

Hans Bellmer and The Games of the Doll.

In 1934 Hans Bellmer together with his brother Fritz constructed their first doll. This was followed by the publication of *“Die Puppe”* a pocket-sized book of ten photographs of the doll in various states of assemblage and in a variety of settings with an introductory text written by Hans called *“Memories of a Doll Theme”*.

There was to be only one other collaboration with Fritz in which they planned to run a cine- film of the doll’s desires within her hollow body. It would have been regulated by pressing her nipple but the operation proved to be too complicated and only exists as a blueprint. However the theme of manipulation continued to underlie all Bellmer’s work .

Not primarily concerned with the fabrication of dolls, Bellmer was interested in the images he could make by positioning and distorting of the doll’s body. The first series of photographs are mainly concerned with the inner workings of the doll and her construction. In one photograph she is ready to be assembled like a tool kit (1934). Often juxtaposed with flowers and bed linen, the doll’s dismembered body sometimes over spills with orbs and eyeballs. There is only one photograph in this series that has a facial expression (1934). Here we see the doll leaning or cowering against a wall, supported on legs that are stripped back to their armatures. Although armless she has a full head of hair and wears a girl’s vest. Half coquette and half victim the most striking features are the eyes that peer out of the papier-macheed head. She surprises us and asks *‘What do you want?’*

A year later Bellmer transformed the doll into a second one, this time with a central movable ball-joint connecting the body parts. The series of photographs that followed was called *“Les Jeux de la Poupee”* (1935-49). Now the often headless doll is either reduced to a set of stumps or has too many limbs. In one of the most disturbing images the fragmented doll has tumbled downstairs. In another, Bellmer has removed the doll’s upper body and used a ball-joint to hinge two pairs of legs so that the doll is in effect turning on

her own genitals (1938). This particular configuration of the doll is destined to spring about in a ghastly and uncanny dance. In another game, the artist himself is caught playing hide and-seek behind a tree, forcing the viewer into a voyeuristic position.

Desire is a problem for Bellmer and the doll is an arena in which he tries to solve it. His two-fold solution is to reposition the female body so that it is unable to experience pleasure and to dismantle it so that he can learn its secret. One of the ways he does this is by replacing the missing limbs with mismatching objects and, calling it "*an anagram of the body*" (1938) he tries to deconstruct the body and its representations. "*The female body*" says Bellmer "*is like an endless sentence that invites us to rearrange it, so that its real meaning becomes clear through a series of endless anagrams*"(Webb 1985,177). His intention was to find a way to "*remove the wall separating the woman from her image*"(1957). A year after he made this statement in 1958 he took photographs of Unica Zurn, his partner, whose naked body he had bound with twine (1958, Plate 3). These images suggest that he was unsuccessful in his attempts to remove the wall. When it was printed in *Le Minotaure* it was cruelly titled "*Keep in a cool place.*"

The disruption of body parts has an important function for Bellmer. He is fascinated by the "*bubbles*" of flesh that are created and the inability of the mind to understand what it sees. For Bellmer "*the imagination derives exclusively from bodily experiences*" and language is hardly sufficient to describe "*the interoceptive images of the body*" (1938). It is the places where the viscera intercept with desired excitation that he is interested in unveiling. These could be any point of focus where desire is submitted to by an internal impulse leaving the rest of the body to disappear or be displaced. By using a process of addition and subtraction and by photographing his dolls in different positions and settings Bellmer provides a frame in which physical and sexual boundaries can be explored. In the early drawings that were concurrent with the first two dolls he drew girls whose body perimeters are made of brick as if he were trying to contain their overflowing sexuality. In *Rose Ouverte la Nuit* (1935) it is Bellmer's curiosity that we see here as he depicts a little girl

peering into her flayed torso at her internal organs. She emanates a musical joy as the notes literally spill off the page, unaware of her sexual power. In other drawings the skin has completely disappeared to reveal piles of soft muscle tissue that dissolve into the landscape. There are no boundaries as the body spills out of itself and bleeds off the page. In his drawing, *Pays-Sage* (1942) there is a homogeneous field of female gaze where vaginal folds spring out of heads and folds of soft flesh permeate the landscape. The female in the foreground turns to regard a figure in the middle distance that seems to be the despairing artist himself, enveloped in a lugubrious treacle of female flesh. He is desolate and must suffer the gaze of her all-seeing and devouring female eye.

One of Hans Bellmer's early sculptures was '*The Machine-Gunneress in a State of Grace*' (1937) She is sometimes ecstatic and sometimes at rest but always the phallic woman, both seductive and predatory. Hinged on a single ball-joint and pinned to her plinth she possesses the gun/phallus. More automaton than doll she looks like a praying mantis, the totem of the Surrealists. The praying mantis has three curious qualities, firstly its ability to play dead, secondly its ability to pretend to be alive when it is dead and thirdly it must be remembered that the female devours her mate during or after copulation. All reminiscent of Bellmer's own games.

For Bellmer the girl's body is a continuous contour of erotogenous zone that can be experienced in multifarious ways. It can trigger off memories through touch and the entire surface can be eroticised but it is the joint that connects the inner with the outer and becomes the focus of his investigations. In his "*Notes on the Subject of the Ball-joint*"(1938) he places the ball-joint at the apex of movement. By subtracting and adding to the body Bellmer disrupts our preconceptions. The ball-shaped joint is ubiquitous and can be found in knees or fingers. He suggests that a little girl might be obliged to concentrate all her attention on her armpit in order to divert her consciousness from the forbidden genitals. Other body parts evoke each other in an endless performance of an erotic dance.

