Original (English) ms. for
Anna C. Chave, "L'Art de Louise Bourgeois: 'Fillette' et les Evénements de 1968," trans. Nicole Jaborska, in Ligeia: Dossiers sur l'Art, nos. 57-60 (jan-juin 2005)

## Bourgeois' Art: Fillette and the "Events of 1968"

"Since I was a runaway, father figures on these shores rubbed me the wrong way," admitted Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911), alluding to her emigration to the United States from France in 1938. In particular, "Breton and Duchamp made me violent. They were too close to me and I objected to them violently—their pontification."[1] The French "Elders" who emigrated to New York during World War II formed "a very small circle and everyone met everyone." But, yearning though she did for French conversation, Bourgeois was ambivalent about her paternalistic new neighbors, the more so "since they were not interested in women, period," except "rich women," and "they were not interested in other artists. They were interested in themselves."[2] Bourgeois' wooden The Blind Leading the Blind of 1947-49, with its two parallel rows of seven tall, tapered sticks yoked by a lintel, "refers to the old men who drive you over the precipice," she confided.[3] This anti-patriarchal feeling ran deep with Bourgeois, who in 1974 composed, as a kind of magnum opus, the environmental work, The Destruction of the Father, out of an impetus of "emotional aggression, dislocation, disintegration, explosion, and total destruction or murder," as she vividly put it.[4] Though the work was not entitled "The Destruction of My Father," she would consistently tie this impetus to childhood fantasies of dismembering and devouring her father in revenge for his tyranny over the family dinner table, and for his cruel sexual infidelity.[5]

As for her Surrealist "father-figures," even after they repatriated Bourgeois would still find them "too close," the more so since her art was persistently subject to annexation as a kind of, more or less noteworthy postscript to Surrealism, at times as if she were a would-be member of the much bruited New York School with its evident Surrealist roots. Attempts to identify Brancusi as her father troubled her less, in part, surely, because such efforts were rare; in part because he seemed more a remote, grand-father figure. "I knew Brancusi," Bourgeois explained once; "But you see, the generations aren't the same." Prior to leaving Paris, while hardly more than a student, "I had a chance to enter the temple" that was Brancusi's studio, but due to a fumbled introduction, he mistook her for a collector, and they had no satisfactory exchange.[6]

Bourgeois is readily differentiated from Brancusi by, what developed as, her appetite for grotesquerie, for the amorphous and visceral, as well as by her greater openness to non-traditional materials—though she did work in wood and, eventually, in bronze and marble (albeit with artisans to carve for her, contrary to Brancusi's practice). Brancusi provided a model for Bourgeois, even so, by his boldly playful investigation of sexual dimorphism and of metamorphism generally, and by his subtle undermining of the rigid orders of geometry.[7] And there are works of hers that compare compellingly to his, especially her iconic 1968 Fillette [fig. 1], that crude latex and plaster effigy of an infant girl shockingly doubling as an outsized penis, which loosely evokes that elegant marble or bronze bust of a woman slyly doubling as an even more outsized penis:

Princess X of 1915 (and 1916) [fig. 2]. Brancusi's claims of innocence as to the double-entendre were tested quite publicly when Princess X was ejected from the 1920 Salon des Indépendants in Paris for indecency.[8] Fillette was not subject in the same way to suppression, but a 1982 photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe of a grinning Bourgeois with the sculpture clamped under her right arm [fig. 3], was notoriously censored, inasmuch as the work was cropped out of the frame when the photo was used as the frontispiece of the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective catalogue of the same year.[9]

Though it is generally talked about as a singular work, there are two distinct versions of Fillette, one of which has recently been copied by Bourgeois. (Like Brancusi, she has as a matter of course productively mined her own prior work for subsequent projects, producing variants that lead to informal series of work on given themes.) One version of Fillette sports a demure, brimmed, smooth-domed baby bonnet (which doubles as a circumcised penis tip or, for that matter, as a clitoris), and a swaddling blanket wrapped to form a stand-up collar (or clitoral hood) around the infant's head, while tucked above and exposing the prominent, disturbing stumps of her two legs (roughly spherical forms which double, more convincingly, as testicles), while the whole dangles from an S-shaped meathook-type contrivance speared through the back of the baby's head. The version Bourgeois tucked under her arm in Mapplethorpe's photo, the "'sweeter version'" (so states the hand-out at the new DIA: Beacon museum in New York, where it is on loan, dated 1968/1999), has a frog-like, wrinkly and hatless head (which doubles as an uncircumcised penis tip, or as a clitoris) with an incised mouth and two bumps that pass for eyes, and sports a cowl-like garment wide open in the back. From that vantage point the work looks neither infantile nor penile but more like, say, a leg of mutton, suspended just above eye-level from a small wire loop.

