

Emma's navel: Dorothea Tanning's narrative sculpture

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The universe, for him, was contracted to the silken compass of her petticoat.¹
(Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 1857)

Emma is an art historical heirloom, one of a number of soft sculptures made by the American artist and writer Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012) between 1969 and 1973 (Figure 5.1).² This one in particular has a well-known source text attached to it; *Madame Bovary: A Story of a Provincial Life* (1857) by Gustave Flaubert. The novel is most often interpreted as a parody portraying a petite-bourgeois woman and her series of entangled sexual affairs. In Tanning's critical essay of 1989, 'Some parallels in words and pictures', which may be said to function as a retrospective artist's statement, her soft sculpture *Emma* features as the sole illustration;³ an encapsulation of the text/image intersections which recur throughout her oeuvre. On the previous page Tanning ponders: 'what would Molly Bloom think of Emma Bovary? (My cloth sculpture of 1970, *Emma*)'.⁴ This imagined literary encounter between two heroines of modernist literature, James Joyce's Molly Bloom and Flaubert's Emma Bovary, highlights the importance of literary touchstones for Tanning, and suggests an intermedial preoccupation inherent to her entire practice as both artist and writer – a typical surrealist combination but a visual narrativity deliberately out-of-sync with mid-century developments in American abstraction, the context in which Tanning first emerged as an artist.⁵ In this regard, *Emma* could be said to function as a disruptive object within the modernist project, morphologically and thematically closer, I would suggest, to more playful neo-avant-garde, postminimalist practices and feminist aesthetics.

This essay poses a dialogue between literary and sculptural manifestations of Emma Bovary in order to expose Dorothea Tanning's position in the historical intersection of surrealism/modernism/women. To do this I appropriate the methodological focus of the cultural theorist Mieke Bal. Since the 1970s, Bal's commitment to Flaubert has remained a long-term preoccupation in her theoretical writing, and more recently in her work as a film-maker, *Madame B* (2013) with Michelle Williams Gamaker, which is the most pertinent for my



5.1 Dorothea Tanning, *Emma*, 1970. Fabric, wool and lace, 11.7 × 25.4 × 21.6 in. (29.7 × 64.5 × 54.8 cm); body: 11 × 22 × 12 in. (body: 27.9 × 55.9 × 30.5). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. © The Estate of Dorothea Tanning/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris, 2014.

purposes. Through applying a selection of Bal's analytical tools, this essay re-reads Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* through Tanning's sculpture *Emma*. By fixing this trinity (Bal/Tanning/Flaubert) at the intermedial intersection of theory/sculpture/literature, and, by extension, feminism/surrealism/modernism, I use *Emma* to tug at the dialogical seams of such medial knots and historical constellations, ultimately aiming to reposition 'Tanning' in a more theoretical and literary context. In stressing and problematising the theoretical dimension of Tanning's practice, I also want to disentangle a series of historical and morphological equivalences, namely her (dis)association with feminist and modernist aesthetics. My remit is primarily historiographical; Tanning's absence from most major accounts of historical modernism is becoming ever more conspicuous. Here stitching acts as a mode of 'rewriting' as I reassemble *Emma* between modernist and surrealist threads in order to grapple with the feminist question that Tanning herself found so troubling.⁶ In doing so, I shift the conversation from the limiting 'woman artist' towards a more nuanced, eccentric model of 'somaticized' textuality.⁷ In sum, I aim to produce a re-reading of 'Tanning' through the metaphor of *Emma*'s navel, which, according to Bal, has a disruptive agenda: 'the little detail that doesn't fit the "official" interpretation.'⁸ I begin with an introduction to the sculpture and its rationale, demystifying its construction, before moving on to explore Bal's methodological framework, *Emma*'s morphological connections with postminimalist practices, and finally placing Tanning and Flaubert into a closer dialogue.