In a small sculpture entitled “*Ball-joint*” (1936) two arms become two legs and an eye peeps out of the vulva like armpit. Bellmer calls this the *Brennpunkt* (burning point) the locus where the exterior meets the interior. It is here that he fantasises about turning a body inside out rather like a glove so that exposure is total. This is not the first time that Bellmer has suggested turning the woman inside out but here we see what might be a combination of her inner and outer bodies because they obviously mirror one another.

When Bellmer positions himself inside Unica Zurn’s body in “Double Cephalopod” (1955) his aged face glowers out of her uterine sac as the limbless Zurn regards him impassively. There are various possible interpretations. Either that he is trying to experience the feminine as before, returning to a pre-Oedipal state where there is no sexual difference, or else he has entered his wife’s body in order to manipulate her. Manipulation is taken to its limit in his photos of the trussed Unica. Sue Taylor has suggested that these images represent Bellmer’s desire to restrain the mother or to return to pre-Oedipal symbiosis (2000,186).

The participants in Bellmer’s games are usually stationary. It is always unclear whether we are witnessing the aftermath of a sexual assault or an impending beating. What is so troubling about dolls is their resemblance to humans coupled with their strangeness. Their familiarity suddenly becomes unfamiliar and our own mortality is called into question. The poet Rilke, a friend of the doll maker Lotte Pritzel who influenced Bellmer wrote: “*Inside the doll is empty and she inflicts a tremendous silence*” (1913). Bellmer’s dolls are not only silent but they often have no facial expression. The silence is unfathomable and frames desire. The doll is a perfect vehicle for Bellmer to explore his fantasies as she is infinitely malleable. In the sinister playground of *Les Jeux de la Poupee* he can investigate the extremes of his desire and continuously replay the kindling of it. The suggestive undertones of menace and violence discomfort the viewer who either becomes an impotent voyeur or identifies with the bruised and hurt creature. Hal Foster calls these dolls sites of desire rather than subjects (2001) and it is I think, the reduction of the female to a

powerless object that is so disturbing. In *Pay-Sage* (1942) Bellmer seems to be trying to appropriate or redirect female jouissance towards himself but when faced with it he is overwhelmed. With the use of the Ball-joint he discovers new sites for it which in *Les Jeux de la Poupee* he enviously tries to destroy or maim. In her restriction te life force is squeezed into her crevices as she defiantly refuses to die. This is an End game that has no victors, its perpetuation being crucial to desire. The doll is indestructible and desire is never satisfied. In answer to “*What do you want?*” Bellmer can only answer “*More*” .

Miranda Argyle 2004

Bibliography

- Bellmer H (1936) *La Poupee*. Tr. Valencay R. GLM, Paris
- (1938) *Notes on a Ball-joint*. The Anatomy of Anxiety. Sue Taylor
2000. M I T. Pg212,216
- (1949) *Les Jeux de la Poupee*. Texte par Eluard P. Editions Premiere,
Paris.
- (1957) *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'anatomie de
l'image*. Terrain Vague,Paris.
- Caillois R. (1934) *La Mante Religieuse*. Minotaure, no 5. Pg 23-26
- Fink B. (1995) The Lacanian Subject. Princeton Univ. Press. N.J. Chap.8
- Foster H. (2001) *Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography*. Desire Unbound
Catalogue. Tate publishing
- Freud S. (1905) Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality. Hogarth
Press London. (1962) Pg 50
- (1915) Totem and Taboo Pg90.SE13

(1919) A Child is Being Beaten. (A Contribution to a study of the Origins
of sexual Perversions.) PFL 10 Pg159

Fuller P. (1980) Art and Psychoanalysis. Biddles Ltd.Surrey. England. Pg 125

Jouffroy A (1954) Bellmer. William & Norma Copley Foundation.Lund
Humphries. London

Lacan J.

(1973) The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis. *Tr.* Alan
Sheridan. (1977) Hogarth Press. London.

(1972) Encore. SeminarXX. *from* On Feminine Sexuality,The
Limits of Love and Knowledge. (1975) *Tr.* Bruce Fink .Norton and Co. NY.
Pg73-77

Lichtenstein T. (2001) Behind Closed Doors. University of California Press. U.S.

Rilke RM. (1913) The Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel.(1994) Idris Parry NY.Pg 29

Taylor S. (2000) Hans Bellmer. The Anatomy of Desire. MIT Press

Webb P.& Short R. (1985) Hans Bellmer. Quartet Books.New York. Pg177

Plates

Bellmer H.

Plate 1 (1934a) *The Doll*. Black and white photograph. 16x16 cms. Ubu Gallery. N.Y.

Plate 2 (1934b) *The Doll* black and white photograph. 16x16 cms. Isidore Ducasse
N.Y

Plate 3 (1958) *Unica*. Black and white photograph. Ubu Gallery New York. **Plate 4**
(1935) *Rose Ouverte la Nuit*. Graphite and gouache on paper
30x24cm. Henri Parisot. Paris.

Plate 5 (1936) *Ball-joint*, assemblage and collage, 48x43 cms. Herbert Lust
Gallery. New York

Plate 6 (1938) Maquette for *Les Jeux de la Poupée*. hand-coloured gelatin silver
print 5.4x5.4 cm. Ubu Gallery. New York

Plate 7 (1937) *Machine Gunneress in a State of Grace*. Photo and
paint. 25'x25'. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.