In both variants of Fillette, it appears that loosely woven cloth was strategically wrapped over a plaster form to provide a canvas for layers of erratically brushed latex, which has dried and aged to a lumpy, mottled golden-brown while retaining some of its skin-like translucency. Read literally, Fillette emerges as a gruesomely lynched, crude and deformed, mummified and decrepit infant (or babydoll), or as the barely veiled, putrefied genitals of some male giant strung up like a (female) trophy hunter's bounty or like so much curing meat, prime for the slicing. Among the many ways that Fillette revises Princess X, besides its rawness or brutality, is in its refusal of a pedestal: whereas Princess X was pinioned to a stone cube, to be stacked in turn on other supporting elements, in Brancusi's innovative way, Bourgeois instead chose "'Hanging' [which] is important because it allows things to turn around. It is very helpless, it changes the hierarchy of the work; the base disappears."[10]

A "big, suspended, decaying phallus, definitely on the rough side," Lawrence Alloway called Fillette when it was (first?) exhibited, in a show of "13 Women Artists" in New York in 1972, staged by members of an inaugural feminist group within the New York art community, the Women's Ad Hoc Committee.[11] Though Bourgeois was already active in feminist initiatives by the time she made Fillette[12] (idiosyncratic though she was and is in her feminism), feminists were widely regarded as humorless in the extreme, and she would never describe the sculpture in a way that it could easily be read, namely as a macabre feminist joke:

as exhibit number one in a fantasized upending of the patriarchy. It bears underlining, however, that this grisly testament to an act of excision and display of the penis/phallus dates from a time when (by sharp contrast with female nudity) frontal male nudity, and even the terminology naming it, remained profoundly tabooed--a taboo by now weakened, though far from eradicated. "People talked about erotic aspects, about my obsessions, but they didn't discuss the phallic aspects. If they had, I would have ceased to do it...," Bourgeois confessed in 1974--and Alloway was, indeed, exceptional in his comments.[13]

Alloway grouped Bourgeois with women artists determined to turn the tables on men, making them serve instead as "sex objects," endowed with "aroused rather than classically quiescent genitals"; but he thereby obviated the obvious: that her effigy of, however erect male genitals was horrifyingly detached from a desirable or desiring male body.[14] "Women become hatchet women...out of fear...," Bourgeois observed in 1974; "She identifies with the penis to defend herself... She feels vulnerable because she can be wounded by the penis. So she tries to take on the weapon of the aggressor."[15] Decades later, in explaining why she chose to be photographed with Fillette, Bourgeois spoke again of identification, calling the sculpture a "little Louise"; but then she described the penis as a disturbingly vulnerable thing, towards which she (as a wife and mother of sons) was impelled to provide tenderness and protection. (She mentioned also playing up to the homosexual Mapplethorpe' fixation on outsized male genitalia.)[16]

At the time she first completed Fillette, Bourgeois downplayed her work's erotic content, telling William Rubin (as he prepared a publication on her work): "My sculptures please me because they represent a certain harmony and certain emphases, and I wouldn't say my work is erotic, even though this side of it seems obvious to many people." When Rubin--who was prone to a certain modernist orthodoxy--probed Bourgeois as to whether she felt "any conflict between the allusive and formal levels of the work," Bourgeois reiterated that she was "not particularly aware or interested in the erotic of my work [sic], in spite of its supposed presence," stressing that she was "exclusively concerned... with the formal perfection."[17] Regardless, Rubin finally declared that "the figurative has also become something of a trap for Miss Bourgeois in that when themes of sexuality are pressed too literally, a set of emotions interposes itself between the viewer and the work in a manner unconducive to aesthetic contemplation." The sexualness of her work was deemed excessively disruptive, in short. "If the phallic character of [Bourgeois'] Sleep, for example, can be savored and absorbed, like the sexuality of Brancusi and Arp, within the framework of the appreciation of the work as a whole," Rubin noted by way of example, "this is not true of Fated Portrait" or, he could have added, of Fillette.[18]

