'Une chaîne invisible': Contemporary Artistes, Feminist Self-Representation, and the Work of Annie Ernaux

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies the work of French author Annie Ernaux in comparison with that of three contemporary artistes – Louise Bourgeois, Annette Messager, and Yayoi Kusama – inspired by Ernaux's own concept of 'une chaîne invisible'. Following a consideration of the existing intertextual and intermedial scholarship on Ernaux's work, I discuss feminism, autobiography, and women's self-portraiture. I address the following questions: how do these women create self-representations? To what extent are such works feminist? How do they link to each other? Each chapter focuses on one artiste, comparing and contrasting their work to that of Ernaux, as well as referencing various aspects feminist art where relevant in order to locate these women in their socio-historic-artistic contexts. My choice of Ernaux works offers intimate pieces of her self-representation: Passion simple *(1991),* Journal du dehors *(1993),* La Vie extérieure *(2000),* L'Événement *(2000),* Se perdre *(2001), and* L'Usage de la photo *(2005). This art-based reading highlights the ways in which Ernaux's corpus interacts with feminist art history and visual culture. This is the first project that analyses Ernaux's work in relation to multiple artistes and is only the beginning of the use of the 'chaîne invisible' as a framework. Through text and image analysis, I examine diverse themes such as sexuality, illness, and death, demonstrating that it is in fact appropriate to call Ernaux an artiste due to the richness of her links with these women. I not only illuminate the work of Ernaux, but also that of the artistes, and I ultimately imply that more consideration should be given to such intermedial matters in future scholarship.*

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INTRODUCTION

> Sœur Sourire fait partie de ces femmes, jamais rencontrées, mortes ou vivantes, réelles ou non, avec qui, malgré toutes les différences, je me sens quelque chose de commun. Elles forment en moi une chaîne invisible où se côtoient des artistes, des écrivaines, des héroïnes de roman et des femmes de mon enfance. J'ai l'impression que mon histoire est en elles.[1]

Contemporary French author Annie Ernaux made the above statement in her 2000 work *L'Événement*, a text in which she recounts her experience of an illegal abortion and ruminates on what it means to be a woman. 'Sœur Sourire' refers to Belgian singer-songwriter Jeannine Deckers, otherwise known under her English stage name 'The Singing Nun'. Deckers fought with depression during her career and after leaving her religious order, struggling with drug dependency, and grappling with financial worries, she committed suicide in 1985.[2] Despite the fact that Ernaux's work has garnered her a great deal of academic criticism over the years, this overt statement in which she affiliates herself with a long line of women figures, especially one with a biography like Sœur Sourire, has not been fully explored. With a career spanning four decades from her first publication in 1974 (*Les Armoires vides)* to the most recent in 2016 (*Mémoire de fille*), Ernaux's body of work continues to be increasingly relevant in a world where the discussion of taboo subjects such as abortion, sexuality, and mental health are slowly opening up.

Existing comparative scholarship on Ernaux's work tends to focus on connections to other writers, and the list of comparative studies is long.[3] In particular, women authors have

[1] Annie Ernaux, *L'Événement,* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 2000), p. 53.
[2] Gregory McIntosh, 'Artist Biography' (2019), <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/soeur-sourire-mn0000038958> [accessed on 21/11/19].
[3] For example, see *Annie Ernaux : L'Intertextualité,* eds. Robert Kahn, Laurence Macé, and Françoise Simonet-Tenant (Rouen: Presses universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2015).

been the subject of numerous comparisons, spanning both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, Catherine R. Montford compares Ernaux and Simone de Beauvoir through their respective reactions to the death of their mothers;[4] Natalie Edwards looks at Ernaux's modes of autobiography and photography in relation to those of Hélène Cixous;[5] and Polly Galis explores elements of sexuality and corporeality in Ernaux's writings in relation to the works of Nancy Huston and Nelly Arcan.[6] Notably, the majority of these comparisons are to *French* women authors. Instead, this dissertation sets out to construct the 'chaîne invisible' of women 'artistes' with whom Ernaux has 'quelque chose de commun', thus presenting her work in an intermedial and artistic context that has received little critical attention.

When artistic links are made in connection to Ernaux's work, it is usually in reference to *L'Usage de la photo* (2005) which was written in collaboration with Marc Marie, undoubtedly due to the inclusion of actual photographs taken by the pair among its pages.[7] Indeed, this book is also a substantial part of this project due to its rapprochement of text and image, but references to other Ernaux works can still be made. Shirley Jordan highlights some of the affinities between these images and the work of French conceptual artist Sophie Calle, as well as briefly referring to the photographers Wolfgang Tillmans and Felix Gonzales-Torres,[8] whereas Ari J. Blatt explores the links between *L'Usage* and other 'phototexts', as well as comparing one of Marie's photographs to a Van Gogh painting.[9] Although they provide important groundwork, the majority of such references are made to male artists and are fleeting

[4] Catherine R. Montford, '"La Vieille Née": Simone de Beauvoir, *Une mort très douce*, and Annie Ernaux, *Une femme'*, *French Forum*, 21.3 (1996), 349-364.
[5] Natalie Edwards, 'Photography and Autobiography in Helene Cixous's *Photos de racines* and Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo'*, *The French Review*, 84.4 (2011), 704-715.
[6] Polly Galis, 'Sexuality and Corporeality in the Work of Annie Ernaux, Nancy Huston and Nelly Arcan' (Leeds: 2018), <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/22713/2/PGalis_Doctoral%20Thesis.pdf> [accessed on 28/10/2019].
[7] Ernaux, *L'Usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). Texts herein referred to by abridged title.
[8] Shirley Jordan, 'Improper Exposure: *L'Usage de la photo* by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 7.2 (2007), 123-141 (p. 130).
[9] Ari J. Blatt, 'The Interphototextual Dimension of Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo*', *Word & Image*, 25.1 (2009), 46-55 (p. 50).

references in articles with altogether different emphases: Jordan focuses on the *impudeur* of *L'Usage* and its images, and Blatt on the format of the text itself. As a result, it is evident that the ways in which Ernaux's work operates within (women's) art history and visual culture more broadly could receive much more scholarly consideration.

In parallel to these critical works, Alison S. Fell and Edward Welch edited an edition of *Nottingham French Studies* entitled 'Annie Ernaux: Socio-Ethnographer of Contemporary France' with the aim to 'faire entrer en dialogue vos [Ernaux's] textes et ceux d'autres écrivains, cinéastes et artistes modernes (Colette, Sophie Calle, Marguerite Duras, Eric Rohmer).'[10] Nonetheless, the only other artist mentioned alongside Calle is the photographer Jo Spence, and neither Fell nor Spence's articles uses feminist ideologies or self-representation as the foundation of their discussions: Welch compares Calle and Ernaux's references to CCTV and technology, while Fell explores *L'Usage* as a breast cancer narrative and compares it with photographs taken by Spence during her battle with breast cancer.[11] When asked if such points of reference are acceptable or surprising, Ernaux replied that:

> Il me semble naturel que mon travail soit rapproché de celui d'autres écrivains et artistes, surtout contemporains. Mais ceux que vous citez ne participent pas, ou très peu, de mon 'horizon de questionnement' : je veux dire, ceux par rapport auxquels on se confronte, on se situe, ou avec lesquels on entretient un rapport de 'fraternité' […]. Et dans ce que j'appelle un 'horizon de questionnement', figuraient Proust, Breton, Nizan, Virginia Woolf, Perec, André Gorz (*Le Traître*) ou Robert Linhart (*L'Établi*), d'autres.[12]

[10] Alison S. Fell and Edward Welch, 'Interview with Annie Ernaux', *Nottingham French Studies,* 48.2 (2009), 6-9 (p. 8).
[11] Welch, 'Stars of CCTV: Technology, Visibility and Identity in the Work of Sophie Calle and Annie Ernaux', in *ibid*., 55-67; Fell, 'Intimations of Mortality: Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo* as Breast Cancer Narrative', in *ibid*., 68-79.
[12] Fell and Welch, 'Interview with Annie Ernaux', *ibid*., p. 8.

On the one hand, it could be argued that Ernaux's 'horizon de questionnement' foregrounds a similar concept to the 'chaîne invisible' as it seeks to establish links with other practitioners, even though her list features a surprisingly French-male-centric 'fraternité'. On the other hand, it is also clear that her 'horizon' focuses largely on questions of influence, which is not the catalyst of this dissertation. I am not claiming that these women were or are aware of each other, and yet there are commonalities between them that are too strong to deny. By creating a 'chaîne' instead of a 'horizon', I inaugurate a sisterhood of women and claim their place in the canon. The structure of a chain also implies that new links can be forged and attached *ad infinitum*. In addition, Ernaux only mentions one woman here, the writer Virginia Woolf, and does not reference any artists at all. It is possible that the sisterhood alluded to in *L'Événement* is symptomatic of its subject matter and time – Ernaux undergoing an abortion shortly before France would be heady with 1970s feminism – but the number of concerns shared between Ernaux and women artists, demonstrated in this dissertation, is too great to refuse.

Ania Wroblewski's 2016 work *La vie des autres : Sophie Calle et Annie Ernaux, artistes hors la loi* directly compares the work of Ernaux to that of Calle using crime as the central theme.[13] Wroblewski's text is the first monograph that associates Ernaux with another artist, and a woman at that. However, she first refers to Ernaux and Calle as 'artistes' in the book's title and in its backmatter and then changes to the term 'créatrices' in the main body of the text without real explanation. Like those before her, Wroblewski does not mention the 'chaîne invisible' of artistes that she begins to construct in *La vie des autres*, and so this concept provides a unique frame of reference for this project. This dissertation shows that it is in fact appropriate to call Ernaux an artiste – a woman artist – given the richness of her connections

[13] Ania Wroblewski, *La vie des autres : Sophie Calle et Annie Ernaux, artistes hors-la-loi*, ePub edn. (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2016) <https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Ania_Wroblewski_La_vie_des_autres?id=qY89DwAAQBAJ&hl=fr>.

with other artistes. I will therefore use the term artiste in order to reference the figures studied in this dissertation, including Ernaux. Though it could be argued that using a gendered term is an essentialist decision, it is clear that 'artist' is 'a profession whose history is dominated by men' and is a label historically reserved for men.[14] Even 'The history of art itself is an area of scholarly work formed within a masculine tradition'.[15] I strongly agree with Marsha Meskimmon, who states that we cannot 'force [artistes'] body of work into masculine-normative structures without seriously misrepresenting it'.[16] Therefore, by using the term artiste, I do not intend to relegate female artists below male artists, but rather I highlight their importance, I reclaim their existence as artistes in their own right and support the creation of a female canon that is separate to the male-dominated canons of art and literature.

Although it would appear that Calle is the preferred artiste of reference, as Jordan, Welch, and Wroblewski have all highlighted her work in comparison to that of Ernaux, Calle should not be seen as the be-all and end-all of intermedial comparisons. Numerous international artistes summon similar thematic and visual elements to Ernaux including Tracey Emin, as analysed in my bachelor's dissertation. Here, I focus on Louise Bourgeois, Annette Messager, and Yayoi Kusama. These selected artistes craft self-representations from the fabric of their daily lives in a feminist way, be it through photography, installation art, or using text in their work. In order to explore such comparisons, I reference Ernaux's texts *Passion simple* (1991), *Journal du dehors* (1993), *La Vie extérieure* (2000), *L'Événement* (2000), *Se perdre* (2001) and *L'Usage de la photo* (2005),[17] focusing heavily on *L'Usage* because of its use of

[14] Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 8.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] Ernaux, *Passion simple* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1991); Ernaux, *Journal du dehors* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2011) pp 497-547; Ernaux, *La Vie extérieure* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 2000); Ernaux, *L'Événement, op. cit.*; Ernaux, *Se perdre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), in *Écrire la vie,* pp. 697-875; Ernaux, *L'Usage de la photo, op. cit*. Texts herein quoted with page numbers in parentheses.

photography. This group of works is particularly pertinent as each presents a fragment of Ernaux's self-representation, with *journaux intimes* and *extimes* as well as written *récits*.[18] Together, this group of texts discusses art, self-representation, and experiences that are often specific to women. Due to the fact that I am constructing a chain, this dissertation will not be structured thematically but will instead assess each artiste in relation to Ernaux in succession. Links between artistes will also be made visible, as opposed to putting Ernaux at the centre of a radial structure. Ultimately, I ask how these artistes create self-representations within their works, are their methods similar, and are such works feminist? How do these artistes represent themselves and their experiences, and how does this link to Ernaux's own self-representation? This introduction aims to set out definitions of self-representation and explores notions of feminism before launching into the analysis that follows, considering feminism in 2020, Ernaux's feminism, and of feminist art.

Art historian Frances Borzello states that if we can treat '[female] self-portraits as painted versions of autobiography, a way for the artist to present a story about herself for public consumption,' then 'the author's need to tell a credible and sympathetic tale makes the end product as artful as a novel.'[19] Therefore, it could be argued that the work of Ernaux and the artistes belongs to both the genres of self-portraiture and autobiography, as Borzello further argues that 'the closest comparison [of self-portraiture] is with fiction, when a writer turns a personal event into art. The work is not exactly autobiography, but it is full of the autobiographical impulse.'[20] This 'autobiographical impulse' is present throughout this 'chaîne' in their self-representations, as well as in the multiple overlapping themes that they explore: sexuality, death, health, and the body. In this sense, Ernaux's writing style can be

[18] As per the distinction made between the three terms by Akane Kawakami, *Photobiography: Photographic Self-Writing in Proust, Guibert, Ernaux, Macé* (London: LEGENDA, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2013) p. 118.
[19] Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016) 2nd edn., p. 22.
[20] Borzello, pp. 201-205.

described as photographic, ethnographic or imagistic, as explained by Akane Kawakami: 'Her writing is designed to describe rather than interpret, to record facts rather than to fashion them into a narrative', often taking the form of a 'traditional ekphrastic narrative using photographs as inspiration', or including printed photographs in certain instances.[21] This combination of art and literature supports Borzello's rapprochement of self-portraiture and autobiography. By connecting Ernaux's work to visual art, I illuminate both her work and that of the artistes included in this project, establishing new lines of interdisciplinary discussion and exploring the ways in which contemporary artistes produce self-representations.

On the one hand, Borzello's notion that a self-portrait is 'not exactly autobiography' is a phrase that could be applied to *autofiction*, a genre of writing that blends largely true stories with slight embellishments or formal additions, similar to the autobiographic novel. On the other hand, Jordan remarks that *autofiction* is a 'slippery hybrid',[22] whereas the self-portrait genre has been well-established for centuries, as documented by Borzello. Though autobiography and *autofiction* are boxes in which the work of Ernaux is placed repeatedly, she argues that her work is factual and belongs to the category of 'auto-socio-biographie'.[23] Despite the number of terms that could apply, when referencing images and texts for the purpose of this study I adopt the term self-representation in which the literary genre of autobiography and the artistic self-portrait are both encompassed.

If self-representation is often labelled as a 'women's genre' as a result of 'the assumed links between women and the personal sphere',[24] then feminist ideology becomes increasingly important. With my use of the term artiste previously explained, this project takes a

[21] Kawakami, *Photobiography*, p. 83; p. 85.
[22] Jordan, 'Etat présent: Autofiction in the Feminine', *French Studies*, 67.1 (2013), 76-84 (p. 76).
[23] Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet* (Paris: Stock, 2003), p. 21.
[24] Gabriele Griffin, 'autobiography', *A Dictionary of Gender Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2017) <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191834837.001.0001/acref-9780191834837-e-21>; Meskimmon, p. 79.

constructivist approach as opposed to an essentialist one, adhering to Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one becomes a woman through one's lived experiences as opposed to through birth or biology.[25] Twenty-first century feminism has witnessed the uprising of communities and the unveiling of scandals, such as the #MeToo movement which saw Harvey Weinstein finally sentenced for his sexual assault and rape crimes as a direct result of women encouraging each other to denounce sexual abuse online using the hashtag.[26] In France, the movement took the form of #BalanceTonPorc but was met with backlash from 100 French women, including actress Catherine Deneuve, who all signed an open letter to *Le Monde* stating that feminism had gone too far and was only inciting a 'witch-hunt' against men.[27] This was met by strong retaliation from feminist groups, with Ernaux herself proclaiming that she was 'so ashamed for Deneuve' and is in complete agreement with the movement, declaring that French culture has a problem in that it views 'male domination' as simple 'seduction'.[28] The campaign for feminism has changed over the years, from focus on women's suffrage, to sexism in the work place and equal pay, to the condemnation of sexual assault. Nonetheless, the need for equality between men and women remains key. From the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 to bell hooks' *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* in 2000,[29] it is clear that feminism (French or otherwise) has had many waves and that the fight is not over: for example, though France made abortion legal in 1975, it is still outright banned in Alabama

[25] See Bonnie Mann and Martina Ferrari eds., *"On ne naît pas femme: on le devient": The Life of a Sentence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[26] BBC News, 'Harvey Weinstein found guilty of rape in watershed case', *BBC* (2020) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-51621041> [accessed on 25/02/2020].
[27] Kim Wilsher, 'Catherine Deneuve's claim of #MeToo witch-hunt sparks backlash', *The Guardian* (2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/10/catherine-deneuve-claim-metoo-witch-hunt-backlash> [accessed on 04/01/2020].
[28] Ernaux in interview with Willsher, 'Annie Ernaux: "I was so ashamed for Catherine Deneuve…"', *The Guardian* (2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/06/annie-ernaux-interview-the-years-memoir-man-booker-international> [accessed on 04/01/2020].
[29] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963); bell hooks, *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

in the United States. Though the French 'waves' of feminism do not neatly correlate to those of the US, outrage continues to brew all over the world as feminists in 2020 question what it is to be a 'difficult woman' as the fight for equality continuously shifts focus.[30]

Ernaux's interactions with feminism are well documented, such as Lyn Thomas's explorations of Ernaux's feminism through the lenses of social class, gender, and race.[31] Born in 1940, Ernaux has lived through waves one to three of French feminism, from the publication of de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* in 1949, the political protests of May 1968, and the aforementioned more recent condemnations of sexism. She has been an active writer since 1974 and followed French feminist groups such as Choisir and MLAC (*Mouvement pour la liberté de l'avortement et de la contraception*) in the 1970s, which indicates that 'her thinking and writing are profoundly implicated in, and influenced by, second wave and more recent French feminisms.'[32] However, Thomas notes that Ernaux's work is not necessarily viewed as representative of 'French feminisms' as is that of theorists like de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous.[33] Indeed, Emma Webb and Thomas suggest that Ernaux's first-person personal experiences 'may be seen as slightly passé when compared with the radical linguistic and political experimentation' of such theorists.[34] I disagree with this implication, as Ernaux's work offers an accessibility that is lacking in the intricate and theoretical nature of de Beauvoir and Cixous's texts, which in fact engage more with male philosophers than with their own personal experiences. The intimate and confessional nature of Ernaux's work enhances its accessibility, which in turn helps to liberate taboo subjects associated with women's self-representation to which Ernaux responds such as abortion, sexuality, and marriage. In writing about her own

[30] Helen Lewis, *Difficult Women: A History of Feminism in 11 Fights* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020).
[31] Lyn Thomas, 'Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness: Finding a Place in the French Feminist Canon?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15.2 (2006), 159-168.
[32] *Ibid.,* p. 159
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] Lyn Thomas and Emma Webb, 'Writing from Experience: The Place of the Personal in French Feminist Writing' *Feminist Review,* 61 (1999), 27-48 (p. 27).

experiences and her ascension from working class to comfortable bourgeoisie, Ernaux creates texts that are relatable, authentic, and representative of a multiplicity of women. Without accessibility, the concept of equality that serves as anchoring force behind the feminist movement itself is contradicted.

