3 FIRST-GENERATION FEMINISM

The malaise that gripped the avant-garde in the late 1960s was dispelled for one group of artists, who embraced a new, positive cause, namely feminism. Feminism surfaced in the art world around 1969, when women artists formed consciousness-raising groups in which, as Faith Wilding remarked, "each woman shares and bears witness to her own experience in a non-judgmental atmosphere." Consciousness-raising was also considered "a political tool because it teaches women the commonality of their oppression and leads them to analyze its causes and effects."[1] Women artists had been active in the Art Workers Coalition and other dissident organizations whose leadership was male—and macho—and had come to resent their relegation to "gofer" status, but they did learn how to organize and proselytize,[2] skills they would use on behalf of the women's movement. Feminism soon replaced the protest against the Vietnam War as the most powerful polemical and political force in the art world.

In their discussions women artists discovered that most of them worked on a small scale, in part because they wanted to and in part because they were relegated to kitchens and bedrooms while their male partners took the large studio spaces. Many women found that they preferred to use handicraft materials and techniques historically identified with women's work. Moreover, they were often drawn to subject matter and content that was culled from their own experiences, and they were encouraged to create a personal and subjective art in their consciousness-raising sessions. Feminists believed that their art should be about their lives as women. Art was to begin with the individual, detailing her experiences, emotions, desires, and dreams—who she was and how she got to be that way[3]—but if deeply felt, it would express a sense of the collective experience and consciousness of all women. As Suzanne Lacy recalled, feminist artists believed that art could "influence cultural attitudes and transform stereotypes. Naive as it sounds, change was our goal (though its directions were not clearly articulated)."[4]

Working small, with unorthodox materials and with personal subject matter and content, ran counter to the still-formidable formalist and

minimalist aesthetics, whose advocates dismissed feminist art for not being modernist and mainstream and, consequently, not major. To legitimate their art feminist artists and art professionals, including Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, and Lippard, waged a campaign against formalism and minimalism, attacking these isms for not being about the artist's experience and thus depersonalized. Feminists also rejected the formalist proscription of theatricality in the visual arts. Acting out intimate experiences was a common practice in consciousness-raising sessions, and performance art was a natural outgrowth of this activity. In asserting the relevance of the personal in art, feminists contributed considerably to the death of modernism and to the birth of postmodernism.

The first generation of feminists—that is, the generation of the 1970s—was labeled "essentialist." Its members formulated a new aesthetics based on the premise that women possess a nature inherently different from that of men. As Joan Snyder said, "if your work is about your life, and I can't imagine it being about anything else on some level, then woman's experiences are very different from men's. As we grow up socially, psychologically and every other way, our experiences are just different. Therefore, our art is going to be different."[5] The question of whether women had an essential nature and what that might be was much debated in the 1970s. What was the source of this nature? Was it the issue of social and cultural conditioning or was it biologically and psychologically determined? And if women had an inherent nature, would it not find expression in a "separate" art and be fully apprehended only by women? In defense of the essentialist position, art historian Patricia Mathews maintained: "A whole body of recent research in psychology, literature, art, music, sociology, and education indicates that women perceive reality differently than men, for whatever reasons, and therefore have different expectations from and responses to human experience."[6]

How was a female sensibility to be expressed in art? Through the female body, feminist artists believed. They focused on such subjects as menstruation, the vagina, pregnancy, and female body language. Body images presented from a woman's point of view had a political dimension, at once denying that women were inferior and asserting their power.

The exploration of female sexuality, exemplified in the terms "central core," "central cavity," or "vaginal iconography," engaged feminist artists as well as art critics, historians, and theoreticians.[7] In her description of women's art, art critic Nancy Marmer wrote that there is "a tendency to center the image, a prevalence of vulval forms, erogenous tones and symmetry. . . . A number of the artists explore the uses of floral and other botanical allusions, either in specific references to aspects of female biology, or as more generalized symbols of female identity."