Emma: umbilical intermediality

The origin of the cloth sculptures is usually attributed to Tanning's attendance at an avant-garde concert of Karlheinz Stockhausen's experimental electronica *Hymnen* (1966–67; 1969) which inspired her to embark on this new medium.⁹ Many have queried the unlikely connection between her soft sculptural forms and his 'concrete' aural tones.¹⁰ Here I am similarly querying her strange quotation of Flaubert's protagonist. However, Tanning's surrealist practice had demonstrated that she was already adept at fusing art and literature into intermedial visual narratives. Moreover, music is an abstract art form known to promote wandering thought patterns. Indeed, we may be taking Tanning too literally when what was really at stake in Stockhausen was the experimental avant-garde. Likewise with Flaubert, it may be the essence of *Emma Bovary* that Tanning is trying to portray. In an interesting essay on the intersection between sculpture and music in Tanning's oeuvre, Victoria Carruthers describes *Emma* as follows: 'an anthropomorphic pink mound of fabric/flesh with seams and depressions reminiscent of a belly or buttocks. Decontextualized and fragmented, the enigmatic form depicts nothing and yet prompts the imagination towards a number of familiar suggestions.'¹¹

My essay continues this scholarly thread as I adopt this imaginative challenge. As an inherently narrative sculpture, *Emma* prompts a chain of verbs and ekphrastic language yet simultaneously eludes our grasp. She looms, haunts, or, to use Bal's loaded term, 'beckons' narrative.¹² *Emma* summons both the aesthetics of the cute and the grotesque. She serves as an enticing dessert platter (the 'sugar' of the text, as in the pure white sugar Emma sees while attending the ball at La Vaubyessard) but also a mysteriously veiled lump of flesh (poisoned by arsenic). She is altogether taxidermic; a dried bridal bouquet: 'in her chignon was a rose, trembling on its fragile stem, with artificial dewdrops at the tips of the leaves.'¹³

Viewed from another angle as a reclining nude, *Emma* flaunts a cheeky, buttock-like crevice with a pair of breast-like mounds pinched at her extremities. A curious arm, hook, or limb-like appendage, emanates from the other side. At her plump centre is the unmistakable indentation of a belly button (though it could represent all manner of bodily orifices) which, in my reading, provides a useful, 'topographical' coordinate for navigating our way around the rest of this sculptural carcass. As a daughter of the surrealist exquisite corpse, she cuts an intangible and unclassifiable figure; a torso or placenta-like apparition.¹⁴ In total, *Emma* is the ultimate 'bump', pregnant with meaning.

The sculpture-to-be makes one of her first appearances as a mass of purple and black crayoned markings on page 53 of Tanning's sketchbook *Projets de 1960-1970* (1969) (Figure 5.2). It details a concentric pinched form; all navel, belly, and skirt. Fleishy figurative forms had already made eloquent, painterly emergences on many of Tanning's canvases from the mid-1960s onwards, for example *Mêmes les jeunes filles* (*Even the Young Girls*) (1966). The recurrent motif of the navel as the focal point on such figures becomes more prominent later in her post-sculptural paintings such as *Web of Dreams* (1973-93), *Portrait de famille* (*Family Portrait*) (1977), and especially *Murmurs* (1976) (Figure 5.3), where the navel of the central figure is shown bare and bathed in moonlight like another incarnation of *Emma* if turned 90 degrees on its side.¹⁵ A counterpoint is offered in her earlier surrealist self-portrait *Birthday* (1942), a loaded title in this context, where Tanning depicted her navel shrouded in an indigo drape. Amy Lyford has drawn convincing parallels between Tanning's fabric sculptures and her earlier fashion illustrations for Macy's, as well as more formal connections between *Emma* and the bodily forms beneath the wallpaper in the tiny surrealist canvas *Children's Games* (1942) in which one tear reveals a swollen belly while another more sadistically exposes a gigantic umbilical cord¹⁶ – a gesture and imagery which is continued in the torn collage fragments and abstract hint of tummy in *Emotion II* (1988). Carruthers likewise makes a link between Tanning's sculptures and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's gothic novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892).¹⁷



Dorothea Tanning, *Projets de 1960–1970*, 1969. © The Estate of Dorothea Tanning/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris, 2014.