Ernaux comments on her relationship with feminism at length in an interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, stating that 'je n'aime figurer dans la rubrique "écriture feminine". Il n'y a pas de division de la littérature intitulée "écriture masculine"… c'est de facto faire de la différence sexuelle'.[35] Ernaux further finds fault with essentialist notions of feminism associated with Cixous's *écriture feminine*, instead preferring a constructivist approach: 'je suis persuadée qu'on est produit de son histoire et que celle-ci est présente dans l'écriture.'[36] Though Ernaux's writings respond in somewhat to Cixous's instructions that 'Il faut que la femme s'écrive… Il faut que la femme se mette au texte',[37] her objective, documentary style is far-removed from the emotional or experimental writing associated with Cixous's genre. Indeed, Cixous's style of *écriture feminine* is in fact opposed to Ernaux's own *écriture plate*, which she defines in *La Place* (1984) as thus : 'je n'ai pas le droit de prendre d'abord le parti de l'art, ni de chercher à faire quelque chose de "passionnant", ou d'"émouvant" […] Aucune poésie du souvenir, pas de dérision jubilante.'[38] It could be argued that *écriture feminine* is indeed a literature of passion, poetry, and art, and so Ernaux's writing is not *feminine* in style in this sense, though it does deal with themes associated with women and femininity. As a result, Ernaux allies herself much more clearly with the existentialist feminism of de Beauvoir, whose work *Le Deuxième sexe* she read as 'une révélation' that anchored her in 'un féminisme vivant'.[39]

[35] Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau,* p. 74; p. 98.
[36] *Ibid.,* p. 99.
[37] Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la Méduse', *L'Arc,* 61 (1975), 39-54 (p. 39).
[38] Ernaux, *La Place* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 24.
[39] Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau,* pp. 102-103.

Galis also comments on Ernaux's feminism and states that it is contradictory as she has critiqued the fact that society 'over-emphasises girls' physical appearance and justifies their objectification' despite 'abid[ing] by the same oppressive clichés of feminine identity which she herself deplores' in prioritising shopping trips, beauty routines, and heteronormative relationships (in *Passion simple,* for example).[40] Therefore, it is clear that Ernaux's position as a feminist or woman writer is just as 'slippery', to use Jordan's aforementioned expression, as the genre of *autofiction* itself.[41] Whether or not Ernaux and the artistes' feminism is clear-cut, it is evident that feminism provides essential frameworks of reference that can be heavily applied to this research which complement those of self-representation.

Finally, feminist art as a genre has been explored and debated at length since the 1970s, with recent notable anthologies including Hilary Robinson's *Feminism-Art-Theory,* and Amelia Jones' *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader.*[42] All the artistes in this study deal with ostensible *female* experiences and have *feminist* qualities in their works, which are not necessarily *feminine* in themselves as texts or images. Such a distinction is explained by Pat Mainardi: 'Feminist Art is different from feminine sensibility... [instead representing] feminism [as] a political position (the economic, political and social equality of women and men).'[43] Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' provoked an intense exploration into the work of artistes, and by extension, into feminist art.[44] Ernaux's aforementioned distaste towards a specifically feminine or masculine literature echoes concerns found in Nochlin's article, as she states that 'the mere choice of a certain realm

[40] Galis, p. 7.
[41] Jordan, 'Etat présent', p. 76.
[42] Hilary Robinson ed., *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Amelia Jones ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010) 2nd edn.
[43] Pat Mainardi, 'A Feminine Sensibility?', *Feminist Art Journal,* 1.1 (1972), pp. 4, 25, in *Feminism-Art-Theory,* Robinson ed., 295-296, p. 296.
[44] Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', *ArtNews* (1971), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/> [accessed on 04/02/2020].

of subject matter, or the restriction to certain subjects, is not to be equated with a style, much less with some sort of quintessentially feminine [or masculine] style.'[45] She further argues that 'No subtle essence of femininity would seem to link the work of Artemesia Gentileschi, Mme. Vigée-Lebrun, Angelica Kauffmann [etc.]',[46] which I agree with and seek to apply to my own argument: Ernaux and the artistes chosen here are not linked because their works are explicitly feminine in style, but rather because they share ideas of feminism and methods of self-representation.

Importantly, 1970s feminist art and its academic criticism would set up the practice of linking artistes to one another which would prove fruitful for countless future art historians. Meskimmon's *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* and Borzello's *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits* serve as key texts for this dissertation as they both succeed in presenting 'female self-portraiture… as a genre in its own right'.[47] Both highlight the historical background of the male-dominated art industry and the ways in which women's self-portraits came into being, exploring notions of autobiography in relation to self-portraiture and discussing a wide range of artistes, including those explored in my own research: Emin, Bourgeois, Kusama, and Messager. Feminism, then, is an essential notion to consider when looking at women's art, but it is only one component among others. Though Meskimmon states that 'women artists working after 1968 frequently engaged with feminist theory and politics in a highly self-conscious way', this is not the crux of her argument, rather that 'women artists over the whole course of the century developed many similar themes in their work',[48] such as pregnancy, domesticity, and sex. It is clear that artistes' self-representation *has* received attention in the last thirty years, and yet much remains to be done

[45] *Ibid.*
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] Meskimmon, *op. cit.*; Borzello, p. 38.
[48] Meskimmon, p. 12.

on an intermedial scale in order to link these women to their contemporaries in literature. Part of the objective of this project is also to combat the fact that 'men have appropriated all of art to themselves',[49] thus firmly claiming artistes' position in art history. Looking at women's art through the lens of Ernaux constitutes a rethinking and re-gendering of art history, as well as recalibrating self-representation itself.

Overall, this dissertation responds to Jordan's call for analyses of 'individual practitioners' wherein gender is the 'central analytic thread', focusing on intermedial self-representation as opposed to *autofiction*.[50] I link and compare Ernaux's writing and image practice (photographic writing and the photographs in *L'Usage*, as per Kawakami) with that of contemporary artistes, starting the construction of the 'chaîne invisible'. This dissertation teases out the connections and concerns that are shared between Ernaux, Bourgeois, Messager, and Kusama, assessing the feminism of each where relevant. As opposed to focusing on influence, I question and confirm Ernaux's belonging to a contemporary circle of artistes. As per the opening quote from *L'Événement*, the 'chaîne invisible' provides an immense potential scope of an art-based reading of Ernaux's works and should continue to be opened out to other artistes. The question is not 'is this self-representation?', but rather 'how do these artistes choose to represent themselves in their work?'

Each chapter begins with a short introduction to the artiste in question followed by the analysis of their self-representation in which the focus is weighted more on the artiste than Ernaux. I then incorporate analyses of Ernaux's works in the sub-sections that follow, assessing the feminist qualities of each artiste and their referenced works. In Chapter One, I explore the ways in which Bourgeois's self-representation denies traditional mimesis and how this represents the female body. I assess her *Femme Maison* (1947) in tandem with her feminism

[49] Mainardi, *ibid.*
[50] Jordan, 'Etat présent', p. 84.

and the ways in which the body is also fused with architecture in Ernaux's text and images. Lastly, I observe how Bourgeois's *Cell (Clothes)* (1996) links to Ernaux's own exploration of *la chambre*, specifically analysing themes of material being and death. Messager follows in Chapter Two with her manner of presenting a multiplicity of selves in her self-representations such as *Quintuple autoportraits* (1973) which leads to a consideration of the figure of the madwoman in comparison to Ernaux's works. I then assess her contribution to feminist art, concluding with an in depth assessment of materiality, clothes, and death in her *Histoire des robes* (1990-1991), all of which resonate profoundly with Ernaux's own self-representations. The last link in the 'chaîne' within the remit of this dissertation is Kusama, whose self-representation transcends and becomes self-promotion. I consider her a number of her works in relation to the themes of sexuality and health and end with a discussion of the dichotomies of life/death and presence/absence in *I'm Here, but Nothing* (2000), themes which are also key to Ernaux's works. Overall, I reference feminism and feminist art throughout, invoking the work of other artistes where relevant, focusing on the deep connections between the links of the 'chaîne invisible' through the analysis of texts and images. Here, I begin the construction of this chain in which there is room for tremendous growth that could include a whole sisterhood of artistes.

CHAPTER ONE

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

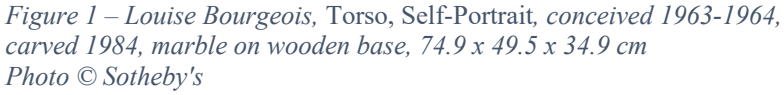

Figure 1 – Louise Bourgeois, Torso, Self-Portrait*, conceived 1963-1964, carved 1984, marble on wooden base, 74.9 x 49.5 x 34.9 cm*
Photo © Sotheby's

Louise Bourgeois was born in Paris in 1911 into a wealthy yet dysfunctional family and her privileged childhood was plagued by her father's affair with the family's live-in English tutor. Bourgeois and her art were very much marked by her formative years, including the passing of her mother in 1932 which saw the end of her father's ten years of infidelity. She then married American art historian Robert Goldwater in 1938, moved to New York and raised three sons.

She spent the rest of her life there, even after Goldwater's death in 1973, creating art that knew many reincarnations up to her death in 2010, aged ninety-eight. Though she sometimes felt exiled from her family in France during the interwar years, Bourgeois ultimately declared that 'I have no desire to express myself in French. I am an American artist.'[51] Her impact and influence are still felt even ten years after her death, as her renowned bronze spider sculpture *Maman* (1999) was to due be re-exhibited in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in May 2020 in order to celebrate the gallery's twentieth birthday, the same space that was inaugurated by Bourgeois with her work *I Do, I Undo, I Redo* (2000). Interestingly, though no strict relations appear to have been drawn between the two artists in Tate's coverage of the exhibition, now postponed to 2021, Bourgeois's *Maman* is to be shown concurrently with two of Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Rooms* under the premise that they 'embody art's journey from the avant-gardes of the early 20th century to the immersive installations being created today'.[52] This project highlights that, in fact, there are intricate thematic similarities between Bourgeois, Kusama, Messager, and Ernaux, thus creating the interlinking 'chaîne invisible'.

Upon discovering Bourgeois's work, Tracey Emin stated that 'I thought she was the same age as me: "Oh, who is this young American artist who makes work that I really relate to?"'[53] Emin even evokes the nature of 'une chaîne invisible' in saying that 'I felt like I was holding the baton of time, of history, and that Louise was helping me through to the next stage of my life'.[54] Indeed, the pair collaborated shortly before Bourgeois's death with 'Do Not Abandon Me', a series of watercolour paintings by Bourgeois overlain with ink drawings and

[51] Louise Bourgeois in conversation with Paulo Herkenhoff in *Louise Bourgeois*, Robert Storr, Paulo Herkenhoff and Allan Schwartzman, eds. (London: Phaidon, 2003), 8-25, p. 9.
[52] 'Tate Modern Turns 20', *Tate* (2020), <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-modern-turns-20> [accessed on 06/03/2020].
[53] Tracey Emin, 'Tracey Emin on Louise Bourgeois: Women without Secrets' (London: BBC Four, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHyAsMdBbH4> [accessed on 13/10/2019].
[54] *Ibid.*

words by Emin that elicit ideas of femininity and pregnancy.[55] Just as Emin and Bourgeois connect, Bourgeois's work also relates heavily to that of Ernaux and the artistes. Thematically, they cover much of the same ground: childhood trauma, parental figures, sex, and death.

This chapter begins with an exploration of Bourgeois's self-representation, assessing her infamous *Torso, Self-Portrait* (1963-1964) in relation to the wider context of women's art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which also serves as context for the chapters that follow. This leads to an examination of her earliest examples of self-representation with her *Femme Maison* works of the 1940s, exploring the ways in which her work responds to feminism alongside the representation of the female body in Ernaux's works *Passion simple* and *L'Usage.* This fusion of body and architecture leads to a consideration of the female space and self-representation in Bourgeois's *Cell (Clothes)* (1996) in tandem with the space of *la chambre* in the work of Ernaux, considering *L'Usage* as well as *L'Événement.*

Self-Representation

Figure 1 *Torso, Self-Portrait* is one of the few self-portraits that Bourgeois explicitly named as such and is arguably the most well-known of them. Her 'torso' is irregular in form and disregards the mimesis associated with conventional self-portraiture, that is painting a true likeness. Two circular mounds towards the top of the piece indicate breasts, as do the two larger circular forms at the sculpture's base. Either forms could represent buttocks. In between these round shapes are four horizontal teardrops which are evocative of labial folds, and a further six forms atop these are smoother and could represent abdominal muscles. In between the two

[55] See 'Do Not Abandon Me', *MoMA* (2009-2010), <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/series/153422?locale=en&page=&direction=> [accessed on 13/10/2019].

columns of teardrop forms is a ribbon of plaster, acting as a spinal column for the piece. This ribbon joins another circle of marble that appears to construct a switch that has two major connotations. If the bulbous base denotes buttocks, the switch could represent a woman's womb or clitoris, alluding to the mechanical processes of childbirth and sex. If the base represents breasts, then the switch could be in the metaphorical throat, connoting the struggle to find one's own voice as a woman in the 1960s. The sculpture in itself is also phallic, with two balls at its base leading upwards to a pointed tip.

In 1982, Bourgeois said that this piece represents 'the way I experience my torso… somehow with a certain dissatisfaction and regret that one's own body is not as beautiful as one would like it to be. It doesn't seem to measure up to any standard of beauty'.[56] It is therefore safe to discuss this piece as a self-representation of Bourgeois's own body. This raises questions of patriarchal ideals surrounding women's bodies, as explored by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*: 'across America, three out of every ten women dyed their hair blonde. They ate a chalk… instead of food, to shrink to be the size of the thin young models.'[57] With *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963 and *Torso* conceived in 1963-1964, it is clear that Bourgeois reacts to the same pressures surrounding body image that Friedan addresses, whether or not she was specifically influenced by Friedan's work. On the one hand, Bourgeois simultaneously conveys her displeasure towards feminine beauty ideals and rejects her own body's reduction to these notions, choosing instead to portray her torso as a gender-fluid, organic, and globular form. On the other hand, one might argue that *Torso* fuels stereotypical representations of female beauty as Bourgeois highlights all of her bumps and wrinkles, parading her apparent discontent with her body. To me, Bourgeois's irregular depiction of herself defies the tradition of the ideal female body as depicted by male artists in traditional

[56] Bourgeois quoted in *Louise Bourgeois,* exh. cat., *MoMa* (New York: 1982), p. 69.
[57] Friedan, p. 17.

portraiture, highlighted by Meskimmon: 'The female nude… has come to connote beauty, wholeness, and, in many ways, "art" itself.'[58] This demonstrates the progress made by artistes, finally able to create their own representations of their bodies in the twentieth century instead of being created under the idealistic male gaze. *Torso* also reminds us that a self-representation need not show one's face, nor be a realistic rendering of one's being in order to be a genuine self-representation.

Bourgeois has used different materials over the years to reproduce her *Torso:* the use of marble in this instance parodies the marble used in classical statues of the female form such as the *Venus de Milo*. Whereas its white hue would typically connote ideas of purity and virginity, the bulging forms of *Torso* are innately sexual. The metamorphosis of *Torso,* originally cast in crumbling plaster, then in bronze covered in a white patina, then in lustrous marble suggests the concretising of Bourgeois's concept of her torso and her own body as her ideas formed cemented parts of her identity, as women tentatively gained more rights and more representation in the artworld. Ultimately, this example of self-representation is somewhat uncategorizable: it is 'organic and inorganic, hard and soft, male and female, fierce and protective yet homely and vulnerable'.[59] Above all, it is corporeal.

Though Robert Storr argues that 'the content of [Bourgeois's] art is not primarily autobiographical',[60] I disagree, as Bourgeois constantly lured audiences into her personal realm: 'All my works in the past 50 years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood' (Fig. 2).[61] Bourgeois's continued self-representation throughout her career is evident, and she herself has said 'I have no ego. I am my work.'[62] Therefore, it is appropriate

[58] Meskimmon, p. 2.
[59] 'Contemporary Art Evening Auction', *Sotheby's,* exh. cat. (2019), <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2019/contemporary-art-evening-auction-l19020/lot.6.html> [accessed on 06/03/2020].
[60] Storr, *Louise Bourgeois,* eds. Storr, Herkenhoff and Schwartzman, p. 33.
[61] Bourgeois, 'Untitled' no. 2 of 69 from illustrated book *Album* (1994) <https://www.moma.org/s/lb/collection_lb/object/object_objid-177702.html> [accessed 20/04/2020].
[62] Bourgeois quoted in *Louise Bourgeois,* eds. Storr, Herkenhoff and Schwartzman*,* p. 49.

to adopt Peggy A. Reinecke's argument that 'Everything you make is a self-portrait',[63] which is also applicable to Ernaux due to the sheer amount of self-representation and autobiographical writing in her works, especially her diary-like *journaux intimes*. In fact, I apply Reinecke's assertion to all of the artistes in this project. Bourgeois's and Ernaux's approaches to producing material from the fabric of their respective lives are intimate, similar, and autobiographical. However, in order to avoid 'readings which subsume women artists into the anecdotal' I agree with Meskimmon, who highlights the importance of understanding women's artworks 'as forms of social communication'.[64] For example, the social commentary proffered by Bourgeois's *Torso* and the ways in which it explores female body image in the 1960s is unmistakeable and is still relevant to the present day. Therefore, I apply Meskimmon's methodology to the artworks I examine throughout.