Marmer went on to say that there were precedents in "Surrealism's stockpile of biomorphic subconscious imagery [and] Georgia O'Keeffe's lubricious flowers."[8] Lippard added that more recently, the "erotic power

of Louise Bourgeois' work and Eva Hesse's psychologically open-ended, biomorphic/geometric forms provided important models for the visualization of sexuality. These immensely innovative works deeply affected the art of the coming decade, especially art by women, who were first to recognize their extra-formal radicalism."[9]

Essentialist iconography was only one topic of discussion among feminists. Another was whether certain techniques and materials were better suited than others to express the female sensibility. Should not feminists favor the decorative and utilitarian crafts—sewing, quilting, weaving, appliqué, china painting—because they constituted most of the creative production of women. But the decorative and useful had long been denigrated in the art world. Elitists maintained that if "art" was useful, it could not be free, and if it was decorative, it could not be serious. To rehabilitate the artistic heritage of women, feminists challenged the hierarchical distinction between the "low" crafts and "high" painting and sculpture, introducing the materials and techniques of the one into the other. They also challenged the proscription of the decorative and the functional.

In an important article titled "Quilts: The Great American Art," art historian Patricia Mainardi asserted that quiltmaking had been the exemplary women's art form.[10] She also commented that quilts anticipated certain tendencies in abstract art by more than a century. In 1973 art historian Linda Nochlin observed that the

> patchwork quilt has recently become a burning issue in certain feminist art circles. On the one hand, the existence of these brilliantly stitched creations seems to offer proof of women's ability to create a valid art form apart from the male-dominated institutions of high art. . . . On the other hand, quilts may be viewed more as tokens of women's traditional ability to triumph over adversity, to make the best of things in the face of continual oppression: denied the means of access to historical significance and major stylistic innovation in the art of the past, women fulfilled their aesthetic potentialities within the restricted, safely ahistorical areas of the decorative and the useful.[11]

In their quest for feminist subject matter and content, women also began, as Suzanne Lacy observed, "unearthing scholarship on obscure women artists, . . . critically examining women's artwork for its underlying impulses and premises, and trying to reconcile the rapidly growing body of feminist political theory with our art making." Hence the feminist project was made up not only of personal introspection and activism but of research as well. "Theory grew out of all three."[12]

Feminists favored performance art because it suited their urgent need to voice their concerns as women, because it engaged the public more immediately than painting and sculpture did, and because collaboration was often involved. Indeed, the coming together of women to create art intensified their collective sense of mission. Such cooperative

ventures rejected the modernist glorification of the individual genius and instead privileged "sisterhood."

In sum the aesthetic mission of feminist artists in the 1970s was to distinguish the art of women from that of men and to discover images that represented the essential nature of women. They aspired to "characterize, affirm, or celebrate specifically female attributes [and] reveal the history and the nature of the repressions of woman." Feminists also sought to reveal the discrepancy between the stereotypical images of women they encountered in art and the media and what they actually experienced and felt. They undertook to counter male-invented representations of women and to represent themselves. The purpose of feminist art, as art critic Moira Roth concluded, was "to make art about women from the woman's point of view," and "to teach others about the conditions of women in a way that would lead to changing those conditions."[13]

Women art critics joined the cause of feminist artists. Lippard led the way; having been a spokesperson for minimal and postminimal art, she rejected impersonal formalist analysis and formulated a specifically feminist art criticism, focusing on art made by women, how gender and sexuality shaped it and distinguished it from that made by men, and on the life histories and experiences of women artists—as well as her own.[14] She hoped that feminist art and criticism would raise the consciousness of women about themselves and their role in the art world and society, and move them to act on their own behalf.