The insight that extreme sexualness could be disruptive (Rubin's disapproving insight); or that unbridled sexualness could fuel or attend extremism more broadly was being boldly proven in 1968, of course, in Bourgeois' own former Left Bank neighborhood in Paris (as well as in her adopted home of New York City, and elsewhere). At the outset, a key factor in radicalizing students in France --besides the prosecution by France and the U.S. of colonialist wars--had been the demand for "free circulation" or "free copulation," that is, for open access between men's and women's dormitories. Students pressed for the

right to full, adult sexual expression, in short, in a revolt against the paternalism of authorities.[19] Often the graffitti splashed over buildings during the storied "events of '68" held a sexual charge: an "enormous phallus" scrawled on a wall at Nanterre, for instance; or the phrases, "The more I make revolution, the more I feel like making love"[20] and "I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires!," both inscribed at the Sorbonne; or "Je jouis dans les pavés"--a claim the more resonant since loosened paving stones were the preferred weapons of radicals holed up behind barricades, together with that historic, radical weapon, the Molotov cocktail.[21]

"Closed because Useless," read the sign that activists posted on the door of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris,[22] which had closed preemptively to avoid occupation, while students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts tried to envision and implement a more socially effective role for the artist: "PEOPLE'S WORKSHOP YES/BOURGEOIS WORKSHOP NO" read a sign over the entrance to the lithographic studios, which had been converted to poster factories.[23] That "bourgeois art" and "bourgeois culture" were being vilified by leftists could hardly have been lost on Bourgeois, who had been named for the great French feminist and socialist, Louise Michel, by her feminist, socialist mother, and whose work (no matter how she initially hoped to position it) was more and more calculated to offend bourgeois sensibilities, as well as modernist orthodoxies.[24]

Returning to Rubin in 1969: in his patronizing view, the "uneven" Bourgeois, while she could never hope to compare to such (phallicly) "towering masters" and "towering innovators" as Jackson Pollock, was an "authentic but intimate" artist, one of a number of "smaller talents" prone "to investigate more modest, private ideas."[25] This idea of the privateness of Bourgeois' enterprise is one that would take hold in the decades to come, especially as she came to adopt a more confessional posture, linking her art generally to an autobiographical narrative centered on her childhood.[26] In the 1982 MoMA retrospective catalogue—marking the very pinnacle of Bourgeois' career to that date—curator Deborah Wye pronounced the sculptor's ambitions "modest" relative to those of artists such as Brancusi or Arp, as Bourgeois' work involved "her attempts to be responsible for herself, and to understand herself and her needs": a reasonable goal for a course of psychotherapy, perhaps, but a pitifully narrow artist's epitaph (though Wye herself deemed it "a deeply moving and humanistic aim").[27] Following the retrospective, Bourgeois' insistence on constructing her "family romance" (in Freud's phrase) as the roman à clef for decoding her oeuvre helped fuel efforts at framing her project in psychoanalytic terms, especially those of Melanie Klein with her focus on the "part object" and on aggression. In performing for Mapplethorpe's camera with Fillette, observes Mignon Nixon, "Bourgeois made herself the very image of the bad enough mother: the mother who grins at the patriarchal overvaluation of the phallus, who parodies the metonymy of infant and penis, and in whose hands the phallus becomes penis, or in other words slips from its status as privileged signifier to become one more object of aggression and desire."[28]

Apt as psychoanalytic readings of Bourgeois' work appear, they finally tend to circumscribe her achievement in a way to which women's art has proven particularly susceptible--that is, within the realm of the private and personal, however expanded that realm may be by processes of theorization. A certain

ahistoricism and an, at most, distanced political consciousness colors such accounts, moreover, such that their authors, like Rubin, have generally overlooked Bourgeois' identity as a politico: as a woman who organized an exhibition in New York commemorating the French resistance during the second World War; who was a target of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee; who was among the earliest agitators on behalf of women artists; who made work that alluded to the experience of marching against the Vietnam War; and who helped summon support for "The Judson Three," artists who were charged with desecrating the American flag during that era, for instance.[29] For that matter, prominently featured in Rubin's 1969 essay on Bourgeois was her 1968 bronze Molotov Cocktail (10.3x20x14 cm.) (fig. 4), intriguingly identified in small print as belonging to Rubin himself. Calling it "an egg, a head, a grenade," where "energies for great potential growth seem squeezed into its rough shell, a 'pregnancy' enhanced by the impression of great weight and density in the small mass," Rubin's account privileged images of generativity in a way that seemingly betrayed his awareness of Bourgeois' gender, while diminishing the bomb-like aspect of the sculpture, and evading its timeliness, underscored by its title.[30]

