

Louise Bourgeois's *I Do, I Undo, I Redo*

January, 2019 | Shahidha Bari

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2000

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BY SHAHIDHA BARI

In May 2000, I turned 20 years old and Tate Modern opened to the public on London's South Bank. I was in the first year of an English degree at Cambridge and was part of that febrile generation of young people who had jubilantly cheered New Labour into power, survived the 'millennium bug' and now peered fearlessly into the brave new world of the noughties. We were the Cool Britannia brigade (although we would have been indignant at this label): post-Spice Girls, pre-9/11, kicking around, waiting for the internet to take off.

The transformation of Giles Gilbert Scott's steel-framed, brick-clad Bankside Power Station into a world-class modern art gallery had taken five years and cost GB£134 million. But, even beyond the scale of the project, the opening of Tate Modern seemed to confirm our conviction that we were at the cultural centre of the world and entering into a new millennium that pulsed with promise. A band of us decided to abandon our morning lectures and hopped onto the London train, determined to bear witness in even the smallest way. We didn't know a great deal about art – although we were keen on Tracey Emin who had drunkenly staggered off a late-night arts programme a few years earlier – and certainly not a thing about Louise Bourgeois. But, elbowing our way to the front of the balcony overlooking the Turbine Hall, we knew we were impressed.

Over the subsequent 18 years of visiting the Turbine Hall, I'm not sure that any installation since has ever come close to the swooning sensation of seeing Bourgeois's work for the first time: the sense of that vast, echoing, industrial space and the supreme confidence of her vision realized in it, beautiful and unbending. *I Do, I Undo, I Redo* had been commissioned especially for the Turbine Hall, its staggering proportions (155 x 35 m), an attempt at filling that enormous vacuum.

If you were fortunate enough to visit it in the summer of 2000, you'll remember the three steel towers, nine metres high each, and how they seemed to jab into the sky. The rusted spiral staircases coiled around the central columns of *I Do* and *I Redo*, holding up platforms encircled by a cluster of mirrors – a structure inverted for *I Undo*, positioned between them, with its staircase concealed inside a steel pillar. In each tower, Bourgeois had placed a bell jar containing sculpted figures of a mother and child. We queued for almost two hours, eventually clambering up the rickety stairs in a strange silence, as though it were an act of pilgrimage.

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On the train home, we puzzled over the piece, unsure of what it all meant, but charged with a sense of purpose, a palpable power, as though the work had emanated something mysterious, imparting it upon us like a benediction. Looking back now, I don't think it's possible to overestimate quite how profound an experience it was to be a gang of 20-year-old women watching a national institution open with the work of a female artist at the heart of it, bold and unapologetic.

Over the years, I've watched a stream of brilliant women artists occupy the Turbine Hall and the exhibition galleries, their names – Anni Albers, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Frida Kahlo, Yayoi Kusama, Agnes Martin, Rachel Whiteread – illuminated across the Tate Modern's unmistakable rooftop lightbox, gleaming like a moonbeam over the river. And, every time, my heart races that little bit faster, my step quickens over the wobbly bridge, eager to take it in all over again ●

SHAHIDHA BARI is an academic and broadcaster, based in London, UK. She teaches visual culture at Queen Mary University of London and is a Fellow of European Philosophy at the London School of Economics. She presents Free Thinking on BBC Radio 3 and Front Row on BBC Radio 4. Her book *Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes* will be published by Jonathan Cape in June.

2000

Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*

BY MAGALI ARRIOLA

What book could conceptually link the giant statue of Vladimir Lenin atop Boris Iofan's 1933 proposal for the Palace of the Soviets – a never-built administrative centre near the Kremlin – to the image of King Kong clinging to the spire of the Empire State Building? Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* offers one explanation for how we overcome the holdover binaries of the cold war. Her work challenges the way the history of the 20th century has been shaped in our cultural imaginaries by reassessing the dream of mass utopia with an analysis of collective political desire. Weaving pictures with history and theory, Buck-Morss approaches images and text from a *materialist* perspective, linking a series of key words and concepts in an operation that, for me, deeply resonated with curatorial practice. Her montage-like methodology not only eliminated the hierarchical relationship between figures and words, but also disciplinary classification in order to produce a liberating reading experience in which affect as much as reason were mobilized. Art, film and mass media serve as the inspiration for her book rather than as its illustrations, allowing her to reveal new creative perspectives for exhibition making ●

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Louise Bourgeois,
I Do, I Undo and I Redo,
2000, installation view
at Tate Modern, London.
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