Feminist art critics also brought neglected women artists to art-world attention. They were helped by feminist art historians. Nochlin's sociohistorical essay of 1970, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" was seminal.[15] Rejecting the notion that women were innately inferior as artists, she enumerated the social, psychological, economic, institutional, and cultural barriers that discouraged women from pursuing careers in art and, if they persisted, from succeeding. Art critic Ellen Handy called Nochlin's essay "one of the first blows struck for the serious consideration of the vexed questions of women, art, history, power, denial, repression, and omission."[16] The essay was the primary catalyst in the search for a women's art history. In 1977 Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris curated *Women Artists: 1550–1950*, the first major historical survey of paintings by women, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The show then traveled to New York City's Brooklyn Museum.[17]

Women joined together not only to examine their condition in a male-dominated society but also to improve their position within the art world. Discrimination against women artists was widespread, and feminists formed organizations to combat it. The first, Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), was founded in 1970 from within the Art Workers Coalition, in reaction to the organization's sexism. The Whitney Museum of American Art became the major focus of protest. In 1971 WAR sent letters to the museum protesting the underrepresentation of women in its Annual exhibition: of the 143 participants, only 8 were women. The Ad

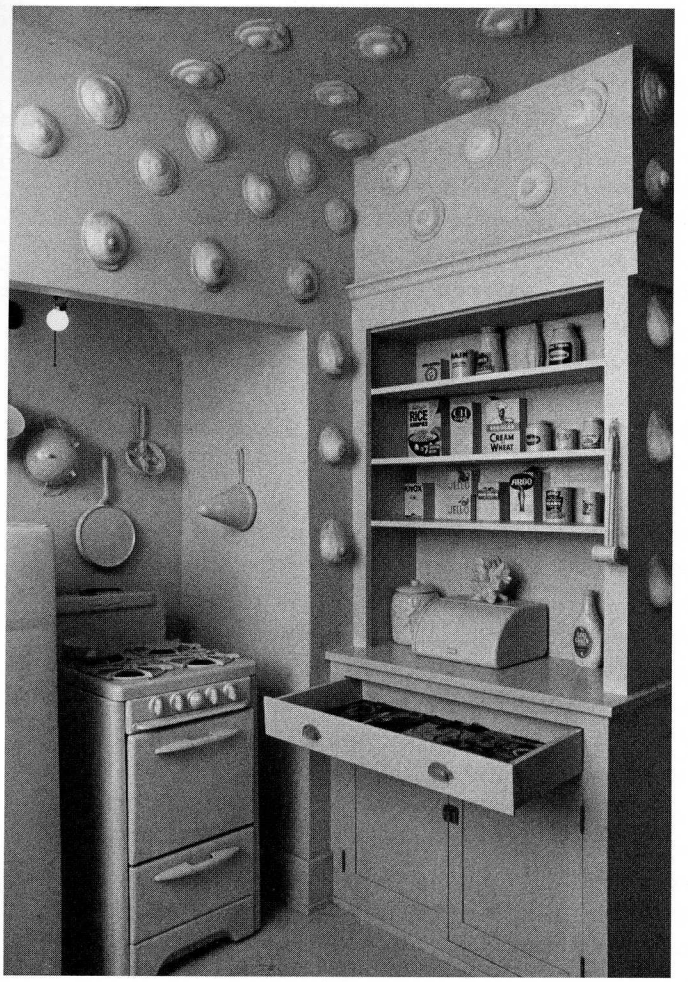
Hoc Committee of Women Artists, formed in 1970, demanded that fifty percent of the participants in the Whitney Annual be women. They staged a large rally outside the museum and engaged in guerrilla tactics, such as leaving Tampax and raw eggs around the Whitney premises. The museum responded by increasing the representation of women to 22 percent, a step in the right direction, but in the opinion of feminists, only a step.[18]

On the West Coast the exclusion of women from the *Art and Technology* show at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1971 provoked feminist artists into organizing the Los Angeles Council of Women. The council's Museum Action Committee investigated the museum's exhibition record during the previous decade and publicized its appalling findings. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported them: "Over a ten-year period, *one* one-artist show out of fifty-three was devoted to a woman; less than one percent of all work on display at the museum at that moment was by women; only twenty-nine of seven hundred and thirteen artists in group shows had been women."[19]