Even though Mignon Nixon comments that 'Too often, the variety and discontinuity of Bourgeois's art have given rise to strict biographical interpretation' in the case of Bourgeois's work,[65] the advantages of biographical interpretation are thus: firstly, such interpretation is necessary in order to fully assess notions of the self within an œuvre, otherwise this would discount both the context of the piece and the *self* within the self-representation. Secondly, biographical interpretation does not negate the need for analysis of content, nor does it inhibit it.[66] The analysis that follows in all chapters aims to be shared between form and content, biography, and socio-historic context, as per Meskimmon. Thirdly, women's self-portraiture in particular sets out to highlight their experiences that have been so often elided from art history or that have been considered too taboo to merit depiction. Therefore, though I

[63] Peggy A. Reinecke quoted in *Images of the Self as Female: The Achievement of Women Artists in Re-envisioning Feminine Identity,* Kathryn N. Benzel and Lauren Pringle De La Vars, eds. (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. 274.
[64] *Ibid.,* p. 84.
[65] Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), p. 2.
[66] See Meskimmon, pp. 64-67.

understand the problematic nature of *purely* biographical interpretation, which then might remove the need for creativity or analysis, this project considers women's intermedial self-representation and contextualises it, assessing notions of feminism and linking artistes to one another based upon *how* they choose to represent themselves in their works.

Figure 2 – Bourgeois, 'Untitled' no. 2 of 69 from illustrated book Album*, 1994, photolithograph with vellum overlay, 21 × 26.6 cm*
Photo © MoMA

Femmes Maisons and Feminism

Despite serving as the title and theme for some of her earliest works, Bourgeois's *Femmes Maisons* were a recurring symbol throughout her artistic career from their first appearance in 1946 to their last manifestation in 2005. The *Femme Maison* has lived through numerous rebirths, first drawn on paper, then relief printed, and finally transposed into marble and cloth sculptures. Translating as house woman, woman house, or housewife, the figure of the *Femme*

Maison acts as a form of self-representation for Bourgeois as well as exploring issues symptomatic of a patriarchal society. By exploring these works in tandem with the work of Ernaux, I shed new light on both women's creative practices in relation to their roles and performances as women.

Firstly, the stark black ink used in this *Femme Maison* block print (Fig. 3) creates a striking image, and the careful use of line allows us to thoroughly read it: from her feet to her ample thighs, her slight genitalia, wide hips, the single bowed line denoting the curve of her stomach, or pregnancy, to the architectural form that starts at her cinched waist. The top-heavy house has multiple levels with many arches, doors, and windows, and a set of stairs lead up to a front door that sits in between two U-shaped lines which could depict closed eyes or breasts. The grain and tone of the paper stock adds colour and texture to the body, as if it has skin. Though much of the figure seems in proportion, a pair of small arms emerges from the house: the right arm hangs down by the figure's side and the left one is raised, waving to the spectator either in welcome or as a signal for help. The fact that the figure stands on a wooden platform or floorboards, and that there is a border printed around her, suggests further entrapment in a domestic space. The fact that we can see the *Femme Maison*'s genitalia and breasts and not her

Figure 3 – Bourgeois, Femme Maison*, 1947, block print, 23.3 cm x 9.3 cm*
Photo © MoMA

face suggests that her sexualised body is her most important asset, that she has no use for intellect, or perhaps that her whole mind is taken up by the thought of playing house.

Secondly, one could argue that Bourgeois conflates the woman with the marital home, stating that this is her correct place in the world, so much so that she has become the house. However, it could also imply that some women feel as if they are trapped in their homes, forever tidying this space and caring for their families. At the same time as these original works on paper were created in 1946-1947, Bourgeois was raising three young sons having moved to New York nine years earlier. This would have affected her work-life balance, and so I agree with Nixon, who claims that Bourgeois 'invented a character, the *Femme Maison*, to portray the predicament of a woman artist and mother, homesick in exile – carrying a house on her head – trying to make it as a surrealist in New York.'[67] In this sense, the work is not just autobiographical but conveys a deeper anxiety felt by both women artists and housewives at the time, as well as foreshadowing contemporary concerns surrounding women artists and motherhood. For example, British artists Celia Paul and Cecily Brown expressed these exact concerns in the 2019 article 'Can a Woman Who Is an Artist Ever Just Be an Artist?'[68] Therefore, though this self-representation is enriched by considering its creation in relation to Bourgeois's biography, it also serves as an important socio-historic symbol by representing a variety of women and artistes from the 1960s to the present day, embodying the 'chaîne invisible'.

The original *Femmes Maisons* pre-date Friedan's aforementioned text by nearly fifteen years, though the image above does not necessarily convey the explicit anger or confusion found in the testimonials in *The Feminine Mystique*.[69] These works also directly relate in both

[67] Nixon, p. 54.
[68] Rachel Cusk, 'Can a Woman Who Is an Artist Ever Just Be an Artist?', *The New York Times* (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/07/magazine/women-art-celia-paul-cecily-brown.html> [accessed 21/04/2020].
[69] See Friedan, pp. 27-28.

content and title to the 1972 work *Womanhouse* by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and their students. These artistes performed numerous household activities in a highly exaggerated parody, such as the performance *Leah's Room* (Fig. 4) in which one student sat at a dressing table, constantly applying and removing her make up on loop, discontented with her appearance each time but compelled to put on a face.[70] This sense of repetition and entrapment is clear in *Femme Maison,* and such ideas of play and performativity have been explored at length by gender theorist Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble*, wherein performativity 'is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body'.[71] Evidently, the role of the woman in *Femme Maison* is one of both repetition and ritual because of its continuous appearances throughout Bourgeois's career. In each instance, the house covers the woman's head, and so it is clear that the *Femme Maison* epitomises women that have become so absorbed in their own gender role as a housewife that they no longer realise that 'gender is an act',[72] or that the role has repeated itself so much so that they can no longer separate themselves from the domestic space.

[70] See Temma Balducci, 'Revisiting "Womanhouse": Welcome to the (Deconstructed) "Dollhouse"', *Woman's Art Journal,* 27.2 (2006), 17-23 (p. 19).
[71] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Oxon: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. xv.
[72] Butler, p. 187.

Similar notions of gender roles and the female body are peppered throughout Ernaux's works. In *Passion simple,* for example, Ernaux details the affair she had with a married Russian diplomat when she was in her forties. She describes how 'À partir du mois de septembre l'année dernière, je n'ai plus rien fait d'autre qu'attendre un homme' (p. 13), and in doing so, every time he visited she would 'choisir des toilettes et des maquillages' (p. 14) and make sure she was 'prête, maquillée, coiffée,' and that 'la maison [était] rangée' (p. 18). This is also expressed in *Se perdre,* albeit in a more direct way: 'Je vais laver le sol, les chiottes, faire un peu de propreté pour l'accueillir, le « mâle »' (p. 727). This text served as the original *journal intime* that inspired *Passion simple.* Though both texts recount the same love affair, there is a change in style – from *récit* to *journal intime* – as well as a difference in content, from more restrained to highly sexual. Ernaux is cast as the mistress and fulfils this role down to perfecting her

Figure 4 – Karen LeCoq, Leah's Room, *make-up performance piece, 1972, mixed media installation at* Womanhouse
Photo © Karen LeCoq

costume, props, and stage for the benefit of a man. The ritual and repetition of Ernaux getting ready in *Passion simple* mirrors that of the aforementioned performances in *Womanhouse,* without the same sense of irony or ridicule. Despite her not caring for a husband or young children at this point in her life, the need to present both her house and her *self* neatly and beautifully further embodies the conflation of the woman and architecture that is present in Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* works.

Butler's aforementioned sense of 'ritual' is also found in *L'Usage,* a text that dually details Ernaux's battle with breast cancer and her relationship with Marie, co-author and forty years her junior, based upon a series of photographs taken of their clothes after having had sex. Ernaux describes the 'rituel' that the pair would go through in order to capture their photographs (p. 11) which would be repeated around forty times throughout their relationship, resulting in the final fourteen images illuminated in the text. Each image is accompanied by a commentary from Ernaux and then Marie, creating twenty-eight texts. Though not performed within the gender role of the housewife, as is the founding idea behind the *Femme Maison,* such 'repetition and ritual' as outlined by Butler is clearly performed here by Ernaux, reflecting Galis' aforementioned concern that, although a feminist presence, Ernaux tends to unironically reinforce such female stereotypes and beauty ideals that are carried out in order to attract a partner.[73] Nonetheless, Thomas highlights that 'Le sujet, l'amour passionnel et obsessionnel, sous sa forme adulte plutôt qu'adolescente, est audacieux dans un texte autobiographique écrit par une femme d'une cinquintaine d'années',[74] and thus this deconstruction and exploration of such taboo topics such as the sex life of a middle-aged woman surely constitutes towards progressive feminist thinking.

[73] Galis, p. 7; see introduction, p. 16.
[74] Thomas, *Annie Ernaux, à la première personne,* trans. by Dolly Marquet (Paris: Éditons Stock, 2005), p. 43.

Figure 5 – 'Chambre, matin de Noël, suite'
Photo © Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, 2005

Both Bourgeois's and Ernaux's bodies often become sexualised in their self-representations. As aforementioned, the *Femme Maison*'s vagina and breasts are clearly marked, and her nudity combined with the house's windows and doors suggest that she is merely an object to be entered. In this sense, the *Femme Maison* works imply that sex is innately linked to the domestic space as opposed to the family home being an innocent and safe space. In *L'Usage,* sex is also inherently tied to the home as Ernaux consistently refers to her body and to sex in relation to the environment of her apartment. On the one hand, one could argue that Ernaux further performs her gender as she feels that 'faire l'amour' is 'le meilleur [usage] que j'aie pu donner au cancer' (p. 83). On the other hand, it is evident that Ernaux is in control of her body in her own space, exploring women's sexual pleasure and sensuality in defiance of her age and illness. For example, the image 'Chambre, matin de Noël, suite' (Fig. 5) depicts 'Rien d'autre que les accessoires de plus en plus commercialisés et banalisés du théâtre érotique intime' (p. 137). Even the choice of the word 'théâtre' used here by Ernaux to describe the act of sex evokes Butler's notion of gender as an 'act'.[75] The stark use of the flash

[75] Butler, *ibid.*

creates contrast between the dark items of underwear and the light carpet, while the bird's-eye composition of the photograph creates a sense of voyeurism that is also felt in *Femme Maison.* In addition, the black lines created by Ernaux's 'lacis de jarretelles et de brides' (p. 137) echo the use of line in the *Femme Maison* drawings, outlining the place of sexual female body within the space of the home.

As a result, the photographs and text in *L'Usage* contribute to Bourgeois-esque imagery of the fusion of the body with architecture, in so far as Ernaux's being and relationships are tied intensely to the space of her Cergy apartment, just as much as her experience is tied to the city in her *journaux extimes* such as *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure,* both serving as diaries that catalogue snapshots of the outside world, dating from 1985 to 1992 and 1993 to 1999, respectively. Ernaux has come to embody, then, the woman who has broken out of the family home and is no longer entrapped as a *Femme Maison,* nor is she expected to take care of her husband and children – her two children are not mentioned once in *L'Usage* – but instead Ernaux is free of familial duties, more imprisoned by cancer than any gender roles. As a result, the apartment in *L'Usage* contrasts the domestic environment of *Femme Maison* as it is more so a space of liberation than of oppression. It is therefore evident that explorations of domestic space and feminism heavily interlink in Bourgeois's and Ernaux's self-representations.

A Cell of One's Own

Nixon further states that 'the dream of the *femme maison* is a room of one's own,'[76] a coy reference to Virginia Woolf's 1929 extended essay *A Room of One's Own,* of which the title comes from her proclamation that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is

[76] Nixon, p. 53.

to write fiction'.[77] In suggesting that the *Femme Maison* dreams of a room of her own, Nixon implies that a woman would prefer to be fully contained within a room as opposed to straddling the realms of house and body or being responsible for the structure in its entirety. Borzello notes that 'A twentieth-century development of female self-portraiture is the painting of the artist's room,' and that 'visual evidence of [Woolf's statement's] application to artists was available in 1900', with women artists such as Emilie Charmy and Gwen John painting depictions of the rooms they worked in.[78] The notion of the room, alias *la chambre* or the cell, also appears heavily in the work of Bourgeois and Ernaux and is intrinsically tied to artistic practice as Woolf suggests. For example, we see numerous photographs of Ernaux's apartment and bedroom in *L'Usage,* wherein these snapshots capture specific spatial and temporal moments in Ernaux's life. This encapsulating of events, freezing of time, and method of processing life events or relationships functions in a similar way to Bourgeois's *Cells*, a series of works created between 1986 and 2008.

The term 'cell' denotes both the biological unit of the cell that makes up living matter as well as the physical act of imprisonment. Each *Cell* is populated with a carefully curated selection of furniture, clothing, sculptures, and/or objects that are 'used as memory devices' by Bourgeois in order to convey the atmosphere of a certain scene, event or feeling.[79] I agree with Frances Morris who notes that the *Cells* pertain to Bourgeois's 'most explicitly narrative and autobiographical works',[80] as well as with Jessica Hemmings who remarks that 'Bourgeois's building and rebuilding of *Cells* allowed her to create spaces determined by parameters that she alone built and controlled. She was building rooms of her own.'[81] Indeed, all of the *Cells*

[77] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1935) 2nd edn., p. 6.
[78] Borzello, pp. 142-143.
[79] Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012) 5th edn., p. 434.
[80] Frances Morris ed., *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 13.
[81] Jessica Hemmings, 'Exhibition Review: Louise Bourgeois. The Structure of Existence: The Cells', *TEXTILE,* 16.1 (2018), 78-83 (p. 83).

were created after Bourgeois turned seventy and coincided with her moving to a larger studio space in Brooklyn in 1980: a larger 'room of her own'.[82]

Figures 6-7 – Bourgeois, Cell (Clothes), *executed 1996, interior installation view at Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2016, textiles, wood, metal, dimensions variable*
Photo © Art Surgery / Art © Fondazione Prada, Milan

[82] A number of works seek to place Bourgeois in relation to the space of her studio in New York, with one such work even entitled *Femme Maison*, combining quotes from Bourgeois with photographic portraits of her in her space. See Jean-François Jaussaud, *Louise Bourgeois : Femme Maison* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2019).

Firstly, the form and narrative of Bourgeois's *Cell (Clothes)* (1996) (Figs. 6-7) is comparable with the photographs of Ernaux's *L'Usage.* This *Cell* features the symbolic use of clothes in order to create a female space impregnated by loss, memory, and absence. The rough oval structure is formed of eighteen wooden doors that were 'scavenged from demolished or abandoned houses' in New York and are mostly painted white.[83] The structure has an open top and a slight entrance between two paned glass doors and various items of women's clothing are suspended from arched hooks that have been affixed to the top of each door panel, in addition to a number of freestanding clothes stands. Some items have been padded out or stuffed, such as the pair of breasts sat underneath a long black dress in the centre of the piece, or the pair of tights that sit on a metal stool, lumpy legs dangling. The clothes are all dark or in light neutral tones such as white, black, and navy, and Brooke Hodge reminds us that they 'were all worn by the artist during her lifetime'.[84]

On the surface, this piece represents a strange walk-in wardrobe full of coat hangers, hooks, and clothing – dresses and bloomers and skirts – that is normally worn by women. The fact that the clothes belonged to and were worn by Bourgeois assure the artiste's material trace and intimate presence within the work. Bourgeois has spoken at length about her attachment to clothes, telling Herkenhoff that 'You can retell your life and remember your life by the shape, weight, color, and smell of those clothes in your closet.'[85] As a result, though the *Cell* is full of clothes and of Bourgeois's presence, a feeling of absence pervades the work, perhaps due to its muted colour palette or the fact that the work takes on a different meaning with Bourgeois no longer alive, serving instead as a mausoleum of or shrine to her material being. To me, Bourgeois uses clothes in order to narrate her own story in this *Cell,* as the filled forms of empty clothes represent past versions of herself, past outfits, and past days of her life. It is

[83] Brook Hodge, '*Cell (Clothes) 1996*' in *Louise Bourgeois,* ed. Morris, p. 73.
[84] *Ibid.*
[85] Bourgeois in interview with Herkenhoff quoted in *Louise Bourgeois,* ed. Morris, p. 82.

as if the audience finds themselves in Bourgeois's wardrobe or bedroom, her 'room of her own'. Indeed, Bourgeois spoke of the desire to create her own space within the space of the museum, and the salvaged doors, windows, and metal grates that make up these enclosures fulfil this purpose.[86] This combination of personal and impersonal items, and the fact that it serves as an installation piece that spectators can walk around, creates an intense link between artiste and audience. Whereas the museum space is typically dominated by male artists, Bourgeois claims her place as a woman in this space and invites others to join her.

If one compares the form of *L'Usage* with that of the *Cells,* art historian Claire Bishop suggests that 'the word "installation" has now expanded to describe any arrangement of objects in any given space', which would indicate that the photographs of *L'Usage* are what Bishop refers to as 'installation shots' or installation views.[87] Therefore, the arrangements of clothes located in Ernaux's apartment and in the two hotel rooms in *L'Usage* become site-specific works of installation art. Though Bishop insists that installation art 'addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space',[88] such as is the case in *Cell (Clothes),* Ernaux does address the audience's presence by informing us that 'Le plus haut degré de réalite, pourtant, ne sera atteint que si ces photos écrites se changent en d'autres scenes dans la mémoire ou l'imagination des lecteurs' (p. 13). Despite the fact that we are not physically passing through the space of her apartment, the photographs' intimate depiction of real still-life scenes coupled with detailed text accompaniments ensures that an audience feels as if they *were* in her space. Though there is no doubt that Bourgeois's *Cells* are works of installation art, she has also remarked that 'a work of art is a language',[89] and therefore that such works can be read. As a

Figure 8 – 'Chambre, matin de Noël'
Photo © Ernaux and Marie, 2005

[86] Hemmings, p. 79.
[87] Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), p. 6.
[88] *Ibid.*
[89] Bourgeois, 'The Sigmund Freud Antiquities: Fragments from a Buried Past', *Artforum*, 28.5, 1990 (111-113), p. 113.

result, the images featured in this comparison are all installation shots or views and all represent a *Cell* or *chambre,* each representing a past self.

