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Introduction

The essay will explore how the concepts of gender were approached by Sarah Lucas and Louise Bourgeois in their artworks. The two artists were chosen because sculpture was the main medium in both of their art practices, and gender concepts hold immense importance in the artists' oeuvres. Both Louise Bourgeois and Sarah Lucas are known as avid supporters of feminist ideas.

The essay will primarily focus on the portrayal of the female gender, solely due to word count limitations. In relation to gender, the definition used for the analysis in the essay is taken from the World Health Organization:

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

The essay will analyse how the perception of gender is constructed in the artists' works and how the gender concepts could be interpreted.

The concepts of gender in art practice of Sarah Lucas

In her artworks, Sarah Lucas constantly challenges our perceptions of gender, encompassing both the masculine and feminine. Some of Lucas's works overtly criticise gender stereotypes, as seen in the series of sculptures *Bunny get snookered* (1997) or the photographs in the series *Get off your horse and drink your milk* (1994).

This essay will concentrate on three of Sarah Lucas's works in which the concept of gender is approached in slightly different ways. The analysed works include *Au Naturel* (1994), *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), and *Self-portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996).



Figure 1. Au Naturel (Lucas, 1994)

The bold and absurd ambiance in Sarah Lucas's deceptively simple work, *Au Naturel* (1994) (Figure 1.) emerges from placing the viewer in a position of spectatorship before a suggested domestic scene. Here, an anthropomorphic 'couple' is assembled from a few fruits and a worn-out bucket. With uncompromising and disarming clarity, the complexity of a relationship within the couple is stripped down to basic biological differences. There is no visible interaction within the 'couple,' only coexistence marked by boredom. The scene lacks overt social criticism. Gender in the work is employed merely to signify a heterosexual, childless couple in a long-term relationship, where the only bond appears to be mutual sexual attraction and/or the comfort of the habit of living together. There is no hierarchy or aggression between the two genders; both appear equally vulnerable and ephemeral, constructed mainly from perishable materials.

Remarkably, in the majority of works that suggest a domestic environment, and therefore assume to represent a married couple rather than a one-night stand, no children are present. The couples are childless, rendering their existence fruitless in procreation terms. Parenthood evidently is not a part of gender identification in Sarah Lucas' works, and this perception is based on her own personal experience.



Figure 2. Two fried eggs and a kebab (Lucas, 1992)

A similar approach emphasizing the spectator's position and the fragility of the artwork subject is applied in *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (Lucas, 1992) (Figure 2.). The assemblage boldly challenges the viewer's idea of the representation of femininity. The photograph, symbolizing a human face, simultaneously heightens the absurdity of the work by repeating the 3D object in a 2D format.

By utilizing a table and food as a medium to create an anthropomorphic female presence, the piece positions gender features and food on the same existential level. Temporality, corporality, fragility, and frailty—qualities that can be ascribed to both the female gender and food, in this case, the eggs and the kebab. The work can be interpreted as having a humorous or critical

connotation, portraying the female body as something to be consumed or eaten by the spectator. The table further reinforces this perception, as the food is literally 'served' on it.

It's important to note that in Sarah Lucas' art, food is not exclusively associated with the female gender. In the series of photographs *Get off your horse and drink your milk* (Lucas, 1994), it also signifies masculinity.

The female gender and the universal person, or an adult human, are conflated in the work. This position, where women could be defined as "bearers of a universal personhood," as expressed by Judith Butler (Butler, 2007, p.13), aligns with the views of third-wave feminism.

Understanding the work without specific emphasis on sexuality is supported by comparison with similar pieces, such as *Bitch* (1995) and *Nude 1 & 2* (1999). In these later pieces, a 'female' identity is constructed from a similar assemblage of domestic objects—a table and fruit—along with the addition of female clothes or underwear. The inclusion of clothes in these pieces makes them appear partially dressed/exposed, intensifying the sexual connotations within the context of the artworks. The absence of clothes in *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* is significant and underscores a more universal meaning of the female gender.

Equating the perishable qualities of both the human body and food imparts a slightly more sinister feeling to the artwork. It prompts viewers to contemplate whether a person is truly more than a few bits that can be consumed or destroyed—a being that may rot and be forgotten when deemed unappealing. The artwork raises serious and uncomfortable questions, delving beyond dark humour to explore the essence of human presence.