The first feminist art course on the college level was organized in 1970 by Chicago at Fresno State College. In the following year she and Schapiro formed and codirected a full-fledged Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts.[20] Its purpose was to help women restructure their lives in keeping with their desire to be artists and "to help them build their artmaking out of their experiences as women."[21] The Program aimed "to provide 'education for women, by women, about women' via consciousness-raising techniques, collaborative projects and the rethinking of art and social history from a feminist perspective."[22]

In 1972 Chicago, Schapiro, twenty-one women students from the program, and three invited artists embarked on an ambitious communal effort called Womanhouse. They converted an abandoned mansion in Hollywood into an environment based on the "age-old female activity of homemaking. . . . Womanhouse became the repository of the daydreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean and iron their lives away."[23] The environment became a kind of "*Gesamtkunstwerk* of women's images," shaped by their feminist consciousness [40].[24] Schapiro described how at Womanhouse subject matter evolved from consciousness-raising sessions. Talking to Roth, she said:

> Do you remember the kitchen? Do you remember the motif of breasts covering the walls? [On] the ceiling [forms of] fried eggs [turned] into breasts by stages. Also, do you remember the flat pink skin painted over the refrigerator, stove, sink, etc. and, as a matter of fact, painted over the walls as well? Well, that subject matter came directly out of consciousness-raising sessions we had on the problem of the kitchen and what to do with it. I was very dissatisfied with the ideas that were emerging for the kitchen. So we sat down in an empty room on the hard floor in the cold winter with no heat and no facilities and we began to talk about childhood. As young children, what did the



40. *The Kitchen* in Womanhouse, 1971–72. *(Courtesy Miriam Schapiro, New York)*

> kitchen mean to us? Who was our mother in the kitchen? Who were we? What were the symbols of all of this? I insisted as they spoke to and listened to each other that they develop the habit of visualizing all the information that was being given. This made finding solutions to visual problems much easier.[25]

Participation in Womanhouse was limited to women because, as Chicago reasoned, in the company of men, women had not been, and would not be, able to express and develop a female sensibility in their art. Separatism became the accepted feminist practice in the 1970s, because, as art critic Arlene Raven commented, it provides "a sympathetic environment in which women's art can be seen apart from male preoccupations. . . . 'We are interested in giving women permission to express themselves in ways that have not been accepted or understood by the male-dominated art community.'"[26] Moreover, the coming together of women by themselves facilitated political organization and action in the

service of a "forceful vision of a future without the unwanted baggage of the antifemale mainstream."[27] However, voices were raised against separatism in feminist circles. They questioned its effectiveness in achieving social change in the larger world. Art critic Irene Moss wrote

> that it was the unfairness of discrimination, . . . not male-female competition that was damaging [to women]. "[Since] art is universal and is practiced by both sexes and since excellence is the goal, separating women's art from that of men's is negating the natural order of growth." [Separation] from the art mainstream would only compound the evils of suppression, and [hinder] the struggle for equality.[28]

In 1973 Womanspace was established in Los Angeles. Ruth Iskin described it as

> an attempt at independent self-definition—and control of—women's art, the manner and context of its exhibition, and the criteria for its critical evaluation. . . . Womanspace should give maximum exposure to female artists, and provide special opportunities for visibility to minority groups within the female community. . . . In addition, the feminist cause has to be furthered by exhibitions designed around content issues, which will contribute toward a comprehensive self-definition of women and their art.[29]

Within a year of its formation Womanspace had more than 700 members, of which some five hundred were artists and the rest included filmmakers, art historians, museum personnel, writers, businesswomen, dancers, collectors, art teachers—and twelve men.