Rubin was not wrong to say that Molotov Cocktail looked a bit like a head--a bit like a Brancusi head, for that matter, but one roughed up and split open. Intimate and benignant, lyrical and pleasing as Brancusi's work tended to be, it performed certain kinds of daring, tacitly political jobs in its time: so I have argued elsewhere.[31] The political valences of Bourgeois' project deserve equally to be explored. To Nixon, the relevant territory for Fillette was, above all, that of the psycho-sexual. To Rosalind Krauss, the "'scandal'" of Fillette could be "more firmly placed within the territory of the sculptural and less within the world of the social."[32] But Fillette was a true creature of the incendiary year of '68. And with the outlandish work that she began doing in the mid 1960s—"sculptures [that] seemed to have the capacity to quiver and ooze," as Daniel Robbins put it then, while "exert[ing] much the same fascination as an aching injury"[33]--work that purposely dispatched or savaged her own standing as a respectable middle-aged sculptor (not to mention as a cultivated French matron and faculty wife), Bourgeois proclaimed her sense of elective affinity to a younger generation which, one way and another, had revolution on its mind (a generation that, in the U.S., had coined the adage not to trust anyone over the age of thirty). It followed that she thereby found for herself a new cohort, of sorts, among such equally independent or "eccentric" upstarts as Bruce Nauman and Eva Hesse.[34] "You cannot always sit quietly," Bourgeois would declare; "Sometimes it is necessary to make a confrontation...and I like that."[35] Still making for unnerving encounters thirty-five years later, Fillette is a loaded case in point.

Anna C. Chave
Professor of Art History
Queens College and the Graduate Center
City University of New York