The motif of clothes, their emptiness, and the notion of past selves are also key to the *chambres* of *L'Usage,* such as in 'Chambre, matin de Noël' (Fig. 8). Ernaux's bedroom is depicted as a female space from a voyeuristic low angle: the apartment belongs to Ernaux, as do her feminine high heels that sit underneath the bed, as does the baroque bed itself, as well as the explicitly female 'chatte' (p. 129) in the background. It is remarked by both Ernaux and Marie that his presence in this scene is lacking, which only serves to cement this as a female space and further highlights Ernaux's dominance: she states that 'Rien n'appartient à M. sur cette photo' (p.129) whereas Marie confirms that 'C'est comme je n'étais pas là' (p. 134). When describing this image, Ernaux also chronicles 'L'étrangeté de dormir pour la première fois avec un homme' (p. 131) as well as the search for 'le lit idéal' with her ex-husband (p. 130), as if comparing her current self to a myriad of past selves through the medium of material goods. As a result, both Ernaux and Bourgeois create explicitly female spaces or 'rooms of their own' in order to combat the aforementioned restraints placed upon them by marriage and motherhood, reclaiming their space through their creative practices. In the case of both artistes, past selves are represented both by clothes and by different *chambres* and such female spaces become synonymous with feminist liberation. Clothes serve as the most personal 'room of one's own', the closest protection one's body can get. In this regard, the *Cells* are just as intimate as the images of *L'Usage.*

Ernaux also notes that 'les maisons gardent la mémoire de ce qui s'y est passé. Pourquoi non. Selon un article du *Monde*, des généticiens ont assuré que la matrice des femmes conserve l'*empreinte* de tous les enfants, nés ou avortés, qui s'y sont formés' (*L'Usage,* p. 72). Conflating the house with the womb further pertains to the ideas behind Bourgeois's *Femme Maison,* but also implies that both are a woman's work or domain, evoking ideas of

motherhood. The idea of a house keeping or storing a memory relates directly to Bourgeois's *Maison Vide* (1990), a project in which she renovated a house for her son Michel who passed away before its completion. As implied by its title, the house remained empty, with Bourgeois noting that the house is actually a 'metaphor' for herself.[90] If this is the case, the *Maison Vide* becomes another form of self-representation and is reminiscent of the moment in *L'Usage* where Ernaux helps Marie to clear out his mother's house after her death:

> Les robes, les tailleurs, les manteaux de la mère de M., pendus à des cintres, entassés les uns contre les autres, étaient restés imprégnés de l'odeur de l'eau de Cologne dont elle se servait à l'excès […] C'étaient les images vivantes et démultipliées d'une femme que je n'avais pas connue, dont, en dehors des photos, je ne connaîtrais jamais rien d'autre que cela […] sans l'avoir jamais rencontrée je l'ai tout de même connue. (p. 73)

The scene described here is eerily similar to the one depicted by Bourgeois in *Cell (Clothes)* and both remark how a person's smell can impregnate clothing, as well as how a house serves as a metaphor for or extension of its owner or creator. Ernaux mirrors Bourgeois by exhibiting her own clothes, and through their representation of their material objects, it is also as if we have known *them*. The way in which Bourgeois turns a life-event into self-representation – and thus making a private scene public – is consistent with the way in which Ernaux creates her own self-representations, thus both artistes confirm that 'La seule vraie mémoire est matérielle' (L'Événement, p. 75).

In fact, many of Ernaux's works are punctured by the space of *la chambre*, including the bedroom (*L'Evénement* p. 85), the hospital room (*L'Usage,* p. 129, unphotographed), and even the intimate yet impersonal space of the hotel room (*Passion simple,* p. 44, p. 58; Fig. 9).

[90] Bourgeois quoted in *Louise Bourgeois,* eds. Storr, Herkenhoff, Schwartzman, p. 24.

Figure 9 – 'Chambre 223 de l'hôtel Amigo, Bruxelles, 10 mars'
Photo © Ernaux and Marie, 2005

From left to right in 'Chambre 223', natural light illuminates the ruffled bedsheets, the remains of a room service breakfast, a vase of roses, sharing yet another personal story – a romantic getaway – and making it public. Ernaux even questions the fact that 'Ne peut-on voir la vie derrière soi comme une série de chambres en abyme' (*L'Usage,* p. 129), and it is clear that Bourgeois followed a similar notion in creating her *Cells*. Also, the same manner in which Bourgeois uses her *Cells* or rooms in order to encapsulate scenes and memories applies to the case of Ernaux's *L'Événement.* For example, Ernaux details how she travelled from Rouen to Paris in order to have an illegal abortion: 'Je suis parvenue à l'image de la chambre. Elle excède l'analyse. Je ne peux que m'immerger en elle' (p. 85). This same sense of immersion applies to the *Cells*, as Bourgeois originally noted that she wanted the installation works to be literally accessible by her audience, that they could be *immersed* in her rooms.[91] In addition, Ernaux remarks:

[91] Hemmings, p. 79.

> Pendant des années, j'ai vu cette chambre et ces rideaux comme je les voyais depuis le lit où j'étais couchée. Elle est peut-être devenue une pièce claire, meublée Ikea… Mais rien ne peut empêcher ma certitude qu'elle garde le souvenir des filles et des femmes venues s'y faire transpercer d'une sonde. (p. 85)

The imagery used here surely relates back to Bourgeois's *Maison Vide,* as well as Ernaux's later assertion in *L'Usage* (aforementioned) that women's wombs keep the imprint of born/unborn babies. Therefore, the *chambre* serves not only to 'exercise of memory',[92] but also to represent autobiographical events. Indeed, Ernaux even ponders that 'Si j'avais à représenter par un seul tableau cet événement de ma vie, je peindrais une petite table adossée à un mur, couverte de formica, avec une cuvette émaillée où flotte une sonde rouge' (p. 90). The space of the room is therefore so tied to the autobiographical event itself that it transcends literature and becomes an image. Indeed, Bourgeois's *Cell* installation works act upon this notion of 'Si j'avais à représenter' certain life events: *Cell (Choisy)* (1990-93) concerns her childhood home which has been rendered in pink marble and sits beneath a guillotine, and *Passage Dangereux* (1997) features a series of metal cells connected via a central tunnel, each one full of old wooden chairs and tapestries that represent her father and the family tapestry restoration business. Consequently, it is clear that the *chambre/Cell* is essential to both Ernaux's and Bourgeois's self-representations, and this attachment to the material perhaps reflects on the capitalist, consumerist society in which we live in, constantly following trends and finding comfort in material goods.

Overall, Bourgeois's and Ernaux's self-representations are reflections on women's developing sexual openness and the growing traction of feminism. On the one hand, twenty-nine years separate the birth of these women, with Ernaux only being six years old at the

[92] Bourgeois quoted in *Louise Bourgeois,* ed. Morris, p. 76.

creation of Bourgeois's first *Femme Maison* works in 1946. On the other hand, the themes that appear in each woman's works echo each other's lived experiences, and so their links are both biographical as well as thematic, which is the more significant of the two. For example, the publication of Bourgeois's illustrated recounting of her father's affair in 'Child Abuse' in 1982 was closely followed by Ernaux's *La Place,* published in 1983, which detailed her relationship with her father. It is clear, therefore, that despite their age difference and their living on different continents, their thematic overlaps are undeniable. Their work offers important social commentary on what it means to be a woman whilst also clearly rebuffing the possibility that artistes' work could be viewed as 'anecdotal',[93] as their self-representations explore materiality, femininity, and sexuality, exposing taboo subjects and conveying feminist ideas. Bourgeois's work offers a clear starting point for the 'chaîne invisible' and also links heavily to that of Messager, explored next.

[93] Meskimmon, p. 84.

CHAPTER TWO

ANNETTE MESSAGER

Figure 10 - Annette Messager, Quintuple autoportraits*, 1973, set of five gelatin silver prints, 14 x 11 cm each*
Photo © artnet

Born in 1943 in Berck, France, Messager developed strong interests in photography and religion as a child. After studying in Paris at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in the 1960s, Messager worked with countless materials including photography, knitting, embroidery, drawing, and painting, valuing everyday objects above all else in her work, from newspaper clippings to plush toys to sleeping bags. In 2005 she won the Lion d'Or at the Venice Biennale and currently resides in Malakoff, Paris, with her French partner artist Christian Boltanski. Like Bourgeois, her art has undergone numerous reworkings, from her earlier *Albums-collections* of collected and modified images in the 1970s to her more recent textile works, often combining the material with the photographic. Though some may consider that her work is less overtly autobiographical, and indeed less well-known, than that of

Bourgeois, in this chapter I explore how Messager's work in fact explores a number of selves, past and present, as well as assessing the important ways in which she studies the concept of female identity, and, by extension, her own.

Messager has stated 'Je suis une féministe, mais pas une militante… Je me suis donc servie des éléments traditionnels de notre culture : des objets pouvant appartenir à l'univers de la maison, matériaux considérés comme des attributs féminins.'[94] As explored in my introduction, Ernaux's feminism also operates along the same lines: using feminist ideas in order to inform her works without the need to 'militantly' define just *how* feminist she is. Though Camille Morineau has compared Bourgeois and Messager's feminisms, she does not describe the thematic concerns they share, highlighting this tendency to escape defining *how* feminist they are: '[elles ont] refusé avec insistance le terme de "féministe" tout en travaillant avec opiniâtreté, justement, le "féminin", adoptant sur ce sujet un mélange d'engagement et de distance…'[95] This sort of 'slippery' feminism, to borrow Jordan's term once more, coupled with the refusal to keep oneself confined within a specific label allows for the multiplicity of the self to be a major facet of self-representation.

Despite the fact that Messager becomes annoyed 'Quand on me range sous l'appellation "femme artiste"',[96] it is important to recognise the links that she has with her women contemporaries in order to cement their position in the history and canon of art and literature, as per the goals of this project. After all, Messager herself has said that 'Les femmes n'appartiennent pas à l'histoire de l'art',[97] so by creating a 'chaîne invisible' and rendering it visible, I assure their rightful place within this sphere which is so typically dominated by men.

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[94] Messager in interview with Annick Colonna-Césari, '"On m'a traitée de folle"', *L'Express* (1995), [accessed 22/05/2020] <https://www.lexpress.fr/informations/on-m-a-traitee-de-folle_604032.html>.
[95] Camille Morineau, *Artistes Femmes : de 1905 à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2010), p. 117.
[96] Annette Messager in interview with Julien Bordier, 'Annette Messager: "Je suis totalement inutile"', *L'Express* (2018), [accessed 22/05/2020] <https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/art/annette-messager-je-suis-totalement-inutile_2039781.html>.
[97] Messager in interview with Colonna-Césari.

In addition, little research has been carried out with regard to the autobiographical nature of Messager's art. Belonging to roughly the same generation – born only three years apart – both Ernaux and Messager explore notions of a collective female identity as well as their own. Comparing the playfulness of Messager's self to Ernaux's more serious treatment reveals two different schools of self-representation. Though I do not intend to reduce to her work to a simple autobiographical timeline, and that it is clear that Ernaux and Messager's processes differ somewhat, Messager's exploration of identity is important and illuminating when compared to that of Ernaux.

This chapter considers the elements of the self that are evident within Messager's work, starting with an analysis of *Quintuple autoportraits* (1973) and a discussion of her multiple identities and her exploration of madness. I then examine Ernaux and Messager's feminism in tandem with *Ma collection de proverbes* (1974) which leads to a consideration of the importance of materiality through a comparison of *Histoire des robes* (1990-1991) and Ernaux's *L'Usage*. This chapter ends with the consideration of the prevalence of death, absence, and stains in each woman's work, from Messager's *Le Grenier du château* (1990) to Ernaux's *L'Événement* and *L'Usage.*

Self-Representation

Quintuple autoportraits (Fig. 10) is one of Messager's only artworks to be explicitly labelled as a self-portrait. It features five sepia photographs of Messager, and each image displays a different facial expression and pose, is positioned on a slant, and is square in composition with its corners clipped. These head and shoulder shots show her hands raised up to her face and contorted in various positions. Her hair is long, dark, and straight, and she appears to be wearing black eyeliner in order to enhance her eyes. In the central photograph, Messager is

blindfolded and her hands are outstretched in front of her, as if trying to feel her way forward. She then appears to be growling in the top left image as we can see her lips are curled back over her teeth, her eyes are wide, and her left hand is raised in a claw position towards her own face. In the top right self-portrait, her hands are raised to her face as if in shock, fingers splayed, with her mouth and eyes wide open. Messager then takes a more nonchalant, juvenile pose in the bottom left image, with a finger resting on her chin and her tongue sticking out. Finally, in the bottom right photograph, she holds her face with one hand and looks down towards her left, dejected. Her expression and mood change from image to image, creating a piece that is enigmatic and expressive, showing the thirty-year-old artist in multiple emotional states.

Firstly, it could be argued that these self-portraits show Messager as someone with multiple selves or personalities. Following the progression of her career, Messager has given herself many labels and names: *artiste*, *collectionneuse*, *femme pratique, colporteuse, and truquese*.[98] Though three of these five labels came into fruition after this particular self-representation, one could argue that Messager's feeling of being split into five different identities had already occurred to her at this early point in her career. Furthermore, Messager has stated that 'Je ne pense pas qu'on a une seule identité, on a des identités multiples. C'est la raison pour laquelle je me suis donnée des appellations différentes'.[99] It is clear that a multiplicity of selves is key to Messager's works which matches Ernaux's own self-explorations: throughout her corpus, we meet Ernaux as a young girl (*Mémoire de fille*), as a university professor (*Passion simple*), and as a cancer patient (*L'Usage*). Ernaux's corpus is peppered with a multiplicity of selves, each contributing a piece to the puzzle of her self-representation. Indeed, in *Se perdre* Ernaux describes her multiple selves as thus: 'je me préfère maintenant. Mais ce moi est contenu dans

[98] Sheryl Conkelton, 'Annette Messager's Carnival of Dread and Desire', pp. 9-44 in *Annette Messager,* eds. Sheryl Conkelton and Carol S. Eliel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), p. 15.
[99] 'Herstory Annette Messager', *HERstory* (2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=332&v=M8MFBay4g3s&feature=emb_title>.

l'actuel, avec les autres, comme des millions de poupées russes' (p. 743). This notion of multiple selves and the concept of a Russian doll clearly links to Messager's ideas of multiplicity. Nonetheless, a multiplicity of selves could also be a metaphor for multiple personalities or madness, even though both Ernaux and Messager represent the multiplicity as a positive and creative reality. Both confirm Meskimmon's statement that artistes became attracted to 'reveal[ing] the multiplicity of "selves" available to one individual',[100] embodying the notion that a multiplicity of selves is fundamental to self-representation, and that the self is not necessarily a fixed entity. The sole identity that remains constant to both Ernaux and Messager is that of the artiste, the woman who creates.

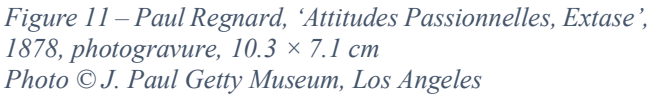

Figure 11 – Paul Regnard, 'Attitudes Passionnelles, Extase', 1878, photogravure, 10.3 × 7.1 cm
Photo © J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

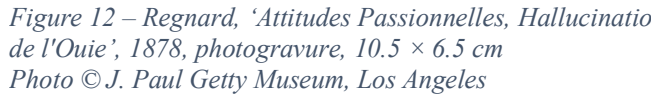

Figure 12 – Regnard, 'Attitudes Passionnelles, Hallucinations de l'Ouie', 1878, photogravure, 10.5 × 6.5 cm
Photo © J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

[100] Meskimmon, p. 86.

Quintuple autoportraits also evokes the imagery of photographs found in the *Iconographie Photographie de la Salpêtrière* of the female patients at the Parisian neuropsychiatric hospital in the late 1800s, taken by photographer Paul Regnard for Professor Jean-Martin Charcot.[101] Regnard's portraits of supposedly hysterical female patients remain iconic, especially those of Augustine and her 'attitudes passionnelles' (Figs. 11-12), given that she was often depicted promiscuously in bed in her nightclothes. Messager's own facial expressions in *Quintuple autoportraits* are reminiscent of Augustine's frenzied, open-mouthed pose in 'Début de l'attaque' (Fig. 13). The range of emotions in the Salpêtrière patients, often solicited by hypnotism or the administering of ether, is akin to those in Messager's self-portraits, though her own emotions here are likely an act conjured up by herself. In this sense, Messager performs madness. That is not to say that Messager has hysteria or is mentally ill, or indeed that either occurrences would discredit her work, but rather that the images exhibit similar notions of madness that is often tied to female identity. For Charcot and Regnard, hysteria was primarily a feminine ailment.

Figure 13 – Regnard, 'Début de l'Attaque, Cri', (1878) photogravure, 6.5 × 10.5 cm
Photo ©J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

[101] Désiré-Magloire Bourneville and Paul-Marie-Léon Regnard, *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière (Service de M. Charcot)* (Versailles: Cerf et fils, 1878).

Whereas the Salpêtrière portraits perhaps originated the imagery of the madwoman in photography, Messager's images actually question the notion of female hysteria as opposed to perpetuating it. In fact, when asked about the critique of her works, Messager responds 'On m'a traitée de folle, de sorcière, de guerrière, de putain, de garce.'[102] Such a comment is especially relevant when considering that female patients at the Salpêtrière were likely sexually abused and treated as prostitutes rather than patients. Indeed, writers Louis Aragon and André Breton noted in 'Le Cinquantenaire de l'Hystérie' that 'les internes de la Saplêtrière confondaient leur devoir professionnel et leur goût de l'amour'.[103] Therefore, the assumption that madwomen were sexually available or were treated as such was rife within these establishments. Each of the labels listed by Messager could indeed apply to each one of her *Quintuple autoportraits*, as if directly responding to such assumptions created in Charcot's imagery, in turn playing with them and breaking them down. Both sets of images are constructions of female identity, though one is produced as a result of a doubly medicalised and sexualised male gaze, whereas the other is Messager's own performance of her multiple selves.

