burial by her family. What is thus involved is a return to an emblematic denial which pushed Camille Claudel to despair and kept her confined for thirty years in the Montfavet psychiatric hospital. This anniversary immediately opens up two orders of perception: the first has to do with relations between art praxis and the “conventions” and social norms associated therewith, and the second with the practice of sculpture by women—we will eschew use of the words ‘female’ or ‘feminine’—, because it was in this reputedly male genre that Camille Claudel had decided to excel.
- 3 The very title, *Les Papesses*, draws our attention to the emphatic presence of the body. It was in fact through the sudden and unexpected appearance of a body that the legend of Pope Joan presented the break with convention. The story goes that it was because she gave birth in public that the female pope saw her plan—which was to usurp male papal power—condemned by one and all. The legend which made much capital out of this imaginary transgression would endure right up to the modern day, and informs the real motif to the exhibition: the body in the work of a few contemporary artists.
- 4 From Camille Claudel to Kiki Smith, it is in effect the obsessive presence of the dull, obtuse material nature of the human body which catches the eye. As if, in its effort to extricate itself from the illusionism of representation, the modern and above all contemporary history of art had found an alternative in the third dimension. Going beyond the image, the sculptures and installations of these artists play on the actual presence of the body, obsessive and stubborn. As if, beyond over-intellectualized avant-gardes, art were finding a new afflatus in the bodily character of things of the world. In this shift there lies a justification of the *installation* as an arrangement or device, in its effort to render the world at once perceptible and intelligible. Not *objects*, in the sense whereby the object exists in its distance from the eye, but *apparitions*, witnesses of a world which includes its spectators, encircles them and acts as a mirror for them, an “*inhabited*” world rather than one merely *seen* or *manipulated*.
- 5 Talking about the line, Paul Klee said that it does not imitate the visible but “renders visible”. Paraphrasing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who borrows this observation from the painter, might we say that the use of different forms of voluminous matter in the work of Louise Bourgeois and Berlinde de Bruyckere does not imitate the human body but renders it tangible, or rather makes it impossible to escape from the closeness which emanates from it, envelops me and, in the end, “touches” me? Here we come upon the issue which, in the ironical manner which was his, Marcel Duchamp raised in *Prière de toucher*, and which Lygia Clark, a great Brazilian “female pope” of the sense of touch, adapted to her language: “*favor tocar*”. In their struggle against the dry season which rationalism had given rise to, all the artists who were, at a given moment, close to Surrealism were intent, in their artistic praxis, on safeguarding the implacability of the bodily experience, and its

unconscious and magical dimension. And, whatever its material, sculpture is a vehicle of this ambivalence of sensation more than any other medium.

- 6 As if the power of what is inhabited came to sculpture in the very moment when this latter steps back from the traditional codes of representation. Whence the question that is implicitly raised by this exhibition: might women artists have something to do with this resumption? Might they offer sculpture a way of being in space referring less to the objects of Edgar Degas and Auguste Rodin, for whom the figure was always representative of a body or of an identity kept elsewhere, than producing an effect of pure presence? But through what combination, then? The objects of the “female popes”, like the child escaping from the ambiguous belly of Pope Joan, sow confusion in relation to the *event*, to a *hic et nunc* “tossed into this world”, as Martin Heidegger put it (*Geworfenheit*). As Paul Claudel wrote for a posthumous exhibition of his sister Camille’s work: “The body, after all, knows as much as the soul”.³ The essence lies in the concession, in the *after all* which reinstates to the immediacy of the body what spiritual idealization had removed from it.
- 7 The fact remains that the exhibition *Les Papesses* puts its finger precisely on the symbolic *creation/procreation* link which turns the body into an essential challenge, and this is not insignificant. Jean Frémon writes this about Louise Bourgeois and Nancy Spero: “The former more solitary, the latter more overtly militant, turned their backs on painting in favour of sculpture, impressions, tracks, cut-out silhouettes and the installation of objects. And, like a different kind of iconoclasm, they were not afraid of broaching hitherto taboo subjects: bodies and their humours, their functions, their secretions, *precious liquids*, in the words of Louise Bourgeois.”⁴
- 8 In this context, the exhibition *Meret Oppenheim Retrospective* which was held in Berlin⁵ relaunches the theme of female art. It is not the only one to do so, because the centenary of Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) spawned a large crop of exhibitions⁶ and critical publications⁷, which help to shed light on this issue from the viewpoint of one of the 20th century’s leading women artists. The fact is that if Meret Oppenheim invariably spoke out very clearly in favour of equality between men and women, and if she produced a combative œuvre in this respect, it was not her intent—quite to the contrary—to contrast a *woman’s art* to a no less hypothetical *man’s art*, which, in the 1970s, put her in a delicate situation with regard to certain feminist movements. Far from making reference to a gendered specificity, Meret Oppenheim waged war against stereotypes of masculinity and femininity alike, which, in her eyes, were injurious for each gender. She explains herself, on this matter, in an epistolary exchange with Alain Jouffroy: “To your question: “Do you think that your objects and your paintings would be the same if you were a man?” She nevertheless replies as follows: “My first instinct was to answer yes... But among them there are some which a man would not have made, I believe, or not in our day and age. If I say “day and age”, I am thinking of the several thousand years that the patriarchy has lasted.”⁸ Everything in this response is said in good humour. Yes, there is a human species and just one. Culture has made it possible for disfiguring representations of domination and submission to develop: the patriarchy prevents each person from being able to *be fully him- or herself*.
- 9 Achieving, unfettered, self-fulfilment applies in an exemplary way to the life led by Meret Oppenheim in “Surrealist” circles and elsewhere, close as she was to Man Ray, Benjamin Peret, André Breton, Marcel Duchamp and André Pieyre de Mandiargues. An extremely interesting volume of correspondence,⁹ published by the family, sheds much original light on the oeuvre itself, which is so disinclined to fit into a mould and undergo repetition in