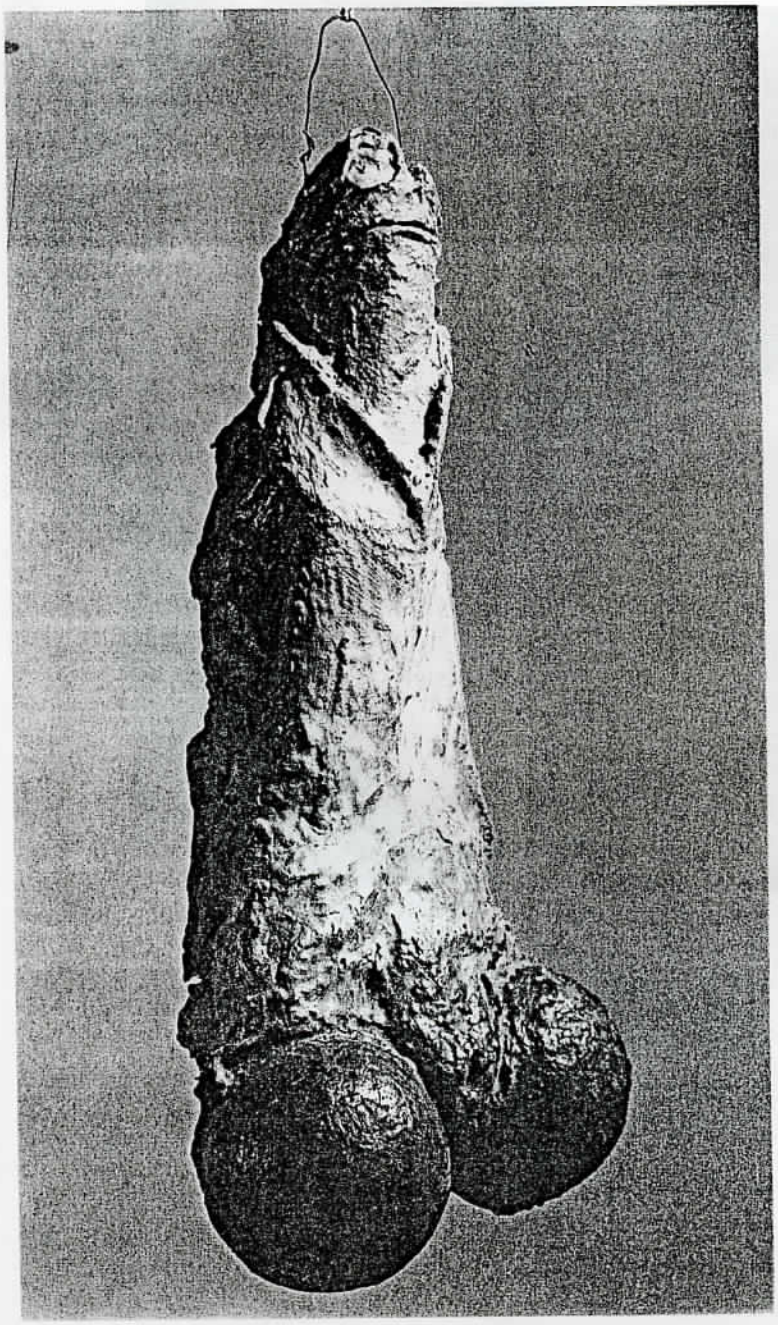
---

[1] Statement first published in 1992, rpt. in Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997, ed.

Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Cambridge, Ma.: M.I.T Press, 1998, p. 230.
[2] Statement of 1990, in ibid., p. 191.
[3] Statement first published in 1992, rpt. in ibid., p. 230.
[4] Statement of 1981, in ibid., p. 136.
[5] Statement first published in 1988, rpt. in ibid., pp. 157-58.
[6] Statement of 1996, in ibid., p. 355.
[7] See Anna C. Chave, Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993, ch. 3 ("Princess X/Prince's Sex: Repositioning Gender"), and passim.
[8] See Chave, Brancusi, pp. 93-97.
[9] See Mignon Nixon, "Posing the Phallus," October 92 (Spring 2000). Suggests Nixon: For the MoMA to have published the picture in tact "would have been to implicate the museum in a joke on itself: on its exclusion of female artists; on its phallocentric history of twentieth-century art; and on its account of modernism as preeminently a history of abstraction (read: sublimation)...," ibid.. (The Mapplethorpe photograph is reproduced in Bourgeois: Writings and Interviews, p. 199.)
[10] Statement first published in 1994, rpt. in Bourgeois: Writings and Interviews, p. 266. Regarding Brancusi's pioneering and influential experimentation with the concept and structure of the base, see Chave, Brancusi, chs. 5, 6.
[11] Lawrence Alloway, "Art," The Nation 214 (27 March 1972), p. 414.
[12] See Deborah Wye, Louise Bourgeois, exhibition catalogue, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992, p. 108.
[13] "Now I admit the imagery. I am not embarrassed about it," Bourgeois continued, cited in Lucy Lippard, "Louise Bourgeois: From the Inside Out," Artforum 13, no. 7 (March 1975), p. 31.
[14] Alloway, "Art," p. 414.
[15] Statement rpt. in Bourgeois: Writings and Interviews, p. 101.
[16] Statement of 1993, in ibid., pp. 202-04; see also statement of 1990, in ibid., pp. 198-200.
[17] Statement of ca. 1969, in ibid., pp. 84-86. Bourgeois had sounded the same note in a 1968 letter to Albert Elsen, in ibid., p. 80.
[18] William S. Rubin, "Some Reflections Prompted by the Recent Work of Louise Bourgeois," Art International 13, no. 4 (20 April 1969), pp. 19-20.
[19] Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, French Revolution 1968, London: William Heinemann, 1968, pp. 28-30.
[20] Ibid., pp. 33, 102-03.
[21] René Viénet, Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68, 1968; rpt. 1992 Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, and Rebel Press, London, pp. 52, 37, 35-36, 66-67. "Make love, not war," was the U.S. counterpart to such sayings.
[22] Seale and McConville, French Revolution 1968, p. 134.
[23] Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins, 1968/Marching in the Streets, New York: The Free Press, 1998, p. 102.
[24] Statement first published in 1979, rpt. in Bourgeois: Writings and Interviews, p. 112.