Ultimately, Messager toes the line between an accurate self-portrait and a fictional self-representation in *Quintuple autoportraits*, perhaps embodying the term autofiction, all while considering her position and place as a woman in the world at large. Indeed, Mounir Laouyen observes that *autofiction*, and by extension autobiographical self-representation, is 'le lieu où le sujet se perd et se dissout dans la multiplicité'.[104] Multiplicity, then, is key to Messager's practice of self-representation and is echoed by Ernaux's own corpus. For example, I agree with Edwards, who argues that *L'Usage* offers multiple views of Ernaux because Marie 'writes

[102] Messager in interview with Colonna-Césari.
[103] Louis Aragon and André Breton, 'Le Cinquantenaire de l'Hystérie', *La Révolution surréaliste*, 11 (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), 20-22 (p. 20).
[104] Mounir Laouyen, 'Préface' in *L'Esprit créateur: Les Nouvelles Autobiographies,* 42.4 (2002), 3-7 (pp. 3-4).

his version of their shared experiences and he thus creates a different persona for her; she is one self and another self, and yet more selves as a result of all the photographs.'[105] In this sense, Ernaux is both object and subject in *L'Usage,* just as Messager is in *Quintuple autoportraits.* Both artistes partake in 'thinking the self *through* photography' as opposed to 'seeing the self *in* photography'.[106] In this regard, *Quintuple autoportraits* and *L'Usage* become the ultimate self-representation for each artiste, depicting multiple images, angles, and selves as a result.

Message(r)s of Madness

The representation of the madwoman has been heavily explored in feminism and literary criticism, such as Charlotte Brontë's Bertha in *Jane Eyre,* otherwise known as *The Madwoman in The Attic* as explored by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their key text on women's madness in literature.[107] Gilbert and Gubar highlight that fact that 'the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage', and that in actual fact, women authors write the madwoman as a means to 'come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation', to reject the 'strictures of patriarchal society'.[108] This literary theory can also be applied to Messager's *Quintuple autoportraits,* especially when considered in tandem with her own feelings towards feminism expressed in a number of recent interviews, such as her aversion for the patriarchal expectation of having children: 'on me demandait toujours « est-ce que vous voulez avoir des enfants ? » Je n'ai

[105] Edwards, 'Photography and Autobiography', p. 710.
[106] Jordan, 'Chronicles of Intimacy: Photography in Autobiographical Projects' in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography,* eds. Natalie Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell, and Ann Miller (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011) pp. 51-78, p. 52. Italics in original text.
[107] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 2nd edn.
[108] *Ibid.,* p. 78.

jamais entendu cette question posée à un homme artiste. Jamais.'[109] Therefore, in representing herself as the madwoman, Messager too rejects the restrictive patriarchal strictures of having a family and accepts her own fragmented female identity, as per Gilbert and Gubar.

It is also worth noting that Messager's home of Berck was 'living in the shadow of the local sanitorium' and thus had 'a sizeable population of sick and convalescent'.[110] Indeed, Catherine Grenier informs us that 'Messager also became increasingly interested in studies of the hysterical body, a theatrical entity which reveals inner states'.[111] Therefore, there is much to be found under the surface of Messager's self-representation which ironically pertains to the stereotype of the woman portrayed as mad or as a witch, with her long dark hair and kohled eyes exaggerating her already intense expressions. *Quintuple autoportraits* undoubtedly 'reveals inner states' in a 'theatrical' manner, thus providing a rare example of a Messager self-portrait that offers both historical and autobiographical references, culminating in an exploration of how madness is oftentimes thrust upon women.

A comparable representation of the artiste as a madwoman might be found in *Passion simple,* Ernaux's recounting of an obsessive love affair. This contemporary representation represents Ernaux as madly in love. Not so much hysterically infirm, she is nevertheless entirely consumed by her obsession for her married lover, even travelling abroad to Denmark to send him a postcard as proof that she has done something *other* than wait in her apartment for him (p. 63). Further discussion of obsession will appear in my final chapter in relation to Kusama. However, as Suzanne Dow highlights in reference to Ernaux, 'the figure of the madwoman, who was such a feature of earlier writing, has all but disappeared in women's writing from Metropolitan France. Contemporary female authors are, however, still concerned

[109] Messager in interview with HERstory.
[110] Catherine Grenier, *Annette Messager*, trans. by David Radzinowicz Howell (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), p. 42.
[111] *Ibid.,* p. 94.

with the inscription of trauma… in autobiographical texts.'[112] Such evocations of trauma and obsession are key to Ernaux's autobiographical works without strictly relating to explorations of madness or hysteria as direct results of mental illness as depicted in *Attitudes Passionnelles* or recreated by Messager in *Quintuple autoportraits.* Such trauma and obsession is even more explicit in *Se perdre,* and even the title of the work, to lose oneself, suggests that the affair Ernaux goes through is enough to make her mad. Indeed, she agonises over this man, whether he will call or not, forever jealous of his wife, regularly losing sleep, from September 1988 to April 1990. Her constant 'angoisse', 'peur', and 'tristesse' are noted throughout this book, suggesting even that she has slipped into depression as a result of this affair: 'Tout est si noir que j'ai envie de rester chez moi, le monde extérieur me fait horreur' (pp. 731-732). As a result, though Dow claims that the traditional character of the madwoman is no longer present in Contemporary French literature, it is apparent that her ripples are still felt.

Messager's self-exploration in *Quintuple autoportraits* was the beginning of a long survey of female identity. One year later she produced a number of hand-embroidered works entitled *Ma collection de proverbes* (1974) (Fig. 14). For this *Album-collection*, Messager stitched a number of misogynistic proverbs apparently condemning women, including 'Que le balai de la mort frappe toutes les femmes sauf ma mère', 'Les femmes et les melons, il est difficile de reconnaître les bons', and 'Chez la femme les dents de sagesse ne poussent qu'après la mort' (Fig. 15). Each proverb varies in colour and is embroidered in capital letters on a slant, as if it were a casual idea scribbled onto the back of a napkin. However, the sentiment behind these sayings is far from casual and highlights the deep-rooted sexism present in our patriarchal society. Such a seemingly damning work appearing in 1974 amidst the boom of feminist artists

Figure 14 – Messager, Ma collection de proverbes*, 1974, coloured embroidery on white cotton, set of 15, 28 x 35 cm each*
Photo © Annette Messager, mfc-michèle Didier, 2012

[112] Suzanne Dow, *Madness in Twentieth-Century French Women's Writing* (Bern: Peter Land, 2009), p. 190.

such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro could appear to be counterproductive for feminist art, but the use of irony is clear. Messager's feminism here is in fact very pointed as these proverbs are not genuine ancient proverbs at all, thus highlighting their ridiculousness and clear inaccuracy.

Moreover, I agree with Colonna-Césari, who states that Messager's use of 'des bouts de tissus' and 'des crayons de couleur' begets '[un] pied de nez au grand art',[113] where 'grand art' is notoriously male. These stitched phrases are distant from the decorative and homely embroideries once practiced by women and are not overtly feminine in style, mocking both this ancient practice and the received ideas that such proverbs would originate from. This aligns with artistes' tendency to reclaim embroidery as a specifically feminist form of art making, used by artistes such as Chicago and Emin, as opposed to a purely domestic practice.[114] This further serves to reinforce the underlying irony of the proverbs and denies any truth in them, even rendering them comical. One could argue that Ernaux reclaims the form of the *journal* in a similar manner as a form of feminist writing meant to share her experiences as

Figure 15 – Messager, Ma collection de proverbes*, detail, 1974, coloured embroidery on white cotton, 28 x 35 cm*
Photo © Annette Messager, mfc-michèle Didier, 2012

[113] Messager in interview with Colonna-Césari.
[114] See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

a woman, as opposed to the stereotypical 'Dear Diary' entries of teenage girls.[115] Also, the constant use of personal pronouns such as *ma* or *mes* employed by Messager in the titles of her

Figure 16 – Messager, Les tortures volontaires, *1972, set of 12 gelatin silver prints, each 19 x 14 cm*
Photo © Artspace

Albums-collections brings a sense of self and privacy to these works, obviously reminiscent of Ernaux's 'je' used in the majority of her works. Coupled with the fact that embroidery is a labour-intensive process historically practiced by women, these textile works are imbued with Messager's presence and her distaste for such sexism is clear.

Messager has also focused on the societal expectations thrust upon women and expressed her own feminism in works like *Les Tortures volontaires* (1972) (Fig. 16). Collected images of women undergoing various beauty treatments are isolated and thus appear alien and torturous, as implied by the title. These acts remain nonetheless voluntarily carried out by women in an effort to fit the patriarchal mould to be beautiful, supple, and smooth by using contraptions to exercise, tighten skin, and dye hair. Butler's notion of gender performativity explored in Chapter One is also relevant here, where gender becomes a performance of 'repetition' and 'ritual', wherein 'acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are

[115] See Cynthia Huff, '"That Profoundly Female, and Feminist Genre": The Diary as Feminist Practice', Women's Studies Quarterly, 17.3 (1989), 6-14.

performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs'.[116] The performance of female identity is clearly 'sustained through corporeal signs' in *Les Tortures volontaires,* with the numerous depictions of women's bodies and faces undergoing 'beauty' treatments, deemed necessary in order to keep oneself 'presentable' for the male gaze, as well as for all possible audiences in a visual culture that is dominated by patriarchal expectations.[117] Ernaux mirrors this concern is *Se perdre,* sharing how 'l'esthéticienne m'épile les sourcils' (p. 788) and asking herself 'Mais pour *qui* est-ce que je bronze?' (p. 774), confessing her 'peur de ne pas être assez belle' (pp. 729-730). There can be no doubt that this *journal intime* is Ernaux's own *torture volontaire*, constantly waiting for a man and wanting to be attractive for him, driving herself mad in the process. In *Journal du dehors,* Ernaux remarks that 'Coiffeurs et coiffeuses appartiennent à un monde en couleurs, théâtral' (p. 511), confirming the links between beauty treatments and Butler's notion of gender as a performance or act. Ernaux and Messager's self-representations are allied with their feminisms in different ways, though both ultimately express anti-patriarchy sentiments in sharing their private experiences. Both Ernaux and Messager focus on and often refuse the behaviour a woman is supposed to have according to society: to be happily married to a man, to have children, and to be a mother.

In fact, both artistes belong to Rita Felski's coined genre of the 'feminist confessional', presenting 'the most personal and intimate details of the author's life' as a means of cementing the relationship between 'female author and female reader'.[118] Though Felski's term originally applies to literary studies, its use in art is warranted, especially due to the personal and confessional nature of Messager's *Album-collections.* Both prioritise a multiplicity of the self

[116] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. xv; p. 185, italics author's own
[117] See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism,* ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), pp. 26-40, p. 33.
[118] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 87.

and create detailed portraits of everyday life, which surely unites and represents a variety of women audiences. Ultimately, having lived through second and third wave feminism, both Ernaux and Messager give life to female experiences with feminist undertones using feminine matters in their works, breaking taboos and defying sexist expectations of them.

In fact, it is evident that the two artistes operate similarly and use the same formal means to realise their self-representations: Messager is a self-professed *collectionneuse* of stories and objects, and Ernaux collects moments and photographic snapshots in time, relating both to herself and to other people. For example, in *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure,* Ernaux records instances of interaction between other people on the RER train, such as the numerous discussions between mothers and daughters (p. 49, p. 64, p. 72), which could in turn reflect her own complicated relationship with her mother, whose death she detailed in *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* (1997). Here, Ernaux projects her own experiences onto that of others through her writing, which perhaps becomes the defining difference between her *journaux intimes* and her *journaux extimes: intime* focuses on intense self-reflection and *extime* explores the self through other people or entities, i.e. the city or the crowd. The terms *intime* and *extime* could also be used to sort Messager's *Albums-collections,* where *Le Mariage de Mlle Annette Messager* (1971) and *Les Tortures Volontaires* (1972) would be *extimes* and *Collection pour trouver ma meilleure signature* (1972) or *Les hommes que j'aime, les homme que j'aime pas* (1971-1972) would be *intime.* As a result, not only do Messager and Ernaux's feminisms intertwine, so do their ways of processing their experiences and exploring female identity, both prioritising everyday elements.

<u>*M(ort)eriality*</u>

Clothing and textiles are some of the numerous everyday elements that Messager utilises in her work. In *Histoire des robes* (Fig. 17), Messager created glass and wood frames to encase dresses, each accompanied by a small selection of photographs or drawings. Though there were

Figure 17 – Messager, Histoires des robes, *1990-1991, mixed media, exhibition view at Douglas Hyde Gallery with* Untitled, *Trinity College Dublin, 1992*
Photo © Douglas Hyde Gallery

a large number of these *Histoires*, each one does not have its own individual title or description. Nonetheless, these hybrid works proffer a number of significations, especially in relation to Messager's own self-representation.

Firstly, the combination of photography and textile is comparable to that of Ernaux's *L'Usage* as both women seek to store and document memories of a person or an experience using these two mediums. This is similar to Borzello's notion of a surrogate (self-)portrait *in absentia,* in which, for example, 'the artist paints her own traces, the sketching stool, palette and parasol abandoned on the downs… fitting into a tradition of absent self-portraits'.[119] The same conclusion can also be applied to the photographs in *L'Usage* taken by Ernaux and Marie,

[119] Borzello, p. 109.

with the images of their clothes representing their frenzied passions perhaps better than any more graphic corporeal images or erotic descriptions ever could, meaning that they too serve as self-representations *in absentia.*

Secondly, I am inclined to agree with Conkelton, who argues that:

> This array of coffins conjures a family or community of women; Messager commemorates her mother in one piece in this series, but the others represent archetypal and idealized aspects of herself, past and present, reiterating the multiple identities she established for herself at the beginning of her work.[120]

Conkelton's idea that *Histoire* is a self-representation in that it represents past and present versions of Messager supports Grenier's notion that the dresses are '*memento mori*',[121] or indeed self-portraits *in absentia* as per Borzello,[122] above all serving to represent Messager through material means. After all, as previously mentioned, a self-representation need not be a direct likeness in order to merit such a label. The notion of past selves in self-representation is key to both Messager and Ernaux, and I agree with Thomas who remarks that 'The structure of [Ernaux's] corpus itself becomes predicated on the notion of multiplicity, as Ernaux returns to the same events in her life, unpicking and questioning earlier versions.'[123] This multiplicity is clear in the repetition of imagery and content evident throughout her texts, such as *Passion simple* and *Se perdre.* The variety of past selves that Messager presents in *Histoire* is also present in Ernaux's entire corpus, as she muses on losing her virginity aged eighteen in *Mémoire de fille*, to her secret abortion aged twenty-three in *L'Événement,* to a sweeping

[120] Conkelton, p. 35.
[121] Grenier, p. 116.
[122] Borzello, *ibid.*
[123] Thomas, 'Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness', p. 162.

account of herself through an exploration of France in *Les Années* (2008). If reading Ernaux's works chronologically, the variety of selves evoked is clear to the reader, and this is no more obvious than in *Les Années.* I agree strongly with Kawakami, who tells Ernaux that 'Dans *Les Années,* vous devenez, petit à petit, le temps passé', then posing the question 'est-ce que les années sont les "Annies" d'autrefois?'[124] Though Ernaux replies that the 'elles' present in this work belong to 'le "nous" du récit collectif',[125] I would argue that Ernaux's whole corpus presents a collection of "Annies" throught the *Années,* with each text adding a fragment to her overall self-representation. Therefore, Messager and Ernaux belong to the group of 'Women artists of the post-1968 generation [that] have also dealt with the implications of producing self-portrait images which do not fix the "self" to simple definitions, but reveal the multiplicity of "selves" available to one individual' as per Meskimmon.[126]

In addition, Conkelton's notion of a 'community of women' bears reference to Griselda Pollock's 'virtual feminist museum' – the insertion of women artists and their work into art history by the creation of a dedicated space.[127] This also conjures up the imagery of womanhood and community present in *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) (Fig. 18) by Chicago, which became an emblem for 1970s feminist art. Here, Chicago created a triangular dining table with places laid for thirty-nine significant women from throughout history, employing mainly embroidery, porcelain and ceramics to create elaborate vulvic table settings for the likes of Judith, Elizabeth I, and Emily Dickinson (Fig. 19), re-appropriating monuments to great *men* of *his*tory into great *women* of *her*story. For example, in 2018 in the United Kingdom, there were only eighty statues of or monuments to named women, not fictional nor royal, compared

[124] Kawakami, 'Interview with Annie Ernaux' in *Photobiography,* p. 180.
[125] Ernaux, *ibid.*
[126] Meskimmon, p. 87.
[127] Griselda Pollock, 'Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space, and the Archive', in *Feminisms is Still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices,* eds. Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjoholm Skrubbe (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 105-139.

Figure 18 – Judy Chicago, The Dinner Party, *1974-1979, ceramic, porcelain, and textile, 1463 x 1463 cm, exhibition view at The Brooklyn Museum*
Photo © The Brooklyn Museum

Figure 19 – Chicago, The Dinner Party, *detail*
Photo © Donald Woodman

to 422 statues of named men.[128] In this regard, *The Dinner Party, Histoire,* and Ernaux's corpus all serve to memorialise a variety of women, pre-empting the call for 'More Monuments to Women'.[129] Furthermore, Chicago's group of women links not only to Messager's *Histoire* but also to my own endeavours in this dissertation: Chicago created as much of 'une chaîne invisible' as I set up here. In this sense, like Chicago, Messager literally creates a space for women to exist within the male-dominated museum/gallery. In fact, it is my argument that both Ernaux and Messager create not only a 'community of women', but a community of women *readers* and community of *past selves* in which they and their audiences find solace through the breaking and discussion of taboos. This embodies the importance of the 'chaîne invisible'.

When in situ in the gallery space as per Figure 17, Messager's *Histoire* works do resemble coffins or even gravestones, with audiences having to walk around them and tower over them to look at their contents, which creates a morbid, voyeuristic atmosphere. One can imagine one's own reflection staring back in the glass of the cases, as if each woman could recount her life through different dresses or outfits she has worn. Evidently, the dress serves as a loaded symbol for femininity and is often associated with momentous occasions such as christenings, weddings, and funerals. I agree with Grenier who argues that 'These dresses are yet another example of Annette Messager's long-standing interest in studies of hysteria, in portraits of women whose life story is imprinted on their very bodies',[130] which links *Histoire* directly to *Quintuple autoportraits* and reinforces its autobiographical elements.

