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“The subject of pain is the business I am in”

Louise Bourgeois and the iconography of hysteria: reclaiming the visibility of pain

“The Hysterical arch talks about suffering but also of expression, of malady but also about communication” (L.Bourgeois, 1993). Those are Louise Bourgeois’ (Paris, 1911-NYC, 2010) words on what constitutes the heart of her research on the issue of pain, epitomised by her lifelong interrogation around the question of pain expressed by hysteria. The essay presents Louise Bourgeois’s production on the theme of hysteria, by analysing the artist’s writings and works, and through a reconstruction of her iconographic and historical sources, notably, the works of J.M. Charcot (1895-1893) and in the *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière*, (IPS) constituting at once both Bourgeois key iconographical source and object of critique. The paper argues how Bourgeois’ oeuvre elaborates on the one hand a critical stance towards the gendered construction of the history of hysteria as a female malady, and, on the other, it makes male hysteria visible, the unspoken in the history of the disease; a silence that influenced not only the understanding of a stereotyped version of femininity but also of a normative masculinity. The second part of the text shows how Bourgeois research shifts from a reflection on the historical construction of the discourse on hysteria to the interrogation upon the expressive element intrinsic to pain. Representing hysteria Bourgeois makes visible the subject and the question emerging from suffering, going beyond any specialized definitions of it. The artist ultimately depicts human condition as the acceptance of suffering.

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