Womanspace succumbed to internal dissension. As Wilding remarked:

> There had been political and aesthetic struggles from the beginning, centering on such issues as: What kind of art should be shown, whether "feminist," "political," or just art made by women? Should Womanspace practice censorship of any kind, and if so, on what principles? Should only "professional" artists be shown, and how define professionalism? Was there room for women of all aesthetic and sexual persuasions? Would certain viewpoints be pushed more than others?[30]

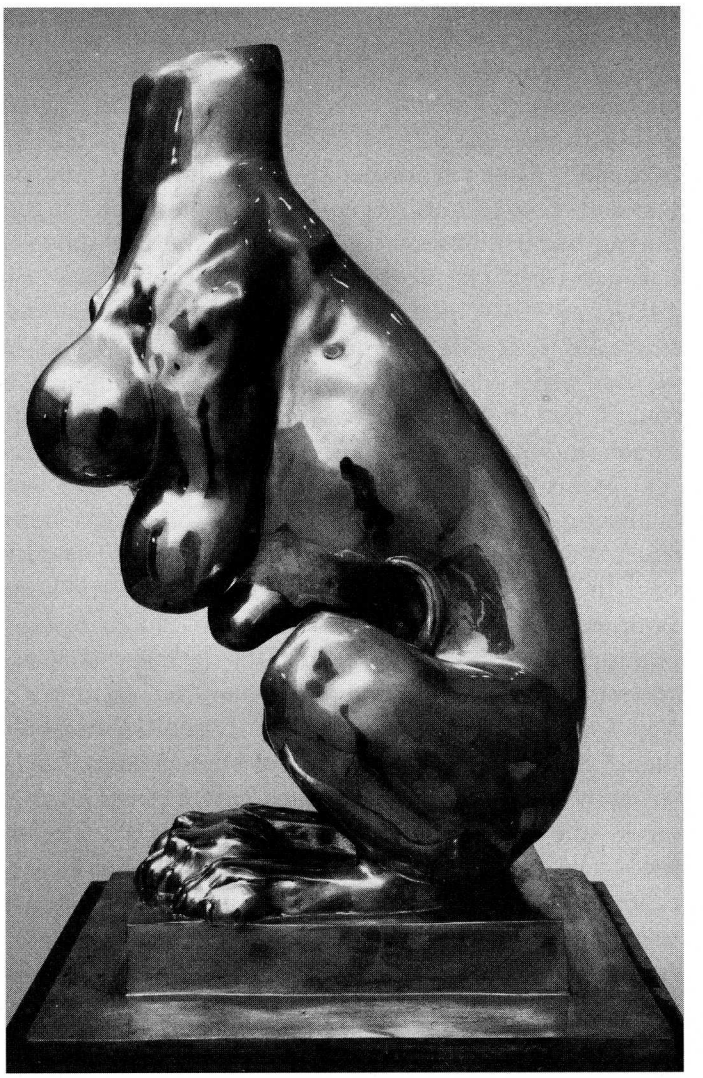
Differences among gays and straights, rich patrons and leftists, and radical and less radical feminists split the ranks of feminist organizations and drove members away and made fund-raising difficult—a problem feminist organizations would continue to face.

Feminism needed its heroines and found early ones in Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois. Hesse had achieved considerable art-world recog-

nition before feminism emerged, having been given a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in 1970, the year after her untimely death. She was esteemed because she had deflected minimal art into a new and viable direction. But her work had a particular appeal to feminists because it issued from her own physiological and psychological experiences as a woman. Bourgeois had had a much longer career than Hesse, having begun to exhibit her work in the middle 1940s. She had always had art-world admirers, but her reputation had been in eclipse in the 1950s and 1960s. Feminist artists and art professionals believed with justification that she was insufficiently recognized because she was a woman artist whose content was autobiographical, and they sought to rehabilitate her. That goal was not achieved until 1982, when the Museum of Modern Art gave her a retrospective exhibition.