order to successfully impose a “style”, as it does on one or two snippets of boudoir gossip, still kept secret, which show that the artist had a fascinating personality. There is another artist whose personality was fascinating, and in whom the critic and historian Michel Seuphor¹⁰ recognized the greatest sculptress of Surrealism: the Brazilian Maria Martins (1894-1973). She, too, had her fully-fledged place among the “female popes”, both through the visual power of her work and because of her international career. The Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo held an exhibition of her work in 2013, under the title *Metamorphoses*.¹¹ In it we find the predominance of sculpture and body, with this latter, incidentally, assuming a sort of mythical dimension, for it was Maria Martins’s own body which was used for the cast in Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant donné*. On her arrival in New York, she in no time found affinities in the Surrealist galaxy. She had three exhibitions at the Valentine Gallery, in 1943, 1944, and 1946, met Breton and Duchamp, and took part, in 1947, in the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947* at the Gallery Maeght. Maria Martins was less concerned than Meret Oppenheim with finding forms of expressions which should permanently be renewed, and remained essentially attached both to working bronze and to the expressive possibilities of its mineral rigidity. But she paradoxically forced it to reinstate the changing world of metamorphoses, the uncertainty of physical identities (*Fatalité femme*, 1948), tensions and vital energies (*Impossible*, 1940) and, in *Glèbe-Ailes* (1944), the need to re-anchor the human being in telluric forces. In such a way that the originality and power of her sculptures once again raised the question of knowing whether a male sculptor could have been their maker.

- ¹⁰ Far be it from us to provide an answer. Perhaps, nowadays, it would no longer be appropriate to ask the question in these terms, meaning that we consider that the range of sensibilities is finally distributed in a random manner between the two biologically determined sexes, or that we abandon the very notion of “sex”, which is felt to be exaggeratedly associated with biologically determining factors,¹² preferring the notion of “gender”, defined by the social construct of roles. This construct is undoubtedly essential for an understanding of artistic production, by women and men alike. It nevertheless tends to make the relation to the body more blurred, be it one’s own body or the body of the other, by disbanding the biological dimension in forms of social conditioning. From the perspective of this question we are also prompted to think about the relation which artists establish with the materials they use in the production of their works: bronze or fabric, marble or cloth. The question merits reflection, especially when we see how an artist like Louise Bourgeois juggles with them all.

NOTES

1. *Les Papesses: Camille Claudel, Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Jana Sterbak, Berlinde de Bruyckere*, organized by Eric Mézil, Collection Lambert, Hôtel de Caumont, and Palais des Papes, Avignon, 9 June-11 November 2013.

2. See the reference work, proceedings of the conference: *Le Genre à l'œuvre*, held in 2011 and supervised by Marie Buscatto, Anne Forselle, Mary Leontsini, Margaret Maruani, Hyacinthe Ravet and Bruno Péquignot, 3 volumes, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2012

3. *Les Papesses*, *Op. cit.*, p. 324
4. Frémon, Jean. *Louise Bourgeois : femme maison*, Paris : L'Eclap, 2013, p. 99
5. *Meret Oppenheim Retrospective*, exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, August 2013-January 2014. Catalogue in English : Berlin, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013
6. Starting on 15 February 2014, the LaM in Lille will be putting on an exhibition titled *Meret Oppenheim* (until 1 June 2014), the artist's first retrospective in France for three decades; see also: *Meret Funken*, Exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern, October 2012-February 2013. Catalogue published by the Kunstmuseum Bern and Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld, 2013
7. *Meret Oppenheim : Gedankenspiegel, Mirrors of the mind*, Bielefeld, Kerber Verlag, 2013
This bilingual publication provides a comprehensive iconography of the artist and a commented biography. Its main interest lies in its inclusion of a selection of critical texts which are sadly not all reproduced in their entirety. Readers may also consult *Meret Oppenheim : Eine Einführung*, edited by Simon Baur and Christian Fluri, Basel, Christoph Merian Verlag, 2013.
8. Oppenheim, Meret. *Worte nicht in giftige Buchstaben einwickeln*, edited by Lisa Wenger and Martina Corgnati, Zürich : Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013. This book reproduces the correspondence (in French and German) which Meret Oppenheim had kept, but asked that it not be published for twenty years after her death. It is a noteworthy mine of information about the life of the art world from the 1930s to the 1980s, memorable, in particular, for her exchange with André Pieyre de Mandiargues. The volume also contains a facsimile reproduction of the "Diary" which Meret Oppenheim kept, from her childhood to 1943, complete with drawings, collages, photos and documents.
9. Oppenheim, Meret. *Worte nicht in giftige Buchstaben einwickeln*, *Op. cit.*, p. 351
10. Quoted by Maria José Justino, *Mulheres na arte : que diferença isso faz*, Curitiba : Museu Oscar Niemeyer, 2013, p. 45
11. *Maria Martins : Métamorphoses*, in São Paulo, from July to September 2013, catalogue and exhibition curated by Felipe Chaimovich, São Paulo, Museu de Arte Moderna, 2013
12. This is the choice that has finally won the day in the Anglo-Saxon world, insofar as, unlike French, the English term "sex" essentially has to do with the biological organ and not gender.