In close-up images of the dresses such as Fig. 20, one can see each fold of the fabric, imagine the smell of the owner, and decipher the links between the dress and its embellishments, be it a watercolour landscape such as on the left, or family photographs on the

[128] 'More Monuments to Women', *Public Monuments and Sculpture Association* (2019), <https://www.pmsa.org.uk/news/2019/3/7/more-monuments-to-women> [accessed on 26/09/2020].
[129] *Ibid.*
[130] Grenier, p. 133.

right. The images are almost medical in content, as if Messager is cataloguing and preserving either her past selves or other women, which again bears resemblance to both *Quintuple autoportraits* and the medical photography of the Salpêtrière, as well as Bourgeois's *Cells*. Not only do these works present a *history* of the dress as an object and its various forms, but they also represent the *story* of each dress, such are the possible translations of *histoire*. This calls to mind Judith Williamson's remark concerning the photography of Cindy Sherman:

> When I rummage through my wardrobe in the morning I am not merely faced with a choice of what to wear. I am faced with a choice of images: the difference between a smart suit and a pair of overalls, a leather skirt and a cotton frock, is not just one of fabric and style, but one of identity.[131]

Figure 20 – Messager, Histoire des robes, *1990-1991, detail, photographs, watercolour drawings, textiles in a glass and wood case, dimensions variable*
Photo © artnet

[131] Judith Williamson, 'Images of "Woman": The Photography of Cindy Sherman' (1983) in *Feminism-Art-Theory,* ed. Robinson, pp. 453-459, p. 453.

Reinforcing this idea, Messager has even noted that 'Le vêtement, c'est une nouvelle peau qu'on se choisit'.[132] This question of the way in which clothes link to identity is profound, especially in the cases of Ernaux and Messager, as well as Bourgeois. For example, in *L'Usage* Ernaux even notes that 'Dans quelques années, ces photos ne diront peut-être plus rien à l'un

Figure 21 – 'Cuisine du 17 avril'
Photo © Ernaux and Marie, 2005

et à l'autre, juste des témoignages sur la mode des chaussures au début des années 2000' (p. 151). It is nonetheless evident that these images have remained important in their ethnographic and sentimental values, as is the case for the dresses featured in *Histoire.*

Mo Gourmelon remarks that the body has 'evaporated' from the dresses of *Histoire*,[133] which is especially apparent in the close-up image of Figure 18. The fact that the dresses are

[132] Messager quoted in *Annette Messager: les messagers* (Paris: Éditions Xavier Barral, Centre Pompidou, 2007), p. 469.
[133] Mo Gourmelon, 'An Accomplished Schemer' in *Annette Messager: Telling Tales* (Bristol: Cornerhouse, 1992), p. 20.

carefully laid out in their full form makes them seem flat and thus evokes the 'evaporated' body. This notion bears obvious resemblance to Ernaux's own use of clothing in the images of *L'Usage*, as Ernaux even remarks that 'Quand je regarde nos photos, c'est la disparition de mon corps que je vois' (*L'Usage,* p. 111). As opposed to a dress standing in as a substitute for the female body, the bras that feature in multiple images serve as a possible substitute for Ernaux's body in images such as 'Cuisine du 17 avril' (Fig. 21) and also serve as a tongue-in-cheek reference to her breast cancer, the delicate mesh and lace fabric contrasting the harsh reality of chemotherapy. The sense of evaporation in the photos of *L'Usage* is perhaps more immediate than that of *Histoire,* and the clothes in *L'Usage* actually belonged to Ernaux and Marie as opposed to Messager's found dresses. Nevertheless, if bodies have evaporated from their outfits in both Ernaux's and Messager's works, I would argue that it is as if they have shed their skin, leaving behind old versions of themselves in the form of empty clothes, like a 'coquille vide' (p. 95). They not only evaporate but in fact transcend their old selves and metamorphosise into someone new, like the aforementioned concept of the 'poupées russes' in *Se perdre.* In *L'Usage,* the clothes become not only a symbol of her overcoming breast cancer but a representation of her shedding Marie as their relationship does not last. Both Ernaux and Messager explore clothes and evaporation in different ways in their self-representations and both create an atmosphere of absence and remembrance.

Elsewhere in her corpus, Ernaux often focuses on the material belongings of the people she describes, what they're wearing, their hair, their jewellery (e.g. pp. 533-534 in *Journal du dehors*). In *La Vie extérieure,* she observes the sales in French shops – 'Chez Caroll, Froggy, Lacoste, les gens cherchent quelque chose qui les aide à vivre, un secours contre le temps et la mort' (p. 127) – all confirming Ernaux's own declaration that 'Je ne connais que la langue des choses, des traces matérielles, visibles' (*L'Usage,* p. 121), which is indeed highly relevant to Messager's own work. In a socio-historic context, such themes could serve as a critical

commentary on consumerist society or on the human condition of sentimentality. Both artistes choose to conserve material objects for different reasons, and thus materiality becomes another important facet of self-representation.

Ultimately, materiality and death operate symbiotically for Ernaux and Messager as Grenier reminds us that:

> when cleaning out the attic, one stumbles across the personal possessions of a dead person. The viewer is pushed into the position of a voyeur, but even more is asked to recall a loss, to be party to a form of resurrection… A term that might be applied is "pre-posthumous," since each *Collection* forms part of an artificial form of remembrance.[134]

This notion of resurrection is surely present in *Histoire,* as well as Messager's numerous *Collections-albums*, as is noted here by Grenier. The presentation of a person's personal affairs in such a way recalls the cataloguing of belongings presented as artefacts in museums, or the gathering of personal effects from someone who has passed away, also reminiscent of Ernaux and Marie clearing out his mother's house as aforementioned. The term 'pre-posthumous' is also revealing when applied to *L'Usage* as Ernaux explicitly imagines her own death, even trying to buy her own plot at the cemetery and researching a myriad of websites on breast cancer: 'Comme naguère pour les signes de la jalousie, je voyais ceux de la mort écrits partout' (p. 26) ; 'Dans leurs yeux je lisais mon absence future' (p. 56). Therefore, *L'Usage* is entirely 'pre-posthumous' and serves as a means of cataloguing her illness and premeditating her possible future absence. In this vein, Ernaux respects Roland Barthes's assertion that 'il y a

[134] Grenier, p. 58.

toujours en elle [la photographie] ce signe impérieux de ma mort future'.[135] The combination of textile and photography in the work of Ernaux and Messager serves as a double assertion of material reality. Though the idea of Messager's *own* death is dealt with less overtly in her art, the associated notions of absence are palpable.

Lastly, *Le Grenier du château* (1990) (Figs. 22-24) is a collaborative work created by Messager and her partner Boltanski. In the 200m^2 attic of the Château de Rochechouart hangs twelve rows of suspended bedsheets upon which sit photographs, drawings, embroideries, and even drawings in blood created by Messager. The materiality and absence that permeate this work directly relate to imagery found in *L'Usage*. Ernaux explains that 'les mariés tziganes du Kosovo ont coutume d'exposer le drap des noces sur lequel ils ont tenté de dessiner des motifs avec le sang et le sperme' (p. 74). Though we do not know whose blood Messager used, the

Figures 22-24 – Messager and Christian Boltanski, Le Grenier du château, *1990, installation views and details, dimensions variable*
Photo © Château de Rochechouart, 2020

[135] Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire : Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 151.

act of 'dessiner des motifs avec le sang' is clearly related in these two instances and is linked to their experiences as women.

Ernaux discusses the notion of bed sheets and stains at length, even though they are not depicted in photographic form : 'je suis fascinée par les photos comme je le suis depuis mon enfance par les taches de sang, de sperme, d'urine, déposées sur les draps' (p. 74). Both Ernaux and Messager explore the everyday and forbidden object that is the stained sheet. They 'ose[nt] exhiber sans honte les draps ouverts, froissés, avec les taches et l'empreinte du corps' (p. 131), refusing to abide by the social standard of what Nancy K. Miller calls 'the kind of dirty laundry meant to remain hidden from view'.[136] Such an 'empreinte du corps' is visible not only in the imagery of bedsheets but also in the photographs of *L'Usage* and in the dresses of *Histoire.* This comes back to the notion of bodily presence and absence: in displaying 'dirty' sheets in *Le Grenier*, the presence of the body is implied by its product (blood), as well as the photographs pinned upon the sheets. This creates a double sense of the *tache* or *trace,* both confirming Barthes's notion that 'ça a été', where 'ça' is evidently the body.[137]

Indeed, the 2020 press release for *Le Grenier* is particularly pertinent: 'Travée après travée, le déplacement dans ce qui devient un labyrinthe mouvant se révèle comme une traversée étrange, envoutante des étapes de la vie : du premier linge qui enveloppe le nouveau né au linceul qui recouvre le mort, en passant par les draps du lit nuptial.'[138] The mention of 'les draps du lit nuptial' relates directly to Ernaux and the bloody sheets of 'les mariés tziganes du Kosovo', whereas this 'lit nuptial' relates to Ernaux's search for 'le lit [marital] idéal' with her former husband (*L'Usage,* p. 130). A white lace dress even features in *Le Grenier* that

[136] Nancy K. Miller, 'Memory Stains: Annie Ernaux's *Shame*', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies,* 14.1 (1999), 38-50 (p. 49).
[137] Barthes, p. 176.
[138] Musée d'art contemporain de la Haute-Vienne, 'Annette Messager & Christian Boltanski : *Le grenier du château*' (2020), p. 2.

looks like a wedding dress. The sheets therefore are imbued with meaning, and the notions of pregnancy, birth, and their associated blood stains mentioned above are most evident in *L'Événement*: 'j'ai attendu pendant plus d'une semaine que mes règles arrivent… j'espérais toujours voir une tache sur mon slip' (p. 17), and then 'À un moment, j'ai eu un rapide et bref écoulement de sang rosâtre. J'ai déposé le slip et le pantalon de toile tachés sur le tas de linge sale, bien en évidence' (p. 23). Though not noted elsewhere, Angelica Pabst has even remarked that the blood used in *Le Grenier* is in fact menstrual blood,[139] which creates even stronger links between this work and *L'Événement,* especially in a feminist context.[140] Much like reclaiming the domesticated medium of embroidery, feminists have also sought to exhibit menstrual blood in order to normalise its appearance in everyday public spheres such as advertising. The idea of a life-long journey of womanhood through stained sheets that is suggested in *Le Grenier* is also implied from *L'Événement* through to *L'Usage.* Both women thus air out their dirty laundry, both are 'liseuses de taches' (*L'Usage,* p. 131), and both break taboos surrounding femininity.

On the one hand, Messager has expressed that 'My life and my art cannot be separated. My studio is my home',[141] which would imply that her work is just as autobiographical as that of Ernaux and Bourgeois, again as if 'Everything you make is a self-portrait'.[142] On the other hand, in the same breath she states that 'One thinks that my work is a personal narrative. But even in the intimate albums there is a clear distance between me, Annette, and this work'.[143] It is this distance and Messager's use of irony that differentiates her work from that of Ernaux. Even though such a distance between Messager and her work could become apparent in

[139] See Angelica Pabst, 'Dans les règles de l'art' in *Féminin-masculin, Le sexe de l'art* (Paris: Édition du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1995), pp. 353-355, quoted in Dominique Château and Claire Leman, *Représentation et modernité*, (Paris: Les publications de la Sorbonne, 2003), p. 175.
[140] See Camilla Mørk Røstvik, 'Blood Works: Judy Chicago and Menstrual Art Since 1970', *Oxford Art Journal,* 42.3 (2019), 335-353.
[141] Deborah Irmas, 'Effigies and Proverbs: Annette Messager', *MoMA*, 20 (1995), 22-24 (p. 24).
[142] Reinecke, *op. cit*.
[143] Irmas, p. 24.

Histoire as only one dress has explicitly biographical connotations (that pertaining to her mother, *Maman, histoire de sa robe verte,* 1990),[144] it is clear through my exploration of her work that such a distance between her art and her lived experiences as a woman is not so great after all. The *robes* depict female characters and characteristics which serve as indirect self-portraits of Messager and her past selves, with much of her work displaying feminist undertones.

Overall, in their exhibition catalogue for *Ma collection de proverbes*, Galerie Michèle Didier states that the content of Messager's *Albums-collections* are 'completely fictitious' and simply 'allow her to reveal the ironic fantasy life of a young woman embodying the archetype of the 60's housewife'.[145] I am inclined to disagree with such a statement, given the usage of photographic content and drawings by Messager which clearly relate to her own experiences and those of her fellow women. These are not simply 'ironic fantasies' but real-life pressures faced by women such as maintaining their appearance (*Les Tortures* volontaires) and dressing oneself in certain fashions (*Histoire des robes*). Though there is a distance implied, in that Messager does not simply record her own experiences in her works, to say that they are 'completely fictitious' does not ring true. I am more inclined to agree with Grenier, who states that 'Unlike all the other autobiographical dispensation in contemporary art, the fictional nature of this identity has enabled Annette Messager to address collective truths'.[146] Therefore, as argued in this chapter, I believe that Messager's work represents elements of female identity that undoubtedly result from her personal experiences, and that she ultimately 'uses a literary type of approach to locate her work at the heart of reality' that associates her work strongly with that of Ernaux,[147] just as I have applied literary theory to her work. In conclusion, it is

[144] An examination of parental figures in the works of Ernaux, Messager, and indeed Bourgeois merits discussion that is beyond the remit of this dissertation.
[145] Galerie Michèle Didier, *Press Release: Annette Messager / Maurizio Nannucci* (Paris: Galerie Michèle Didier, 2013), p. 3.
[146] Grenier, *Annette Messager,* p. 68.
[147] *Ibid.,* p. 173.

clear that both Ernaux and Messager have produced a corpus that 'delineates the plural identity of womanhood' and of the 'chaîne invisible', as well as representing 'a timeless feminine entity' that is not limited to one character.[148] They establish a multiplicity of selves through material and photographic means as well as autobiographical influences, techniques which are also apparent in the artwork of Kusama, the final link in this 'chaîne invisible'.

[148] *Ibid.,* p. 130.

CHAPTER THREE

YAYOI KUSAMA

Figure 25 – Yayoi Kusama, Self-Portrait*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 227.3 × 181.3 cm*
Photo © Tate

Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929) was raised in Matsumoto, Japan, where her seemingly well-to-do family was awash with abuse, adultery, and arranged marriage. This ill treatment would serve as one of the triggers for her severe mental health problems that started when she was a child, including neuroses, hallucinations, and obsessive compulsive disorder. After leaving home for Kyoto in 1948 to study traditional Japanese painting, she felt nonetheless stifled by Japan and its values and was thus attracted to the American art world. She moved to New York in 1958 and integrated herself into the avant-garde art scene, producing an immense number of

paintings, installation works, and Happenings – events in which she would walk through the streets of the city and perform with large groups of naked protestors, often painting their bodies with polka dots. Her poor health and visions overwhelmed her to the point that they permeated her art and merged onto her canvases, and the vast 'infinity nets' and polka dots that she vividly hallucinates are now widely known as Kusama's trademarks.[149] After fifteen years in America and after surviving various bouts of financial insecurity, ill health, and suicide attempts, Kusama returned to Japan and later checked herself into a psychiatric hospital in 1977. To this day, she still lives in this secure facility and visits her nearby art studio in order to create. From her strong personality to the continued elaborate exhibitions of her work, Kusama has become an iconic giant of contemporary art who is known and celebrated internationally, often obtaining at least four major exhibitions a year since 2000.[150] There is no doubt that her work has remained significant, and this is especially the case for her self-representation.

As the final link in the chain for the purpose of this dissertation, Kusama has produced the highest number of explicitly labelled self-portraits out of the three women artists featured here. Not only has she painted numerous self-portraits and penned an autobiography, but Kusama is often famously photographed with her installation works, thus creating hybrid installation-self-representations. Though her self-representation is arguably more consistent and prolific than that of Bourgeois and Messager, it is clear that the previous thematic similarities I have located throughout this project are also fundamental to the work of Kusama: death, sexuality, obsession, health, as well as the determination to enter male-dominated artistic domains.

[149] The term 'infinity net', coined by Kusama herself, serves as the title of her autobiography: Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama,* trans. Ralph McCarthy (London: Tate Publishing, 2011). Text herein referred to by abridged title with page numbers in parentheses.
[150] See 'Exhibitions', *yayoi-kusama.jp,* <http://yayoi-kusama.jp/e/exhibitions/00.html> [accessed 09/09/2020].

In this final chapter, I first analyse Kusama's intense focus on self-representation as per the pattern set out in Chapters One and Two. This leads to an assessment of the body and sexuality within Kusama and Ernaux's respective works, referencing Kusama's own feminist practices and her *Accumulation* sculptures (1963-1964) in tandem with Ernaux's *Passion simple* and *Se perdre*. I then conclude with an exploration of the interweaving themes of health, illness, life and death, from Ernaux's physical health and mortality in *L'Usage* and *L'Événement* to Kusama's mental health in works such as *I'm Here, but Nothing* (2000), exploring the assimilation of the body and the city in Ernaux's *journaux extimes*. Each comparison is also enriched with quotes from Kusama's autobiography, *Infinity Net,* and it becomes clear that the extent of overlapping themes found between Ernaux and Kusama is enriching for both of their corpuses.

Self-Representation

Although the head-and-shoulders composition of Kusama's 2008 *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 25) is reminiscent of classic (self-)portraiture, its form and content are unique to Kusama, full of clashing colours and patterns. Larger black dots sit on a dark green base in the background upon which Kusama's long white hair spotted with smaller black dots, offering a direct contrast and creating texture. The lace-like quality of a red and white infinity net acts as the underneath layer of her hair, which also contrasts with her bright yellow skin that is afflicted with miniscule red and white dots. These dots imply a visible sickness such as pox or measles and become the embodiment of her otherwise invisible mental illness, whilst her yellow skin ironically marks her Japanese ethnicity. Though the features of her face are distinct in that they are marked out by patterns of lines as opposed to dots, Kusama does not otherwise look specifically Japanese, which contradicts her hue and hints at her split identity, discussed below. Her pupils and irises

are black brick-like circles, both staring out at the spectator and suggesting that she has been hypnotised and immobilised by her hallucinations whilst also hypnotising spectators. Lastly, she wears a purple high-necked garment, striped in yellow and white dots that is reminiscent of the smock dresses she has worn into her old age. The bold colours and defined shapes used within the piece create a two-dimensional effect within the painting, and yet the sections of dots that vary in colour and size give the piece a sense of movement and life. Colours clash, dots grow and shrink, as if the painting itself is breathing and contracting, as if we can see Kusama's affliction forced out of her head and onto her skin. Overall, the painting demands attention, induces headaches, and makes the spectator consider what dots and cells that they would be made up of and what colours they would be.