Bourgeois was obsessed by memories of a girlhood trauma: Her charming, womanizing father brought into her home a young English teacher who became his mistress, an intruder hated by her mother, who nevertheless accepted the situation in order to keep the family intact. Bourgeois could never resolve her childhood experience of male-female relationships, and they became the primary subject of her subsequent sculpture. As she said, "everything I am interested in is a personal problem. And I have to see my problems in visual shapes before I can deal with them." She also spoke of "flashes of intense experience. . . . I am attacked by so many images. . . . I see images next to each other, or overlapping each other—the whole thing is visual." Bourgeois did not illustrate her memories but strove to recreate how they felt—in a great diversity of images, both figurative and abstract, and in an equally great variety of mediums: wood, marble, bronze, cement, wax, plaster, and latex. She said that while working "there is a mounting tension, arising from my physical encounter with the physical material . . . and out of it grows what I want to say."[31]

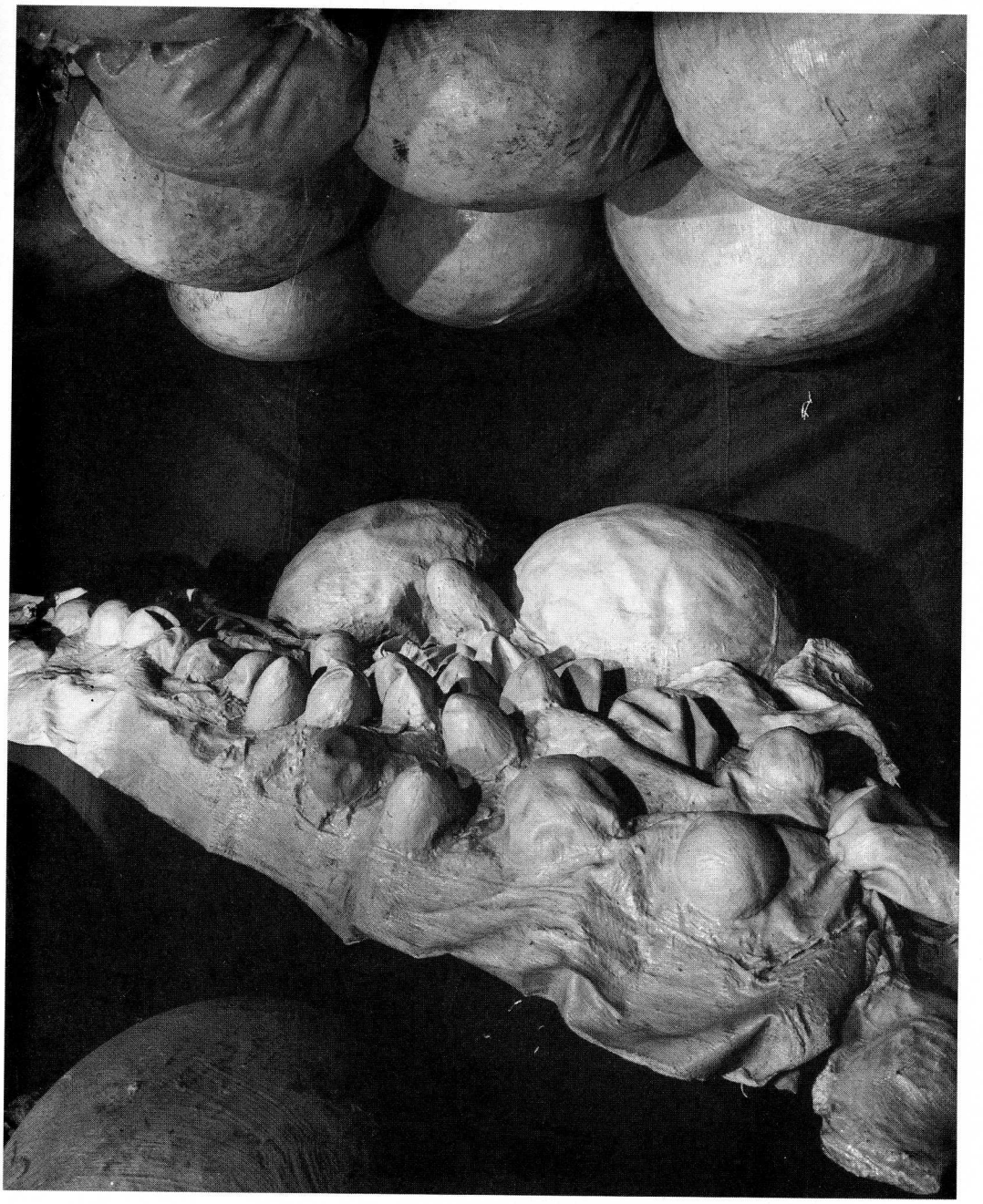
Bourgeois's images often refer to the bodily experiences of women—pregnancy, birth, breast-feeding—in the context of the house [41]. Perhaps her most revealing images are found in drawings titled *Femme Maison* (1946–47), each of which is a nude female figure whose upper half is a house. The mood is one of anxiety, loneliness, and vulnerability. A number of her sculptures are of pregnant women whose identity is in their bellies. Most are armless, legless, and headless, in a word, defenseless. But some of Bourgeois's women are aggressive, among them the marble *Knife Woman*—an elongated torso with exposed pudenda that seems to metamorphose into a knife—a mixture of sex and death—and *Fillette* (Little Girl) (1968), a latex-and-plastic penis and testicles hung from a hook—like a hunk of dead meat. *Shredder* (1983) is an image of slicing. Bourgeois once said: "In my art I'm the murderer. . . . The guillotine appears all the time in my work."[32] Her most telling work is a nine-by-eleven-by-nine-foot maw in which the "father"—and, by extension, all authority figures—is devoured, aptly titled *The Destruction of the Father* (1974) [42].