Figure 3. Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs (Lucas, 1996)

In Sarah Lucas' series of self-portraits, *Artist as Subject* (1990-97), she examines gender in a different manner compared to her sculptural works. In *Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs* (Lucas, 1996), the artist's image presents an androgynous identity. The placement of two fried eggs on the artist's breasts symbolises feminine nature, while the macho pose, absence of makeup, cigarettes, and an uncompromising gaze back at the spectator without attempting to charm or please reflect masculine features. The combination of these features, along with unisex clothing and the slightly elevated viewer position, creates an androgynous identity.

Interestingly, the fried eggs, a metaphorical representation of femininity, appear very cartoonish and starkly contrast with the solemn realism of the rest of the image. The artist's personality in the self-portrait transcends gender clichés, as her presence, vividly communicated through her gaze, defies any gendered social expectations.

Using herself as a subject makes the work highly personal and can be viewed as Sarah Lucas' direct manifesto of both her artistic and gender identities. Individuality is no longer constrained by gender stereotypes. Similar to a pair of fried eggs, feminine features, perceived by an individual as something entirely arbitrary, can either be integral to a personality or easily detached from it.

The concepts of gender in art practice of Louise Bourgeois

Louise Bourgeois' exploration of gender standards was profoundly influenced by second-wave feminism, including figures such as Simone de Beauvoir, Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and the existentialism of [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) (Appendix 1). In her art, gender is intricately intertwined with sexuality, family relationships, and motherhood.



Figure 4. Femme couteau (Bourgeois, 1969-70)

In Louise Bourgeois' artwork, such as *Femme couteau* (1969-70) (Figure 4.), gender often emerges as a product of individuality shaped by external forces. These forces may include the patriarchal standards of society or an existential fear of the Other—fear of the opposite gender/sex, or a combination of these forces simultaneously.

This marble sculpture-my *Femme Couteau*-embodies the polarity of woman, the destructive and the seductive...the woman turns into blade, she is defensive. She identifies with the penis to defend herself...We are all vulnerable in some ways, and we are all male-female (Bourgeois, 1998, p.100).

In *Femme couteau* (Bourgeois, 1969-70), sex is perceived as an innate quality, but gender is a somewhat fluid concept, shaped by resistance to the environment. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in "The Second Sex": 'One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.' (Beauvoir, 1973, p.301)

The seductive soft curves, the pastel pink colour of the marble, and the elegant shape of the torso—all evoke traditional feminine traits. However, in order to endure an environment where she is subjected to male aggression and discrimination, the subject of the artwork adopts some masculine features and transforms herself into a sharp, hard, and dangerous object—an embodiment of a knife.

The pointed end of the artwork could be interpreted with a double meaning: as a tongue, serving as a sexual tool bringing pleasure, or as a sharp attacking tool, using words or the blunt force of a blade to attack and thereby protect herself. To survive, she needs to combine both gender features. This merging or blending of two gender features in one entity is one of the main recurring themes in Louise Bourgeois' oeuvres, exemplified in its utmost contrast in the famous *Fillette* (1968).

It is significant that the gentle folds on *Femme couteau* (Bourgeois, 1969-70) imply an elegant dress enveloping the torso. This not only highlights the feminine features of the *Femme couteau* but also underscores the social context of gender. In 1969, wearing a dress signified belonging to the female gender in society and was expected of a middle-class woman.



Figure 5. Untitled (Bourgeois, 1996)

Female garments are frequently employed by Bourgeois and serve as a medium in pieces such as Untitled (1996) (Figure 5.), where women and girls' underwear is draped on cows' femur bones. In this piece, the light, beautiful, almost transparent camisoles starkly contrast with the large, angular, and grim-looking bones. This sharp distinction appears to allude to different facets of the female gender: the elegant and fragile appearance versus the harsh reality of the laborious domestic chores behind it. Similar to cows, women are perceived as valuable assets due to their functionality. The representation of cows as bones in the piece suggests that women's personalities can metaphorically be utilised in the family structure.