5.2

The sources for Tanning's soft sculptures are twofold, both physical and intertextual. Curator Ann Temkin tells us that the external materials were purchased at the Marché Saint-Pierre, Paris, while the internal stuffing was procured from the local sheep in Seillans.¹⁸ Three-dimensional forms were then manipulated on a Singer sewing machine, as documented in a series of photographs taken by André Morain of Tanning's studio featuring the artist dwarfed by her larger version of *Pincushion to Serve as a Fetish* (1979) (Figure 5.4). Fabricated out of wool and an antique lace petticoat, *Emma* can be located at the heart of Tanning's wider body of soft sculptural work. *Emma*'s sister sculptures likewise utilise intertextuality, such as *Verbe* (1969–70), an inverted comma-like punctuation mark with a mouth which includes pieces of jigsaw representing Vermeer's *The Artist's Studio: The Allegory of Painting* (c.1665–66) as teeth, and *Don Juan's Breakfast* (1972), a playful allusion to the fictional libertine.

Bal reminds us that the length of the time it takes to engage with a novel is, on the whole, quite different from the time it takes to view a sculpture.¹⁹ However, the relative surfaces and textures of pages and cloth, as conveyers of information, have certain similarities. For Roland Barthes, 'etymologically the text is a tissue',²⁰ while Bal attributes the same revelation to Mikhail Bakhtin: 'any text is a patchwork of different strata'.²¹ Both media (fabric and novel) are thus easily punctured or torn in the very process of quoting or sampling. There



5.3 Dorothea Tanning, *Murmurs*, 1976. Oil on canvas 51.2 × 38.2 in. (130 × 97 cm). © The Estate of Dorothea Tanning/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris, 2014.



Dorothea Tanning in her studio with *Pincushion to Serve as a Fetish*, 1979. © The Estate of Dorothea Tanning/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris, 2014. Photo: André Morain.

5.4

are many choice quotations from *Madame Bovary* which Tanning may have been inspired to represent, for instance Emma's matter-of-fact pregnancy with Berthe: 'When they left Tostes in March, Madame Bovary was pregnant.'²²² I would argue that *Emma* embodies all of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in narrative microcosm as a synecdoche – a part standing for the whole. For example, it is striking how often the materiality of Emma Bovary's clothing is voyeuristically described, such as Flaubert's abject description of his protagonist's wedding dress: 'Emma's dress was too long and dragged on the ground slightly.'²²³ The fabric of Tanning's sculpture is reciprocally torn and antiqued. *Emma*, the cloth sculpture, presents something infantile like the petty bourgeoisie whom Flaubert parodies in his novel. As Peter Brooks points out:

Descriptions [of Emma Bovary] tend toward the metonymical, accumulating details of her body and especially of her dress and accessories. Emma tends to become a fetishized object, or rather, an object that is never seen whole because her accessory details become fetishes, arresting attention along the way... The

fragmentation of Emma's body into parts and accessories is...in a sense the very subject of [Flaubert's] novel: the inauthenticity of desire that has come to be called 'Bovarysme'.²⁴

Tanning's *Emma* is likewise an erotic object, climactic in its rite of passage. Flaubert's character is sexually frustrated and presents a breakdown of the fairy tale image which can only be found in literature: 'Emma wondered exactly what was meant in life by the words "bliss", "passion", "ecstasy", which had looked so beautiful in books.'²⁵ Tanning may have identified with this idealistic bibliophile; her sculpture repurposing the character's erotic fantasies, tinged with a knowing, Flaubertian parody. The sculptor both embodies the character and critiques her behaviour in a self-reflexive fashion.

In the transition from reading the novel to making the sculpture, it is worth remembering that, since Tanning did not learn fluent French until her early 30s, it is likely that she first encountered the novel *Madame Bovary* in its English translation while at work in Galesburg Public Library, Illinois. In her autobiographical text 'Souvenirs', she lists the novel among the favourites of her youth,²⁶ no doubt due to its sexual themes and controversial status within the modernist canon.²⁷ Writing on the transgressive aspects of reading practices for adolescent women, Anna Green highlights Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as a case in point: 'a young woman whose excessive attachment to fiction since girlhood leads to her adulterous downfall'.²⁸ Tanning's late allusion may also have been a subtle rebellion against the surrealists' broader dislike of the realist novel as a genre.