41. Louise Bourgeois, *Nature Study,* 1984. *(Copyright © 1994 Whitney Museum of American Art; © Louise Bourgeois/VAGA, New York, NY)*

Bourgeois's imagery is too diverse to categorize, but there are recurring motifs, for example, cavities suggestive of caves, lairs, nests, cocoons, and wombs that appear in hanging plaster-and-latex pieces of the early 1960s. Like the house-body images of the 1940s, they both enclose and exclude, providing protective shelter and places in which to nurture or hide, and from which to watch. There are also clusters or gardens or crowds or nests of rounded forms, most prominent in the late 1960s and 1970s. She called these images "phallic breasts, male and female, active and passive."[33] Sprouting from the floor, their arrangement was innovative in sculpture at the time.

Despite their private nature, Bourgeois's often eccentric images are archetypal, as Robert Storr commented, echoing "modern psychology and classical myth, in which gods and demiurges act our their desires



42. Louise Bourgeois, *The Destruction of the Father,* detail, 1974. *(Robert Miller Gallery, New York; photograph copyright © 1975 by Peter Moore, New York; © Louise Bourgeois/VAGA, New York, NY)*

with the paradoxical combination of fickleness, cruelty and powerful constancy we accept as inevitable."[34]

Performance art, often incorporating two- and three-dimensional work, video, film, dance, music, and texts, was an effective medium for feminist artists to communicate urgent messages about their life experiences, emotions, and the condition of women. Not only was there little separation between the performer and her work but between the performer and her audience. This provided the artist with "immediate feedback as well as support for difficult and often painful exposures of experiences and feelings," as Moira Roth commented. She identified three main tendencies in woman's performance art: "the autobiographical/narrative, the mystical/ritualistic and the political."[35] Feminist performance art had been influenced by Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, but its introduction of autobiography, myth, and politics added a new dimension to the tendency.