On the one hand, this painting pertains to Kusama's own term of 'self-obliteration', wherein her episodes of severe disassociation lead her to feel as if she is 'revolv[ing] in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be[ing] reduced to nothingness.'[151] This sense of nothingness relates to a loss of sense of self, and so this self-representation becomes a contradiction: Kusama depicts a likeness of herself and yet is so invaded by polka dots that it is almost obliterated into nothingness. On the other hand, Jo Applin suggests that self-obliteration can be 'imbued with positive connotations, alluding to a kind of oceanic bliss in that moment of feeling lost to one's surroundings.'[152] In this sense, *Self-Portrait* implies that Kusama is at one with herself and her condition, wishing to highlight her way of seeing to audiences that allows her to transcend superficial reality. Conceived in 2008, this *Self-Portrait* embodies a career-long practice of self-representation turned into self-promotion.

[151] Kusama quoted in 'The Infinite Art of Yayoi Kusama', *IdeelArt* (2017), <https://www.artsy.net/ideelart/article/ideelart-infinite-art-yayoi-kusama> [accessed 10/09/2020].
[152] Jo Applin, *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field* (London: Afterall, 2012), p. 66.

Figure 26 – Kusama, Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field*, 1965, installation view*
Photo © Yayoi Kusama Studio Inc.

Kusama actually extends beyond typical self-representation as she markets herself as an essential facet within the brand of her art, often wearing brightly coloured wigs and polka dot-covered clothes when appearing in installation views of her works, such as the above photograph taken in earlier *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field* in 1965 (Fig. 26) and the later *With All my Love for the Tulips, I Pray Forever* (Fig. 27) (2011). I concur with Laura Hoptman who states that Kusama's penchant for being photographed with her works 'make[s] clear not only Kusama's desire for her physical "self-obliteration" by her graphic metonym, but also her desire for her signature pattern to bleed off the canvas and overrun the environment.'[153] Kusama's polka dots are her very brand of self-representation, taking over her world and becoming her way of life.

[153] Laura Hoptman, 'Yayoi Kusama: A Reckoning', in *Yayoi Kusama,* ed. Laura Hoptman, Udo Kulterann, Catherine Taft, and Akira Tatehaha. (London: Phaidon, 2017), 2nd edn., p. 45.

Figure 27 – Kusama, With All My Love For The Tulips, I Pray Forever*, 2011, installation view*
Photo © Yayoi Kusama Studio Inc.

Nonetheless, the 'marketing approach' of Kusama's self-representation differs from Ernaux's own endeavours,[154] which instead serve to explore and explain her life events and not necessarily to promote her *self*. Even though self-promotion perhaps comes naturally to many artists and writers, SooJin Lee has explored the specifics of what she refers to as Kusama's 'unique and profitable persona' that 'has become an art itself'.[155] This is clear in *With All My Love for the Tulips, I Pray Forever* (Fig. 27) as Kusama's physical appearance is identical to not only the sculpture she has created, but to the walls of the room in which it is installed, as if she truly wishes to self-obliterate and remove the boundaries between art and life. Her bright red wig and pale face match the red and white colour scheme, and photographic images such as these serve as direct extensions of her painted self-portraits and sculpted objects. Kusama's involvement of the self in her work further affirms Reinecke's aforementioned argument that everything one creates is a self-portrait,[156] and thus is it a hybrid

[154] Morris ed., *Yayoi Kusama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p. 109.
[155] SooJin Lee, 'The Art and Politics of Artists' Personas: The Case of Yayoi Kusama', *Persona Studies,* 1.1 (2015), 26-39 (p. 26).
[156] Reinecke, *op. cit.*

artwork: the sculpture/installation piece combined with Kusama's outfit and pose, resulting in the photographic image.

Midori Yoshimoto has also analysed the ways in which 'Kusama's self-presentation was often very deliberate' and how she 'often had a professional photographer take pictures of herself posing theatrically amid her sculptures.'[157] Such staging is evident in the installation view of *Phalli's Field* with Kusama's confident pose and her never-ending mirrored reflection creating a purposeful sense of symmetry in which we see both endless 'Kusamas' and our *own* endless reflections, as if trying to locate the triangular structure within an infinity of bulbous phallic shapes. The sheer volume of photographs taken of Kusama in her installation works surely serves as 'an extension of her artistic creation' and should be considered as self-representation,[158] even though such images were often taken by hired photographers. Therefore, Kusama's insertion of herself into her works bolsters Meskimmon's argument that women's self- representations 'insist that the trope of women-as-object be re-examined because they posit woman as both subject and object simultaneously.'[159] Kusama's hybrid images present her as subject, object, and creator, thus offering the ultimate fully-developed self-representation.

Kusama's self-representation challenges stereotypes of women in directly depicting her as an artist, representing one of 'the ways in which women artists have used self-portraiture as a strategy to say I am here, to insert themselves as practitioners within the masculinist myth of the artist as hero/genius'.[160] In contrast to her later commercialised, polka dot-heavy self-representations, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster addresses Kusama's 'Orientalized eroticization', highlighting the fact that Kusama was photographed naked in the 1960s just as much as she

[157] Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 62.
[158] Yoshimoto, p. 64.
[159] Meskimmon, p. 198.
[160] Rosy Martin, 'Foreword: How Do I Look?' in Meskimmon, p. xvi.

was captured in typical Japanese dress (see Figs 28-29).[161] Consequently, Kusama's self-representation confronts Western audiences with a triple threat: 'her Japanese identity and her female identity and her star artist identity' join forces to 'disrupt Western notions of self, ethnicity and the body'.[162] Both *Untitled* (Fig. 28) and *Walking Piece* (Fig. 29) were created in 1966, and yet her suggestive nude pose and the emphasis placed on her Japanese heritage contrast each other completely, even though both firmly constitute a certain facet of Kusama's identity.

Whereas Kusama is nude among her personal artworks in her private studio in *Untitled,* she parades the public streets of New York in a Japanese kimono with a decorative parasol in *Walking Piece*. It is clear then that Kusama's 1960s work represents 'The particularly feminist extension of self-portraiture's possibilities of basing subject matter on the artist's body…

Figure 28 – Untitled*, 1966, Kusama reclining on* Accumulation No. 2 *sculpture, macaroni,* Infinity Net *painting*
Photo © Yayoi Kusama Studio Inc.

[161] Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, 'Self-Stylization and Performativity in the Work of Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama and Mariko Mori', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video,* 27.4 (2010) 267-275, (p. 272).
[162] Foster, p. 273.

Figure 29 – Kusama, Walking Piece, *1966, slide projection of a Happening*
Photo © Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2015)

encouraged by a willingness to tell all in art [and] the adoption of new forms, such as performance… put[ting] the artist centre stage', and above all ensuring 'the feminist conviction that the personal is political.'[163] The inclusion of heritage or nudity all but disappear in later self-representations, with Kusama dressed instead in polka dot smock dresses wherein the only hint towards her ethnicity is her yellow-coloured skin in works such as *Self-Portrait*, despite this being an outdated reference.[164] Therefore, Kusama ultimately embodies the fact that women's self-portraiture focuses on 'the production of imagery which suggests the shifting and provisional nature of identity, rather than its unity or fixity',[165] and so Kusama's self evolves, representing a similar multiplicity of the self as proffered by Messager.

Kusama not only explores her own sense of self but serves to represent the otherness still felt by immigrants arriving in America to this day, often labelled as alien, foreign, or other,

[163] Borzello, pp. 221-222.
[164] Though I am aware of the ways in which Ernaux deals with race and ethnicity in her works, they do not majorly affect her self-representation and are thus beyond the remit of this dissertation. See Thomas, 'Voix Blanche? Annie Ernaux, French Feminisms and the Challenge of Intersectionality' in *Making Waves: French Feminisms and Their Legacies 1975-2015,* Margaret Atack, Alison S. Fell, Diana Holmes, and Imogen Long, eds. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 201-214.
[165] Meskimmon, p. 92.

as well as the ways in which people suffering from mental health issues are also othered. In her autobiography, Kusama even recounts an experience in 1960s New York: 'my visa had expired… Never before had I prayed for anything as vulgar as the success of a solo exhibition, but that is how desperate my circumstance as an alien had left me feeling' (*Infinity,* p. 29). However, Foster does not mention the way in which Kusama's self-representations focus on her mental health and therefore how they go against depictions of Western sanity, as Yoshimoto has remarked how 'Kusama has been associated with a stereotype of a "mad artist"'.[166] In this regard, Kusama's unflinching self-representations are not dissimilar to Messager's own explorations on the subject, wherein sanity is investigated in relation to being a woman artist in her work *Quintuple autoportraits,* and so the 'chaîne invisible' continues to interlink.

On the one hand, it could be argued that Kusama felt out of place after leaving Japan which lead to her wearing distinctly Japanese garments. Nonetheless, the appearance of kimonos is intermittent and is only present during her time in New York in the 1960s. Therefore, the notion of ethnicity splits Kusama's selves as her self-representation moves clearly from Japanese kimonos to nudity to brightly coloured spotted dresses. On the other hand, these three distinct personas are perceivable from her long-sustained practice of self-promotion, and so it could be argued that Kusama moves beyond a distinctly Japanese identity instead of still being split into different fragments. Ultimately, *Untitled* represents all but one of the motifs found throughout her œuvre – infinity nets, phallic forms, polka dots, and macaroni – with the only one missing being the pumpkins that appear in her later works. It can thus be labelled as Kusama's definitive self-representation, a hybrid piece that results from the

[166] Yoshimoto, p. 45.

combination of her obsessions, artwork, and incessant self-promotion. Kusama thus firmly claims her place as a Japanese artiste within the Western male-dominated artistic canon.

Sexual / Health

If there are feminist motives behind her self-promotion, they are blurred by Kusama herself as she has stated that her mother was able to be authoritarian and abusive as a result of feminism, a movement which apparently empowered her to the point of violence, and thus Kusama perceives the term negatively.[167] Nonetheless, her control over and display of her own naked body do exhibit feminist tendencies, and much of her nude work, such as her pin-up-like pose in *Untitled*, 'represents a very early example of the kind of brazen self-sexualized body that came to be identified in the 1990s with the "bad girls" artists and the term "post-feminism"'.[168] Therefore, despite her apparent rejection of the term feminism, Kusama's work does foreshadow later feminist artistic practice. Also, the soft phallic forms handsewn by Kusama that flood installation works such as *Phalli's Field* (Fig. 26) and her *Accumulation* sculptures (Fig. 28) evoke castration imagery. Kusama's concurrent obsession with sex and 'phobia' of men and the phallus are well-documented,[169] and it could be argued that these are acts that are mistaken for feminism, that is being anti-men. However, the dialogue that Kusama creates between such works and her own self-representation creates a new level of feminist meaning: by placing her body into phallic situations of which she is seemingly terrified, Kusama takes ownership of her body, of her obsession, and of the metaphorical phallus. Indeed, the fact that

[167] Yoshimoto, p. 47.
[168] Amelia Jones, 'The Return of Feminism(s) and the Visual Arts, 1970/2009', in *Feminisms is Still Our Name,* eds. Hedlin Hayden and Sjoholm Skrubbe, pp. 11-56, p. 30.
[169] Kusama in interview with Akira Tatehaha, quoted in *Yayoi Kusama,* ed. Hoptman et al., p. 16; Kusama quoted in 'The Question of Gender in Art', Tema Celeste, *Contemporary Art Review,* 30 (1993), p. 50.

Kusama successfully inserts her naked, Japanese, and unwell body into the artistic sphere is a political and feminist act in itself.

Although they both create equally revealing self-representations, Ernaux and Kusama deal very differently with the body and sexuality. Firstly, the physical insertion of the body found in Kusama's corpus is something that is portrayed with more distance in Ernaux's texts, despite her focus on physical health and sexual relations throughout: her abortion detailed in *L'Événement,* the decline of her mother's health in *Une femme* (1989), and her relationship with a Russian diplomat in *Passion simple* and *Se perdre*. Secondly, where Kusama is 'terrified of sex, and of the phallus' as a result of her traumatic childhood *(Infinity,* p. 42), Ernaux relishes in sexual pleasure. Her exploration of sexuality is frank, detailed, and is perhaps no more explicit than in her *journal intime, Se perdre*. As the original written account of her affair that was the basis for *Passion simple*, this diary-style text includes much more vivid detail: 'Il me désire tellement que je m'agenouille et je le fais jouir avec la bouche, longuement' (p. 704) ; 'Je suis mangée de désir à en pleurer. Je veux la perfection de l'amour' (p. 705) ; 'Maintenant il ose me demander « tu as joui ? ». Pas au début. Ce soir, première fois pour la sodomie' (p. 710). Even Kusama's phobia of the phallus is countered completely by Ernaux's 'Adoration de son sexe' (p. 715). Both women openly address sex in their work and (metaphorically) take hold of the phallus, even though this results from entirely different reasonings – Ernaux's sexual freedom versus Kusama's need to cure her sex obsession (*Infinity,* p. 42). In doing so, both women overwrite the gendered narrative assigned to them –be it ageing, mad, or foreign – and both combat what Jordan refers to as the 'number of ways [that] old women "disappear"… These women arouse ambivalence, are rarely heroines or central to a narrative, and have bodies which are perceived to be unpalatable and in need of curing.'[170] Within their

[170] Jordan, 'Writing Age: Annie Ernaux's *Les Années*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 47.2 (2011), 138-149 (p. 139).

Figure 30 - 'La chaussure dans le séjour, 15 mars'
Photo © Ernaux and Marie, 2005

self-representation, Ernaux and Kusama are very much the central heroines to their own narratives, leave no space for ambivalence, and their bodies feature extensively in their works, with Ernaux proving the worth of hers without concern for her age and Kusama's effective branding of her body lasting well into her nineties.

The constant depiction of underwear and description of sexual scenes in *L'Usage* (as well as texts such as *Passion simple* and *Se perdre*) sexualises Ernaux's body in a manner that defies both her age and illness. The final 'image' in the text is in fact an invisible one, described only by Ernaux but not existing in real life: 'Je nous revois un dimanche de février, quinze jours après mon opération… Nous sommes restés tout l'après-midi sur le lit… J'étais accroupie sur M., sa tête entre mes cuisses, comme s'il sortait de mon ventre. J'avais le titre, *Naissance.*' (p. 151). This final image described by Ernaux serves as a culmination of the sexual and medical imagery found in the text, as if giving birth to her young lover and thus to a new self after her breast cancer operation. Despite such sexual imagery, the body is missing from the images of *L'Usage* despite the fact that the text deals explicitly with bodily experiences: Ernaux's breast cancer and her female sexual pleasure or 'jouissance' (p. 9). Fell has explored the theme of health in relation to Ernaux's work, assessing *L'Usage* as a 'breast cancer narrative'.[171] In fact, Fell refers to the work of British photographer Jo Spence (1934-

[171] Fell, 'Intimations of Mortality'.

1992) in relation to *L'Usage* and discusses the ways in which her graphic self-representations appropriate Michel Foucault's 'medical gaze'.[172] Ernaux inhibits this gaze by actively choosing not to depict her cancerous body in the photographs of this text, and the resulting visual effect focuses more on the future absence of Ernaux as opposed to the presence of illness in her body, representing her fleeting mortality and materiality in tandem with Marie's transitory position in her life. Both women present narratives of the same illness through completely different means: Ernaux highlights her sexual pleasure as opposed to the medical pain that Spence experiences as a medical patient.

For example, in Figs. 30 and 31, Spence's breast is forcefully squashed in hospital machinery during a mammogram, whereas Ernaux's breasts are merely alluded to by the lace bra sprawling on the wooden floor, flattened by Marie's dark leather boot as opposed to any medical equipment. Though this would suggest that both women are passive as they are dominated in these scenes, they are nonetheless active storytellers of their illnesses and therefore affirm the fact that 'Women [are] not simply passive victims of medical ascendancy'.[173] Whereas Spence chooses to depict herself in a very direct way, Ernaux represents her health in *L'Usage* in a more symbolic manner, by her clothes. In her installation works and paintings, the polka

Figure 31 - Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, The Picture of Health?*, 1982-1986, Studio Voltaire*
Photo © Jo Spence

[172] *Ibid.,* pp.70-71; see Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1973).
[173] Catherine Kohler Riessman, 'Women and Medicalization: A New Perspective', *Social Policy,* 14.1 (1983), 3-18 (p. 4).

dot represents her hallucinations and so Kusama's own depiction of her mental health is therefore more akin to Ernaux's as it is also symbolic and not a direct representation.

Despite the absence of images of her body, Ernaux does describe her body on numerous occasions throughout, such as 'Quand je suis nue, avec ma ceinture de cuir, ma fiole toxique, mes marquages de toutes les couleurs et le fil courant sur mon torse, je ressemble à une créature extraterrestre' (p. 83). These descriptions contradict the images found in the text that otherwise suggest no sign of Ernaux's battle with breast cancer or her otherworldly appearance: we never see her body, nor any paraphernalia to do with cancer (wig, chemotherapy belt, hospital gown). Indeed, though the bodies of both Ernaux and Marie are described multiple times, the body is both sexualised and medicalised. For example, Ernaux describes the plethora of scans that she underwent as a patient in a footnote following this sobering line:

> Pendant des mois, mon corps a été investigué et photographié des quantités de fois sous toutes les coutures et par toutes les techniques existantes… Mammographie, drill-biopsie su sein, échographie des seins, du foie, de la vésicule, de la vessie, de l'utérus, du cœur… J'en oublie sûrement. (p. 149)

However, the fact that the medical details are not represented in any of the text's images and are instead relegated to a footnote towards the end of the work highlights the fact that Ernaux did not wish to be seen as ill, nor did she want to draw attention to it. Ultimately, this is not a posthumous novel – Ernaux did not die sick, she lives alive and well. Even in the moment of writing this text and taking these photographs, she did not want to be seen as a walking timebomb. Ernaux confirms this by stating that 'J'avais mis très peu de personnes au courant

de mon cancer' (p. 56), and *L'Usage* thus becomes a narrative of a woman who was once sick, and not that of a sick woman.

Furthermore, Lisa Connell argues that Ernaux 'challenges the depersonalized medical narrative of her body's vulnerability by imagining her physical self outside of binary configurations of health and sickness'.[174] I agree with this assertion because the images are not what one would expect from a breast cancer narrative and are a far cry from those of Spence. Also, the images are only taken in Ernaux's apartment and in hotel rooms and not hospital settings, though it is described briefly by both her and Marie albeit in a soft manner. Ernaux's statement that 'Mon séjour à l'Institut Curie pour l'intervention chirurgicale, six jours plus tard, a été d'une grande douceur. On m'avait enlevé la tumeur et des ganglions' (pp. 18-19) possesses a similar tone to Marie's reflection of 'Peut-on être nostalgique d'un moment tout entier conditionné par l'éventualité de la mort ? … le versement dans le passé des jours heureux de l'Institut Curie' (p. 115). The use of vocabulary such as 'douceur' and 'heureux' in relation to the hospital further implies that Ernaux wishes to reduce the focus on her illness.