Now in the collection of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri,²⁹ *Emma* has regularly appeared in exhibitions of Tanning's work since its first outing at Galerie Le Point Cardinal in 1970, especially in her retrospectives of 1974 (Paris) and 1993 (Malmö and London). The sculpture has occasionally been exhibited under recognisably modernist conditions; sparsely displayed on a perspex plinth like a vitrine or petri dish; the curatorial effect, suggestive of something experimental, slippery and difficult to classify. More typical of surrealism's erotic objects, however, *Emma* tends to be mounted on antique furniture, emphasising the link to the 'Victoriana' of the character's historical period, and highlighting the concurrent emergence of fetishism narratives.³⁰ The effect is reminiscent of a dainty self-portrait by Claude Cahun (1932) where the photographer positioned her own body within a chest of drawers. *Emma* also offers a feminist emancipation and counter-narrative to Joseph Cornell's fairy tale box porcelain doll *Bebe Marie* (early 1940s) and Hans Bellmer's photographs of Unica Zürn's bound body *Tenir au frais* (*Store in a Cool Place*) (1958). Tanning's sculpture might also be recontextualised with reference to the 1960s' soft feminist aesthetics of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse,

and Yayoi Kusama discussed later. For the meantime, it is worth stressing that *Emma* acts as a dialogic seam and, conversely, a caesura between modernist aesthetics and appropriation art.

Mieke Bal's navel: a quotation without inverted commas

The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try and find the sources, the influences of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas.³¹

(Roland Barthes 'From Work to Text')

The relationship between Flaubert's novel and Tanning's sculpture (i.e. Tanning's quotation of Flaubert), requires some temporal and methodological consideration. Over a century separates these two cultural artefacts (novel and sculpture) but the two are thematically and intertextually conjoined; both were made in France, and both reincarnate the fictional spectre of Emma Bovary. Bal's anachronistic 'preposterous history' offers a useful way of readjusting the agencies at work in such a dialogue, as it interrogates the assumption that the secondary artwork merely illustrates the primary source text.³² Michael Baxandall similarly encapsulates this dynamic:

'Influence' is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient; it seems to reverse the active/passive relation... If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X. But in the consideration of good pictures and painters the second is always the more lively reality.³³

In this equation, Tanning is 'Y' and Flaubert is 'X' (a creative reversal of sex-determined chromosomes and the 'genetics' of influence),³⁴ and the sculpture *Emma* becomes an active participant; *Emma* is as authentic a character as Flaubert's Madame Bovary, if not more so. Aside from the so-called authority of historical context, there is a contemporaneity in our reading of such artworks, a presence which must be accounted for. For example, in Bal's logic, eighteenth-century Chardin 'read' *fin de siècle* Proust, while twentieth-century Bourgeois 'beckons' seventeenth-century Bernini.³⁵ Can we therefore speak of Flaubert reading Tanning? In other words, can we understand Flaubert's novel better through focus on Tanning's sculpture? Approached anachronistically, *Emma* helps 'explain' the novel in visual terms, and is thus an example of what Bal would term a 'theoretical object' or an 'art that thinks.'³⁶

At the crux of Bal's approach is the concept of the 'navel of the text'.³⁷ Her theoretical argument is worth quoting at length:

Derrida replaces the metaphor of the phallus as the ultimate meaning with that of the hymen as a sheet or canvas – on which meaning circulates without fixity [...]

Deconstructing this metaphor with the help of visual images read as texts, I propose to replace it with the navel – both a trace of the mother, and token of autonomy of the subject, male and female alike, a centre without meaning [...]

The navel, then, is a metaphor for an element, often a tiny detail, that hits the viewer, is processed by her or him [...]

By choosing a bodily metaphor, I also wish to demonstrate both my allegiance and my polemic opposition to much of psychoanalytic theory. Here the navel is the symbolisation of a body part, just as a phallus is, and it too is loaded with the connotations of gender. Yet these are radically different in status. The phallus refers to gender in terms of haves and have-nots, or 'to have it' versus 'to be it': The navel, in contrast, is fundamentally gender specific – the navel is the scar of dependence on the mother – but it is also democratic in that both men and women have it.³⁸

Bal's 'model in miniature'³⁹ for this statement is Rembrandt's painting *Danaë* (1636) (Figure 5.5), a reclining female nude nestled within a rich array of velvet drapes, tasselled cushions and other bedclothes. The composition revolves around the small aperture at the centre of the nude's slightly swollen belly – the key element of this visual narrative being her impregnation by Zeus. The 'navel' serves as a witty little metaphor, an 'alternative'⁴⁰ that displaces the meaning, as in the disavowal of the fetishism narrative, and simultaneously adjusts stereotypical gendered readings.