[25] Rubin, "Some Reflections," p. 18.
[26] Bourgeois: Writings and Interviews, p. 1 ("All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood"), and passim. See also Jerry Gorovoy et al., Louise Bourgeois: Blue Days and Pink Days, exhibition catalogue, Milan: Fondazione Prada, 1997, which is rife with family photos and other mememento.
[27] Wye, Bourgeois, p. 33.
[28] Mignon Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," October 71 (Winter 1995), p. 85. Nixon adds: "This is not a Kleinian fantasy per se, but rather a fantasy of turning psychoanalysis against itself," ibid..
[29] Wye, Bourgeois, pp. 106, 108; Lippard, "Bourgeois," pp. 29-30; Bourgeois: Writings and Interviews, p. 97.
[30] Rubin, "Some Reflections," p. 17.
[31] Chave, Brancusi, passim.
[32] Rosalind Krauss, "Portrait of the Artist as Fillette," in Louise Bourgeois, ed. Manuel J. Borja-Villel, exhibition catalogue, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1990, p. 234. (This essay also treats Fillette in psychoanalytic terms.)
[33] Daniel Robbins, "Sculpture by Louise Bourgeois," Art International 7, no. 8 (20 October 1964), p. 29.
[34] Lucy Lippard, who was a graduate student of Bourgeois' husband Robert Goldwater at N.Y.U.'s Institute of Fine Arts, included Bourgeois alongside Hesse, Nauman, and others in her important "Eccentric Abstraction" show of 1966 at the Fischbach Gallery in New York.
[35] Paul Gardner, Louise Bourgeois, New York: Universe, 1994, p. 88.

fig. 1



*61 Fillette, 1968*

fig. 2

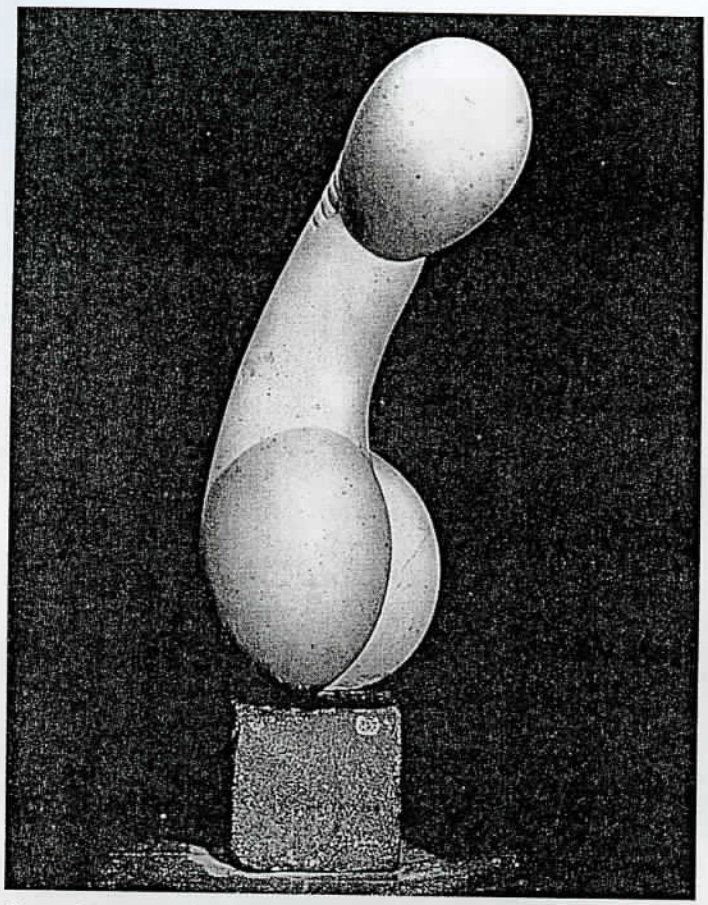


Fig. 2. *Princess X*, 1915–16 (Ph 410)

fig. 3

3. Louise Bourgeois avec sa sculpture *Fillette* sous le bras, photographie prise par Robert Mapplethorpe en 1982 (La photo est reproduite dans *Louise Bourgeois : Writings and Interviews*. Ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac et Hans-Ulrich Obrist. Cambridge. Ma. : M.I.T. Press. 1998. p. 199).

Fig. 4

*62 Molotov Cocktail, 1968*