(SELF)PORTRAIT OF A LADY

She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life.
Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1881

For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture
Louise Bourgeois

Between 1946 and 1947 Louise Bourgeois made a series of drawings on canvas entitled *Femme Maison*. The 'house wife', which is the literal meaning of the title, portrayed by the artist is a naked female body that is almost entirely exposed except for a miniature house that covers, and constrains, her from the shoulders up (an image that half a century later would be taken up and animated in Monica Bonvicini's video-performance *Hausfrau Swinging*, where a young and naked woman repeatedly bangs her head, stuck inside the model of a house, against the wall). Married with children at the time, Bourgeois had produced those works as models for sculptures that she did not have the room to create at home, as she declared in an interview given a long time ago. On another occasion, she said that she had started to sculpt, i.e. to *make* art in the most physical sense of the term, in order to escape the feeling of demoralization that overcame her when her husband and children left her alone at home during the day. The *Femme Maison* is the artist herself assailed by the 'feeling of being trapped... and the theme of escape.... On the one hand you are trapped by the past, and there is nothing you can do about it except running from it... the art comes from those unsatisfied desires'. The domestic environment, which takes the shape of a place both of containment and possibility, is the nerve centre of the female artistic experience. The home understood as metaphor for childhood, whose salient events return, reworked, in the research of many women artists – such as that of the seven protagonists of the exhibition *(Self)-portrait of a Lady* – as well as the mirror of a femininity that has always been conditioned by socio-historical factors. Louise Bourgeois, and with her artists as distant from one another in their background and personal motivations as Rossana Buremi, Letizia Cariello, Berlinde de Bruyckere, Carol Rama, Maddalena Sisto and Veronica Smirnoff, have made art, taking very different routes and with equally different aims, into a possibility of transcending the stereotyped female condition and its claustrophobic boundaries – commencing with the destructuring of the domestic environment seen as both a physical and a symbolic location. These artists, more or less consciously, have subverted the concept of the home as a female prison – a sad constant down the centuries examined by Virginia Woolf in her famous essay *A Room of One's Own* (1928) – and turned it into a place 'in which to look for tests of oneself' to borrow the words of Letizia Cariello, who has worked intensely on overturning this oppressive scheme. She does this by appropriating its own means, which signifies declaring: 'It's not you that is shutting me in. It's me that is shutting you out'. As does Isabel Archer, the heroine of Henry James's novel *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), who opts to set herself free while remaining inside the oppressive house of her marriage, making a choice of deliberate seclusion that disarms every attempt at external conditioning and that, as a consequence, achieves the greatest inner freedom. A conceptual conquest already attained by the female mystics of the Middle Ages but one that only started to become tangible in the 19th century when it was no longer just the very few celebrated female artists (the *Rosalbas*, the *Artemisias*, the *Angelicas*...) who possessed a studio. The 'room of one's own', that Virginia Woolf considered materially indispensable for any woman who wished to devote herself to artistic creation, developped from mark of emanicipation into a theatre in which she could explore her own identity, wrestling with the most intimate and conflict-torn dimensions of the self and, at last, give form to that creative force with which, again according to Woolf, the rooms in which women have remained seated for centuries are pervaded. 'What interests me is the conquering of the fear, the hiding, the running away from it, facing it, exorcising it, being ashamed of it, and, finally, being afraid of being afraid': once again Louise Bourgeois shows herself to be as effective with words as she can be with her art. Words which are echoed by those of Carol Rama, another genius of the 20th century who shares many things with Bourgeois besides an extraordinary longevity: 'Art exists if there are secret things, something that is not said and cannot be said'. Both have produced highly eroticized, unconventional imagery (even bearing in mind the fact that these two vestals first began to express themselves around the 1930s): in other words anti-female images in the ordinary sense of the term. As Gillo Dorfles has said of Carol Rama, 'there is nothing in her of traditional, acted-out femininity',[1] summing up her capacity, and that of other women artists, to express themselves *naturally* outside the rules. Even when they seem at first sight a bit mannered – for that is how we paradoxically interpret any recourse to elements of the female universe – these artists puncture any prejudice by recounting with primordial intensity the cruel beauty of the existence that lies beyond any sociocultural construct. Even the use of craft – almost 'domestic' - materials and techniques (from pottery to plasticine, from needlework to collage), becomes a way of questioning the distinctions between 'high' and 'low', between cultured and popular, between male and female.

As Louise Bourgeois puts it: 'I'm an artist. I'm not a woman artist'. When the young Rossana Buremi moulds her pornographic repertoire in plasticine she uses sex as a conceptual tool with the capacity of abstraction of an intentionally sexless artist. The obsessive repetition of the erotic theme allows the artist to represent her own torment, which she herself defines as 'a theology that does not overcome, does not relieve, but that investigates and leads to a circular route without beginning or end'.

If at home one is a woman, in the studio one is an artist. The studio is the inviolable space in which it is possible to redesign one's own autonomy without having to go along with a male idea of the feminine. Even the yielding

charm of the work of Veronica Smirnoff, so apparently feminine in a stereotyped sense, has an underlying sense of strong self-determination; a need to free herself from her own past by mythicizing it through forms drawn from the fund of Russian fables and legends. It was in her studio that Maddalena

[1] Gillo Dorfles, 'Santa Karol della Trasgressione. Dialogo tra Gillo Dorfles e Marco Vallora', in *Carol Rama. L'occhio degli occhi, Opere dal 1937 al 2005*, Skira, Milan 2008.

Sisto, an eclectic artist, as omnivorous and disinterested as only (certain) women can be, found the possibility of escape from the demands of society (to a female interviewer who once asked her what was her ideal way of spending a Saturday, the artist responded ‘alone working in my studio because no one knows I am there’); a ‘disappearance’ that has nothing to do with the annihilation of the housewife but, on the contrary, becomes an opportunity to explore different aspects of one’s own complex identity. Maddalena Sisto did not draw men because, as she had declared with disarming frankness, she didn’t find them interesting: ‘they are ordinary and blend easily into the crowd’. To the facets of the female, on the other hand, she devoted hundreds and hundreds of portraits that, at bottom, are all self-portraits.

The artistic research of these women artists always stems from individual experience, beyond the desire to represent the female gender. If anything, as in the case of Berlinde de Bruyckere, the interest is shifted towards universal themes, such as human suffering, symbolized through a yearning physicality that often alludes to the female body. A distorted, lacerated body, reduced to bits of flesh. One thinks too of the mutilations of Carol Rama and Louise Bourgeois, as well as the sutured wounds of Letizia Cariello and the anatomical excesses of Maddalena Sisto... Conquering a – physical and symbolic – space of one’s own also signifies regaining possession of the body, destroying it metaphorically to deliver it from the reification of the (male) gaze, and finally to reassemble it into one’s own, most intimate self-portrait.

Caroline Corbetta, January 2009