It's intriguing that certain delicate pieces of underwear on the hangers belonged to an adult woman while others belonged to a girl. These items could be transferred from a mother to a daughter, both literally and metaphorically, symbolizing societal expectations of what it means to be a woman, akin to an inherited trauma passed down to the next generation. The artwork effectively communicates these ideas in a striking and exquisite manner.



Figure 6. The Good Mother (Bourgeois, 2003)

Functionality emerges as a significant aspect of the female gender in Louise Bourgeois' body of work, particularly concerning the theme of Motherhood in the artist's later pieces.

Undoubtedly, Louise Bourgeois's personal experiences profoundly shaped her understanding of motherhood within the gender concept. Influenced by her close relationship with her own mother, Louise Bourgeois later became a mother herself, raising three sons.

In soft sculptural pieces such as *The Good Mother* (2003) and *Umbilical Cord* (2003), Louise Bourgeois presents a female figure devoid of arms and hair, engaged in pregnancy or breastfeeding. The figures' faces lack specific feminine features and resemble fabric male heads from the same *The Woven Child* (London, Hayward Gallery, 2022) exhibition. Devoid of embellishments like hair, makeup, or clothing, these depictions emphasize the essence of womanhood through reproductive functions. The act of giving birth and breastfeeding, fundamental biological functions, distinctly define the female figure in these works.

In *The Good Mother* (2003), Louise Bourgeois portrays a female figure connected to spools of thread, actively engaged in producing valuable material. However, this scene also captures her in a fixed position within the space. The threads that connect her to the spools simultaneously render her captive, restricting her movement and anchoring her within her environment.

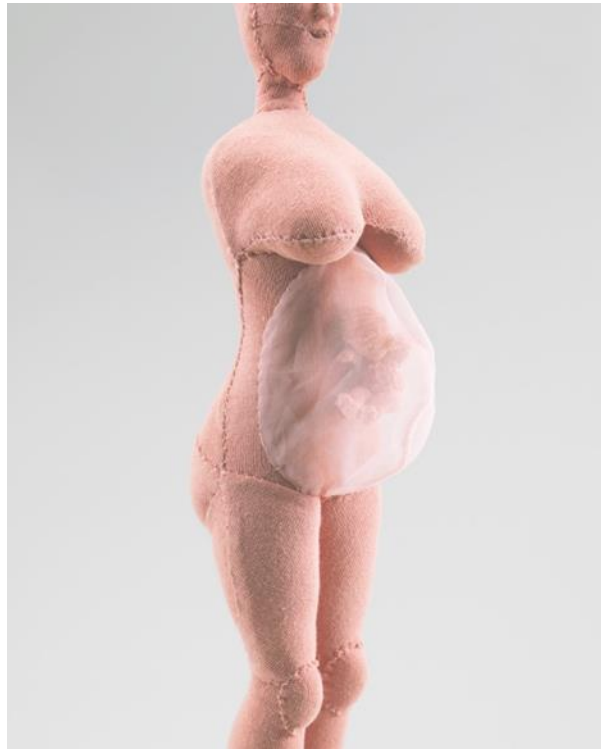


Figure 7 and 8 Umbilical cord (Bourgeois, 2003)

In Umbilical Cord (2003) (Figure 7,8), Louise Bourgeois depicts a heavily pregnant woman encased in a vitrine crafted from a solid metal frame and glass. This arrangement carries metaphorical weight, portraying the transformation of the woman, turned into a valuable asset through pregnancy, and placed within a cage. The transparent walls offer visibility, but the unyielding metal frame symbolises confinement. The vitrine both protects her and denies any opportunity for escape, mirroring the predetermined position within a family, where her future is fixed and pre-designed.



Figure 9. Knife figure (Bourgeois, 2002)

Louise Bourgeois's later work, *Knife Figure* (2002) (Figure 9), continues the metaphor introduced in *Femme couteau* (Bourgeois, 1969-70) but takes a more unsettling turn. The female torso is roughly stitched from soft fabric, with missing limbs and a sharp knife in place of her head.

Whether the sharp knife is the cause of her amputation or serves as a means to protect the lone remaining leg remains unclear to the viewer, yet the undeniable connection between these two aspects is apparent. In comparison to *Femme couteau*, the later sculpture, *Knife Figure* (Bourgeois, 2002), portrays a woman deeply marked by life's trials, having lost her elegance and innocent charm while enduring horrendous traumatic experiences.