Tanning was similarly sceptical about the psychoanalytic sources for surrealism.⁴¹ Reviewing Bal's study *Reading 'Rembrandt'*, the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock notes that 'feminists will be fascinated with [Bal's] attempts to dephallicize our concepts of gender by using the metaphor of the navel: a bodily part, common to both sexes. The navel is a trace of the mother that marks all bodies.'⁴² Successive scholars have similarly commented on the use-value of Bal's theoretical navel. Benjamin Bennett-Carpenter writes: 'The navel is a curiosity and a mystery. It invites inquiry at a scarred site, a seal of surplus meaning, both past and future [...] I take feminism, effectively, to be that navel';⁴³ while Fred Botting uses the mark of 'the mother who pre-exists her child' as a metaphorical porthole to access both 'future present' and historical examples.⁴⁴

Like Rembrandt's *Danaë*, Tanning's *Emma* is similarly concentric, cushioned and draped, almost as if Tanning was visually 'quoting' *Danaë* in the



Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Danae*, 1636. Oil on canvas, 72.83 × 79.72 in. (185 × 202.5 cm), Holland. Inv. no. GE-723. Collection of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Image © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo: Vladimir Terebenin.

5.5

round – a sculptural interpretation being closer to a corporeal pregnant abdomen in scale and dimension. Tanning's own art historical interests were as active as her reading practice; primarily self-taught as an artist, she acquired her techniques from visiting artworks in museums and pouring over monochromatic reproductions in books, colouring them in with her imagination.⁴⁵

Bal's recent 'embodiment' of Flaubert's novel as a 'theoretical fiction'⁴⁶ has involved her collaborating on a film *Madame B* (2013), a useful touchstone when thinking about the novel in a different medium and era. As Bal's collaborator Gamaker points out: 'our quest [was] to incorporate the contemporary as a strategy of anachronism,' their quotation from other artworks justified as a 'loyalty' to the novel.⁴⁷ Moreover, for Bal and Gamaker, Flaubert was not only a proto-postmodernist but also a feminist (*Madame B* promotional material). One unique scene focusing on Emma Bovary's education involves the literary infusion of a Sol LeWitt exhibition of wall paintings *Pyramids* (2012–13) in the Marian Goodman Gallery with themes from

Gilman's novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* coming to the fore. Such analogies and engagement with the fraying ends of the modernist spectrum chimes with Tanning's Flaubertian project. Bal's own relationship with late modernist examples like the LeWitt is a complex one due to her emphasis on a narratology more comfortably accommodated by postmodern and 'contemporary' phenomena. Tanning and Bal thus 'speak' a common tongue of narrative and quotation.

While Bal has never, to my knowledge, discussed Tanning's work directly, she has written extensively on the sculptures of Tanning's almost exact contemporary Louise Bourgeois. In articles of 1999 and 2002, and a short book in 2001, Bal uses metaphors of threads, webs, and the spinning of yarns, to explore Bourgeois's use of narrative as a kind of theoretical 'glue' in the creation of her architectural *Cells*.⁴⁸ For Bal: 'Narrative is centrifugal; it entices you to spin off, develop strands that move away from the centre of attention, from the work of art, like so many silvery threads that run outward from the spider in her web.'⁴⁹ Bal's detailed methodological analysis of a single artwork, *Spider* (1997), as a 'theoretical object' inspires my focus on *Emma* here.⁵⁰



5.6 Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 2001. Fabric and steel, 11 × 15 × 26 in. (27.9 × 38.1 × 66 cm). © ADAGP, Paris/DACS, London, 2014.

Long lost cousins: morphological equivalences

At this point it seems necessary to reassert *Emma's* status alongside the post-minimalist historical narrative. Morphologically and materially, it is striking how Tanning's soft sculptural forms would at first appear to fit with the overarching aesthetic of the late 1960s period. The equivalences are almost fraternal. One might be promoted to compare the amorphous forms of Bourgeois's sculptures, for example *Lair* (1962) and *Amoeba* (1963–65), and Hesse's latex and papier mâché studio objects (1967–70)⁵¹ with Tanning's *Emma*. There is an important tactility to the surfaces of such sculptures – plush works like Tanning's *Cousins* (1970) and *Étreinte (Embrace)* (1969) almost daring the viewer to touch or caress them.