Early manifestations of what might be called feminist autobiographical theater took place in 1972 in Womanhouse. The artists there performed pieces based on such activities associated with women as ironing and scrubbing floors. Faith Wilding exemplified female passivity in a piece titled *Waiting* [43], in which she recited events for which women wait: to wear a bra, to go to a party, to be asked for a dance, for pimples to go away, for Mr. Right, for an orgasm, etc.[36] Chicago commented: "I think that the reason our performances . . . at Womanhouse created so much tension, excitement, and response was that we told the truth about our feelings as women in them, . . . feelings that had simply never been so openly expressed in artmaking."[37]

Eleanor Antin began her "theater of the self," as she called her performances, in the early seventies. These had been preceded in the late 1960s by environments of common objects that constituted "portraits" of friends, and starting in 1971, by *100 Boots,* consisting of fifty-one picture postcards chronicling the adventures of one hundred boots, which she mailed to artists, art professionals, and friends over a two-and-a-half-year period.

In 1972 Antin turned in on herself, producing her first videotape, titled *Representational Painting.* In it she slowly made up her face using the video monitor as a mirror, until finally "I turn out to be some sort of *Vogue* hippie." Thus she represented herself through "painting" as women generally represent themselves to the world.[38] Antin continued to define and portray herself as an artist and a woman by typecasting herself as four characters—surrogate selves: a ballerina, a king, a black movie star, and a nurse, whose roles are "to rule, to star, to help, and to turn one's blackness in a white culture into a Virtue and a Power"[39] She declared: "Since my dialogue is with myself, my method is to use video, still photography, painting, drawings, writing, performing as mediums between me and myself so we can talk to each other."[40]

43. Faith Wilding, *Waiting,* performance, Womanhouse, 1972. *(Photograph by Lloyd Hamrol)*

As the king Antin asked the question: "If I were a man, what sort of man would I be?"[41] Her answer was to wage a losing war on behalf of the have-nots against the haves, who are destroying the earth. As a nurse she assumed the persona of Florence Nightingale [44]. *The Angel of Mercy* was a Victorian costume drama that consisted of photographs of Nurse "Eleanora's" life and activities in the Crimean War as well as live performances involving the artist, family members and friends, musicians, and forty life-size painted cutout masonite figures of nineteenth-century hussars, lancers, common soldiers, ladies and gentlemen, and Queen Victoria. The work examined the contest between healing and killing in war. Antin as the ballerina "Eleanora Antinova" read from her memoirs, *Recollections of My Life with Diaghilev,* recalling her celebrated roles in the Ballets Russes.[42] Summing up her work, Antin commented that although she was "interested in defining the limits of myself . . . the four selves soon began to lead their own lives . . . that I am hardly in a position to stop or control."[43]

Hannah Wilke was primarily a performance artist who used her own naked body as her medium, but she also made portable wall works, such as a series (1971–77) in which latex was shaped into erotic, flowerlike and

fleshy labial images in sensuous pinks [45]. In her performances, begun in 1970, Wilke undressed in order to examine her body and sexuality from the viewpoint of the "female gaze." Her purpose was at once to expose and challenge stereotypes of women and to celebrate eroticism.

In a number of her performances, Wilke turned her own naked body into living sculptures to whose erotic surface she attached other erotic objects. In the *Starification Object Series (S.O.S)* (1974–75) [46], she and bystanders chewed gum, which she folded into vaginal shapes and then stuck onto herself. These "signature" images read as vulva and scar, denoting both pleasure and pain, reflecting, as she said, "the ambiguity and complexity of emotions."[44] In the title Wilke turned "scar" into "star," an allusion perhaps to her pose as a beauty queen. On the other hand, the scar coupled with S.O.S. suggests a plea for help as if from a battered woman.[45] In her punning titles and use of readymades, vaginal images, and of herself as the subject of photographs, Wilke was influenced by Duchamp, with whose work she had a kind of love-hate relationship throughout her mature career.

Wilke's self-exposure raised questions in feminist circles. Did her striptease and cheesecake poses make her complicit with the "male gaze," particularly because she was beautiful? Many feminists thought so. For example, Muriel Dimen wrote that since women have traditionally been seen as sex objects, feminist artists must downplay erotic attributes and

44. Eleanor Antin, *"My Tour of Duty in the Crimea"* from *The Angel of Mercy*, 1977. *(Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc., New York)*