Despite this, she has developed a dangerous defensive mechanism, utilizing her mind and words for both attack and protection simultaneously. Metaphorically, the knife represents a new personality acquired through this transformative process. The level of both vulnerability and threat is notably heightened in Knife Figure (Bourgeois, 2002), pushed almost to its limit.



Figure 10. Couple IV (Bourgeois, 1997)

The vulnerability conveyed through the metaphor of missing limbs as a representation of female identity undergoes further exploration in Louise Bourgeois' work, Couple IV (1997) (Figure 10). In this piece, a couple is depicted in an embrace or engaged in a sexual activity within a vitrine positioned on a table, symbolizing a marital bed. The woman, missing a leg, stands out, but in this instance, she is equipped with a prosthetic one.

The addition of a prosthesis in the work introduces complex connotations, highlighting the resilience of physical allure in the realm of sexuality, where even disability is not an obstacle. This inclusion imbues the scene with a heightened sense of intimacy and obscenity. Moreover, the prosthetic limb evokes associations with thigh-high boots made of leather or latex, worn to enhance sexual appeal.

The presence of the prosthesis on the female figure evokes another association, reminiscent of a veteran—one who has been hurt and damaged, perhaps in the eternal battle of the sexes, yet persists in participating until her last breath. This portrayal captures the enduring spirit of the figure, marked by the scars of experience but unwavering in her commitment to the ongoing struggle.

What distinguishes the female from the male in this work is solely his dominating position and the absence of visible damage to his body. Otherwise, the bodies share the same characteristics—they are made from the same material, both headless, implying the unimportance of personalities in the depicted scene. Gender, in this context, is defined by a hierarchical position that one must accept and carry on with.

In these soft sculptures, gender emerges as something immanent, intimately linked to biological sex and procreation. It manifests as a set of social or domestic functions and obligations imposed upon females, shaped by a series of traumatic events that mould one's personality in a specific manner. Gender is portrayed as a source of suffering, rendering individuals vulnerable and potentially instigating aggression as a protective mechanism. Simultaneously, it represents vitality and resilience, qualities directly tied to the libido concept, which opposes death and mortality in psychoanalytic theory.

Conclusion

In Sarah Lucas' art practice, gender stereotypes are subjected to dark humour and clever critique. Crafted from domestic objects and food, her sculptures adeptly portray and challenge gender concepts with minimal materials. In her surreal, absurd anthropomorphic sculptures, the artist elevates the ambivalence of gender to an existential level, portraying it as a signifier of the fragility of human nature. In her deeply personal series of self-portraits, the artist opts for androgyny as her chosen gender identity, reflecting both her individual lifestyle and embracing the ideas of third-wave feminism.

Louise Bourgeois lived during a time when the ideas of existentialism, psychoanalysis, and second-wave feminism held significant influence. Her sculptural works not only depict gender as a social construct perpetuated through generations but also portray it as an existential state marked by vulnerability, pain, and a sense of separation from the other. Gender, closely intertwined with sex and procreation in her body of work, places particular emphasis on motherhood as a crucial element in shaping female identity. Bourgeois's deep and intricate relationships with her parents, coupled with her later experiences as a mother, unquestionably influenced the nuanced ways in which she approached gender concepts in her art practice.

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List of figures

Figure 1. Lucas, S. (1994) Au Naturel. Available at: <https://www.artandobject.com/news/sarah-lucas-lets-it-all-hang-out-au-naturel> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 2. Lucas, S. (1992) Two fried eggs and a kebab. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01hw2mr/p01hw2km> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 3. Lucas, S. (1996) Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/15fac45e-3007-4862-bc2c-2430a055d3d2> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 4. Bourgeois, L. (1969-70) Femme couteau. Available at: <https://amis-musees-saintes.com/vendredi-17-mars-2023/> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 5. Bourgeois, L. (1996) Untitled. Available at: https://www.tripadvisor.fr/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g227920-d10834169-i433360910-Museum_Voorlinden-Wassenaar_South_Holland_Province.html (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 6. Bourgeois, L. (2003) The Good Mother. Available at: <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/13872/trauma-in-textiles-inside-london-louise-bourgeois-exhibition-hayward-gallery> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 7. Bourgeois, L. (2003) Umbilical Cord. Available at: <https://kulturnews.de/gropius-bau-berlin-louise-borgeois/> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 8. Bourgeois, L. (2003) Umbilical Cord. Available at: <https://kulturnews.de/gropius-bau-berlin-louise-borgeois/> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 9. Bourgeois, L. (2002) Knife figure. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/artist-out-on-a-limb-with-works-20121127-2a5jx.html> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 10. Bourgeois, L. (1997) Couple IV. Available at: <https://theartsdesk.com/node/87689/view> (Assessed: 15 December 2023)