Similarly, despite living in a psychiatric hospital and representing her mental health heavily in her work, Kusama avoids physical depictions of both the medical space and of herself as a medical subject, much like Ernaux. Therefore, Kusama's work also pertains to Connell's statement that Ernaux places herself 'outside of the binary configurations of health and sickness'.[175] Instead, Kusama almost always places her physical body in harmony with her artwork. Nonetheless, I agree with Yoshimoto in that one must not reduce Kusama's art to a mere symptom of her illness, as she highlights that 'Much of the scholarship on Kusama tends to overemphasize her illness as a solely cause (sic.) of her artistic creation'.[176] In fact, Kusama's

[174] Lisa Connell, 'Picturing Pain and Pleasure in Annie Ernaux's "L'Usage de la photo"', French Forum, 39.2 (2014), 145-160 (p. 146).
[175] Fell, *ibid.*
[176] Yoshimoto, p. 45.

work is representative of much more than mental health, although this is a factor of her self-representation, it also explores notions of race, feminism, and consumerism.

When in interview with Damien Hirst, Kusama was asked 'Do you think the growth of cancer is the same as the growth of a flower?' to which she replied 'Cancer is what people fear, but a flower is what people visualize.'[177] I interpret this as Kusama referring to the desensitising of and romanticisation of illness. Just as her own mental health produces terrifying hallucinations, the resulting polka dots appear playful and harmless. The same imagery and concepts are present in *L'Usage,* as Ernaux comments that 'Le cancer devrait devenir une maladie aussi romantique qu'autrefois la tuberculose' (p. 91). In a sense, people fear cancer and visualise the flower, which is exactly what Ernaux shows them: the flower formed by her soft clothes, as opposed to the fear of the literal cancerous body (Fig. 32). The bottom right form created by clothes in the image entitled 'La rose des sables' resembles its title, a desert rose with a boot folded in on itself creating a leaf and a ribbon serving as a stem. When describing 'Chambre, matin de Noël, suite' (Fig. 5), featured in Chapter One, Ernaux even comments that 'Je n'éprouve rien devant cette photo. À la limite ce n'est pas moi, mon corps, dont cette fleur est la dépouille…' (p. 138). Kusama has also used floral imagery in her work in order to reference illness and death, such as her poem 'Cherry Blossoms' – 'cherry blossoms. / They explore my life and death' – as well as numerous flower sculptures that are a 'visual treat and a subliminal threat' like the imposing *Tulip* aforementioned (Fig. 27).[178] This metaphor of the flower that is representative of a threat/illness is used by both artistes and perhaps comes from the marketing of breast cancer awareness charities that often employ pink ribbons and flowers in their logos and campaigns, even referenced by Ernaux throughout her works: '*Madame Figaro… OSEZ LA TRANSPARANCE !* (*L'Usage,* p. 85); 'Le sein un peu

[177] Kusama in interview with Damien Hirst, quoted in *Yayoi Kusama,* ed. Hoptman et al., p. 138.
[178] Kusama, 'Cherry Blossoms' in *Yayoi Kusama,* ed. Hoptman et al., p. 154; Catherine Taft, 'Dashing into the Future: Kusama's Twenty-First Century' in *ibid.,* p. 189.

affaissé est celui d'une femme mûre et il est atteint d'un cancer. Le regard de la femme croise celui des autres femmes partout, dans le métro' (*La Vie extérieure,* p. 50). It is evident, therefore, that both artistes focus on illness in their artistically analyse metaphor and floral imagery to represent it, avoiding its direct depictions in image form.

In their considerations of the romanticisation of illness, both women explore imagery found in Susan Sontag's musings in *Illness as Metaphor.*[179] Ernaux's above comparison of cancer and tuberculosis was first expressed by Sontag, who describes how both illnesses have been 'spectacularly' 'encumbered by the trappings of metaphor'.[180] Ernaux's descriptions of her cancerous body also pertain to the imagery described by Sontag: 'j'ai le sein droit et le

Figure 32 – 'La rose des sables, 7 janvier 2004'
Photo © Ernaux and Marie, 2005

[179] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).
[180] *Ibid.,* p. 5.

sillon mammaire brunis, brûlés par le cobalt, avec des croix bleues et des traits rouges dessinés sur la peau pour determiner précisément la zone et les points à irradier' (p. 82) reflects Sontag's assertion that '[Cancer] treatment has a military flavour… chemotherapy is chemical warfare'.[181] Though such military symbolism is absent from Kusama's work, the similarities between her brightly coloured polka dots and Ernaux's 'croix bleues' and 'traits rouges' are clear as both 'delineat[e] zones of disease', 'illustrat[ing] a form of medical writing' that invades the artistes' bodies and environment.[182] In fact, Kusama's body also becomes besieged by her health just as Ernaux's does, and her polka dots could represent targets. In both women's work, the body becomes a performance space for private health matters made public, even though their inclusion of the body in actual images differs. Ultimately, I agree with Edwards in that Ernaux's 'choice to include images that remove the female body may therefore represent a feminist agenda that intends to subvert a double patriarchal bind: that of art and that of autobiography'.[183] Both artistes explicitly deal with depictions of health in their self-representations, be it physical or mental, but both refuse to be reduced to a symptom.

La vie, le vide

Finally, both explore the liminal space between life and death in their self-representations. Ernaux confesses that:

> En écrivant, très vite s'est imposée à moi la nécessité d'évoquer « l'autre scène », celle où se jouait dans mon corps, absent des clichés, le combat flou, stupéfiant – « est-ce moi, bien moi, à qui cela arrive ? » - entre la vie et la mort. (*L'Usage,* p. 12)

[181] *Ibid.,* p. 65.
[182] Connell, 'Picturing Pain and Pleasure', p. 153.
[183] Edwards, 'Photography and Autobiography', p. 706.

In addition, in *L'Événement* Ernaux recalls seeing her aborted baby: 'C'est une scène sans nom, la vie et la mort en même temps. Une scène de sacrifice' (pp. 101-102). The dichotomy between life and death plays out in multiple Ernaux works and could be argued to be her greatest preoccupation that is shared with all the artistes in this study. Kusama states that her work 'battle[s] at the border of life and death, questioning what we are and what it means to live and die', and that 'My revolution of the Self, which has been such an essential part of my life so far, is all about discovering death' (*Infinity*, p. 93; p. 229). Both women, therefore, create work that questions the duality of life and death, evoking 'l'autre scène' going on inside themselves, making their private struggles public, and rendering their illnesses and preoccupations with death visible without the need to have their bodies present in any morbid, medical scenery.

However, Kusama does situate herself overtly in her pieces more than Ernaux does, which evokes the theme of death in a different way. Whereas Ernaux states 'Quand je regarde nos photos, c'est la disparition de mon corps que je vois' (*L'Usage,* p. 111), it is as if Kusama combats her future death in confronting the viewer directly with her presence, as if by cataloguing herself to an extent that she can never truly die, that her image can never be lost. Kusama also informs us that:

> the theme of my artistic creation is "death" … What death signifies, its colours and spatial beauty, the quietude of its footprints, and the 'nothingness' after death: I am now at the stage of creating art for the repose of my soul, embracing all of these.[184]

[184] Kusama, 'The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul (extracts) 1975', in *Yayoi Kusama,* ed. Hoptman et al., p. 120.

Though her presence in her installation works is normally undeniable, Kusama aptly captures the theme of death and its 'nothingness' in works such as *I'm Here, but Nothing* (2000) (Fig. 33), with its empty chairs absent of all life. And yet, the title of the work confirms that Kusama is indeed *there,* represented instead by her habitual multi-coloured polka dots that are projected onto the household scene in the manner of a disco ball. This further justifies the notion that Kusama's polka dots serve as her ultimate symbol, representing her *self* and her mental health

Figure 33 – Kusama, I'm Here, but Nothing, *2000, installation view, light projection and furniture, dimensions variable*
Photo © Tate

more than any other of her motifs, and thus *I'm Here, but Nothing* can also be labelled as an example of self-representation. The implied nothingness of the piece juxtaposes the fun, jovial atmosphere created by the colourful spots and the purple light of the scene which in turn hints towards the aforementioned contradictions within Kusama's own life: she produces such

colourful work and yet lives in a hospital. *I'm Here* not only embodies the duality of life/death but also that of presence/absence and is indeed another self-representation *in absentia.*[185]

In the same manner that Kusama confesses 'I'm Here, but Nothing' in the title of this work, Ernaux remarks that 'La rose des sables' 'n'éveille rien en moi. Il n'y a plus ici ni la vie ni le temps. Ici je suis morte' (*L'Usage,* p. 146). The same sense of absence/presence felt in Kusama's installation works is epitomised in *L'Usage* through the images and their descriptions, as Ernaux even states that: 'Quand je regarde nos photos, c'est la disparition de mon corps que je vois… C'est la disparition de la pensée [qui m'importe]. Plusieurs fois je me suis dit que si ma pensée pouvait continuer ailleurs, il me serait indifférent de mourir' (p. 111). This notion of disappearing into or merging with one's surroundings is key to Kusama's own aforementioned principle of self-obliteration. Speaking of paining canvases with infinity nets, Kusama states that 'As I repeated this process over and over again, the nets began to expand to infinity. I forgot about myself as the enveloped me, clinging to my arms and legs and clothes and filling the entire room' (*Infinity,* p. 20). This loss of self is also present across a number of Ernaux's texts. Her exploration of the city often relates back to herself in works such as *Journal du dehors,* where she considers that 'Je suis traversée par les gens, leur existence, comme une putain' (p. 528), and in *La Vie extérieure* where her sense of disappearing into nothingness evokes the same level of self-obliteration that Kusama achieves:

> Aujourd'hui, pendant quelques minutes, j'ai essayé de *voir* tous les gens que je croisais, tous inconnus. Il me semblait que leur existence, par l'observation détaillée de leur personne, me devenait subitement très proche, comme si je les touchais. Si je poursuivais une telle expérience… Peut-être n'aurais-je plus de moi. (pp. 28-29)

[185] Borzello, p. 109.

Whereas Kusama becomes so absorbed in her own patterns that they cling to her, Ernaux soaks up the presence of other people that she literally feels as if she had touched them, linking to the prostitute imagery offered by the term 'putain'. In this sense, Ernaux and Kusama practice the same technique of self-obliteration in different ways, with Ernaux immersing herself in the outside world and Kusama immersing the outside world in her *self,* i.e. her polka dots, both losing themselves in the process. I agree with Kawakami who argues that Ernaux's photographic writing and *journaux extimes* 'are explicitly presented as attempts to "photograph" in words the everyday world of Ernaux's life in Cergy… these texts, although ostensibly about the outside and the other, nonetheless constitute snapshots of her self'.[186] Therefore, though there is a certain loss of self experienced by both Ernaux and Kusama in these works that seemingly deal with nothingness, they still serve to provide audiences with a broader picture of the artistes themselves.

The use of the domestic scene as a place to contemplate life/death through the presence/absence of the artist and certain objects is a technique utilised by both women and is ultimately a feminist approach. Meskimmon argues that the '"mother" or "wife" is internalised as a personal identity' that is inherently linked to the domestic sphere, and 'the way in which society constructs definitions of the domestic woman.'[187] Nevertheless, it is clear the scenes portrayed by Ernaux and Kusama do not explicitly relate to being a mother or wife and instead pertain to their private health and thoughts, and thus they serve to *de*construct definitions of the domestic woman. Domestic space serves as an extension of the artistes and in turn of their self-representation. Whether such spaces are constructed as per Kusama or are realistic as per Ernaux, they serve as vessels to contain a multitude of themes and thoughts: the body, illness, sex, life, and death.

[186] Kawakami, *Photobiography,* p. 84.
[187] Meskimmon, p. 62.

It is clear that both Ernaux and Kusama explore the symbiotic relationship between art and health, whether as a means of therapy, or coping mechanism for physical or mental health problems: Ernaux's breast cancer and Kusama's obsessional neurosis. Though one might argue that Ernaux and Kusama are worlds apart – France versus Japan, writer versus artist, born eleven years apart –the way in which they create health-centric self-representations from their life experience is not. Both artistes project their health onto a domestic scene with a distinct absence of the clinical scene that is normally depicted first in medical narratives: Kusama's playfully coloured polka dots echo her hallucinatory visions caused by her neuroses, and Ernaux's abandoned clothes represent the possibly future absence of her body from this earth. Ultimately, both break down the taboo nature of subjects such as sexuality, illness, and death in the creation of their self-representations.

CONCLUSION

> Je peux la décrire [la photographie du sexe du Marie], je ne pourrais pas l'exposer aux regards. Je m'aperçois qu'elle est, d'une certaine façon, le pendant du tableau de Courbet, *L'origine du monde.* (*L'Usage,* p. 15)

> Je n'arrivais pas m'éloigner du *David* de Michel-Ange, étonnée jusqu'à la douleur que ce soit un homme et non une femme, qui ait manifesté sublimement la beauté du corps masculine. (*Passion simple,* p. 50)

> … l'art n'est pas cette chose au-dessus de l'humanité. Dans la madone de Giotto, il y avait la chair des femmes que celui-ci a rencontrées et touchées.
> La vie extérieure demande tout, la plupart des œuvres d'art, rien.
> (*La Vie extérieure,* p. 19; p. 144)

Published in 2005, 1991, and 1999 respectively, the above quotations establish and show the depth of Ernaux's relationship to art as a subject that she contemplates, admires, and questions. Although she references male artists in all cases – Courbet, Michael Angelo, and Giotto – this further demonstrates the need to situate her work in relation to that of artistes, to create a space for these contemporaries within the male-dominated canons of art and literature, thus fulfilling the ambition of the 'chaîne invisible'.

Overall, there is no doubt that the artistes presented in this 'chaîne invisible' have a considerable number of overlapping themes that they evoke in a variety of different ways in their self-representations. All deal with the female body: its symbolism, usages (sex, abortion, pregnancy), how it can be tied to the domestic space, or how it can house illness. All explore how this body is presented, its clothes (or not), and all explore the importance of materiality. This materiality is often related to the themes of mortality and death, and even the rebirth of the self. This notion of the self undulates, from the loss of the self, to a multiplicity of selves, to the concept of past selves. Though their identities evolve throughout their careers, the same motifs recur and serve as the thread or 'chaîne' that holds their own identities together and

links them to other artistes. The fact the feminism of each artiste can be described as 'slippery' echoes the ways in which their selves evolve and shift, in turn highlighting the fact that the self is not a fixed entity. Nonetheless, the way in which they represent their own life material and lived experiences as women is consistent and proves their belonging together as part of a 'chaîne invisible' of women contemporaries, finally made visible in this project.

In this dissertation, I have made it clear that Ernaux's 'histoire est en elles' – where 'elles' are Bourgeois, Messager, and Kusama – by referencing key secondary material from Borzello, Meskimmon and following Reinecke's assertion that 'Everything you make is a self-portrait.'[188] The fact that each woman's work feeds into the next and interlinks means that this dissertation does not only illuminate the work of Ernaux in an intermedial light, but also shows that of Bourgeois, Messager, and Kusama in detailed comparisons and with regards to feminist and literary theory. Through text and image analysis that is placed within its artistic-feminist context, I have shown that these women often react to the same patriarchal pressures in their self-representations: pressure to be beautiful, married, sane, with child. They all consider their bodies and their self-representation as symbiotic concepts. In relation to Messager, Sophie Duplaix questions the fact that 'son œuvre se développe-t-elle comme une quête et une conquête de soi, incessamment renouvelée et comme le processus de formation d'une personnalité sociale.'[189] This conclusion can actually be applied to each artiste in this study and not just Messager, as the 'quête' and 'conquête' of the self is so fundamental to their careers that it does leads to the creation of a 'personnalité sociale'. Each woman's style, and therefore self, is iconic and recognisable, whether it is decidedly split as per Messager, or the evolution of the self and its motifs that Bourgeois and Kusama represent, or the combination of the split and yet consistent self-image that Ernaux depicts throughout her works. In representing their

[188] Reinecke, *op. cit.*
[189] Sophie Duplaix, 'Jouer avec les forms du "je"' in *Annette Messager: les messagers*, pp. 13-17, pp. 13-14.

specific lived experiences as women, all embody what Ernaux refers to as '*la valeur collective* du « je » autobiographique et des choses racontées'.[190] That is to say that the artistes here represent not only themselves, but a greater collective of women.

In conclusion, I have demonstrated the range and depth of insights to be gained for Ernaux's work, as well as providing a new framework in which to analyse the artistes' work. It is clear that a feminist-art-based reading Ernaux's work is entirely merited, and this project serves as the first project to consider Ernaux's work in a light that is not only intermedial but feminist. My intention is that this 'chaîne invisible' is continued, that extra links should be forged and added, due to the sheer number of artistes that have 'quelque chose de commun' with Ernaux's work: not only Emin, Calle, Bourgeois, Messager and Kusama, but also Kaarina Kaikkonen, Sarah Lucas, Dorothea Tanning, Nan Goldin, and Yoko Ono. Such additional work could also consider the figures of the mother and the father, the themes of abortion and pregnancy, and the symbolism represented by objects such as the bed and the shoe. The 'chaîne invisible' establishes significant chains of communication and embodies the detailed links that can be found between artistes as well as between life and art. Ultimately, this project responds to one of the earliest calls for a 'chaîne invisible', the opening statement of feminist journal *Heresies*: 'As women, we are aware that historically the connections between our lives, our arts and our ideas have been suppressed.'[191]

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[190] Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, p. 80.
[191] Heresies Collective, 'Statement', *Heresies*, 1 (1977), inside front cover.

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The front cover of this work is reproduced with permission of the artist, Emily Cuthbert, and illustrates the 'chaîne invisible': four nude women are drawn in pink onto a blue background, utilising such stereotypically gendered colours in an ironic manner in order to signify the insertion of artistes into the male-dominated canon. A thread or chain loops around each woman, acting as both the 'chaîne invisible' as well as the notion of a bloodline that runs through a sisterhood, hence the use of the colour red. Finally, the nudity references the ways in which each artiste reveals themselves in their self-representations and explores the female body. Thank you again, Emily, for understanding my vision.