Figure 11. Bourgeois, L. (1998) Destruction of the father reconstruction of the father: writings and interviews, 1923-1997. Cambridge: MIT Press

Appendix

The perception of life as an existential threat which manifests itself to the point of inducing nausea, is a sentiment famously echoed in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel "Nausea" (La Nausée, 1938). This attitude is also thoroughly chronicled in Bourgeois' personal diary entry dated June 23, 1975 as seen in Figure 11: "Life today is the present...What is meant by the present: Hate and terror of the present crush it every minute-nausea." (Bourgeois, 1998, p.72)

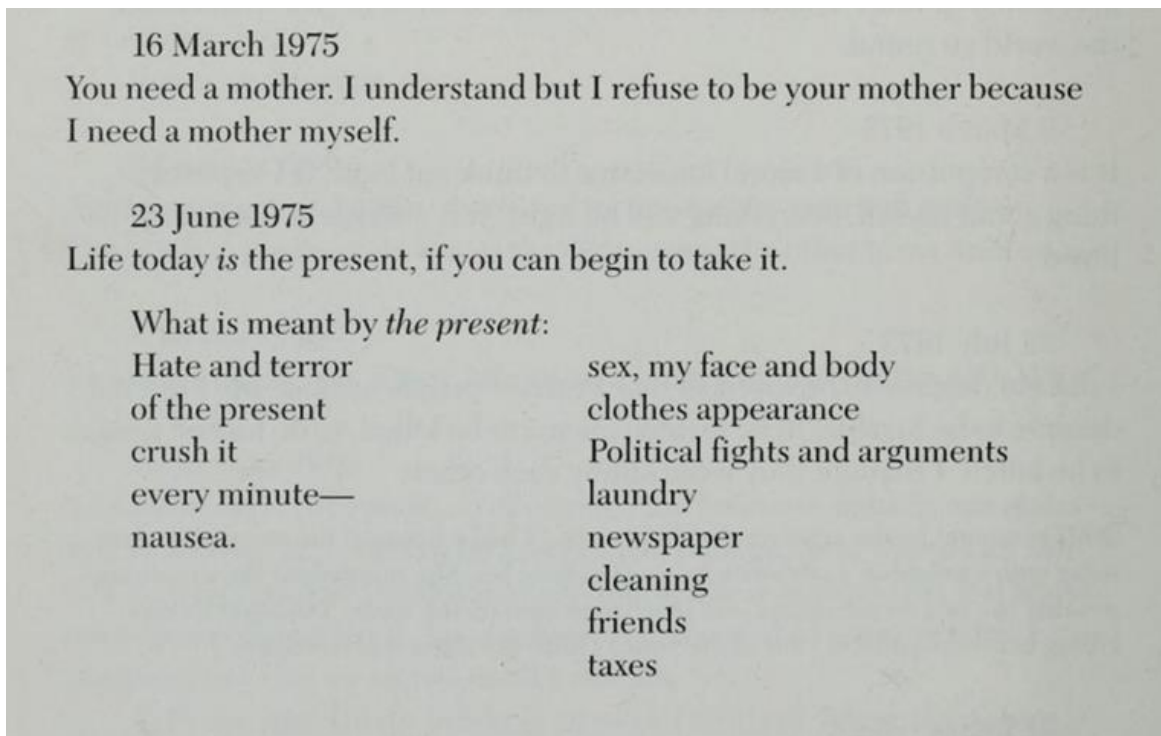


Figure 11. Diary page 72 (Bourgeois 1998)