On a grander scale, one could also be forgiven for directly comparing the eccentric furniture of Kusama's *Accumulation* (1962) with Tanning's navel-studded, tweed sofa *Rainy Day Canapé* (1970).⁵² Many of these objects owe at least a small debt to surrealist precursors such as the found object and the ready-made at large, or more specific works like Marcel Duchamp's false breast *Prière de toucher (Please touch)* (1947) and erotic cast *Female Fig Leaf* (1950–51). It is often observed that there is a fertile and phallic bodily affect inherent to such objects, 'a separate anthropology'⁵³ or playful anthropomorphism at one remove from the pure, harder-edged variety of minimal aesthetics. Describing the appearance and materiality of 'postminimalism', Robert Pincus-Witten writes:

A disparate range of work came into being, resistant to the architectural and sculptural ambitions of Minimalism. These artists, in order to cut through Minimalism's solemn atmosphere, adopted as self-mocking stance... The limp, the pliable, the cheap were sought; the hard, the polished, the expensive became suspect. Unanticipated methods of seaming and joining were emphasized – sewing, lacing, grommeting.⁵⁴

While 'soft' sculptural aesthetics (and narrative art for that matter) are hardly the sole preserve of the 'feminine', it is noteworthy that many of postminimalism's key practitioners were female in an era which coincided with the rise of the women's liberation movement, and a more prominent visibility of female artists in avant-garde exhibitions and museum collections.⁵⁵ Interestingly, the language used to discuss and classify such 'formalist' practices on the cusp of late modernism is multifarious and neither definitive nor exclusively gendered: 'eccentric abstraction'; 'anti-forms'; 'specific objects'; belonging to some of the chief theorists of this milieu: Lucy Lippard; Robert Morris; and Donald Judd.⁵⁶ Whatever name one ascribes, Thierry de Duve notes that '[a] new "species" of art [had been] born.'⁵⁷ Again, Bal's notion of the 'navel' might be utilised to give a historical 'impression' or 'trace' of the complex gender politics conceived during this period.

Another important text, written after the fact, is Rosalind Krauss's 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' which charts the modernist 'rupture' of medium specificity into the more open terrain of postmodernism where 'practice is...defined in relation to...a set of cultural terms'.⁵⁸ While Tanning is not name-checked by Krauss, *Emma's* innate sense of narrative and unconventional materials surely thrives theoretically and historically within the 'field' explored. Indeed, Tanning's sculptures are absent from most accounts of postminimalism, which is not altogether an oversight. The fact is Tanning simply was not part of the 1960s American art scene because she was geographically remote at that time in the south of France. However, it is unlikely that she was entirely cut off from such artistic developments abroad. James Meyer charts the reception of minimalism in France in the late 1960s through the touring show *L'Art du Réel: USA 1948–1968* at the Grand Palais under the auspices of Centre National d'Art Contemporaine (CNAC) in Paris.⁵⁹ While one can only speculate that Tanning, the American ex-patriot, would have visited this exhibition, she did maintain a property in Paris during this time, and certainly had her own retrospective at the same venue a few years later in 1974.

Meyer also highlights the important role of glossy fashion magazines in the dissemination of the minimalist 'look'.⁶⁰ Although at various moments in her life Tanning may claim to have deliberately severed ties with the art world preferring to work in her own little 'bubble',⁶¹ the increasing availability of visual culture in the late 1960s no doubt meant that the influence of American ideas would have been inescapable, even for the rural French avant-garde. Another potential link is her American pen-pal Cornell's unlikely relationship with Kusama who was making soft serial forms and environments in the early 1960s.

Historiographically speaking, it is also useful to rethink the curated dialogues. For example, in an innovative curatorial twist, the 'soft' sculptures of both Tanning and Bourgeois were used to conclude the *Desire Unbound* exhibition at Tate Modern in 2001, placing them in a belated visual and thematic dialogue. In the context of this exhibition, *Emma* was listed as an 'erotic object' alongside Bourgeois's *Fillette* (1968).⁶² As a concluding visual chapter, sculptural objects by two female artists, who were both in their 90s at the time of the exhibition, spoke volumes on the notion of the 'surrealist legacy'. Their morphology and materiality redressed the notion of a pure modernism impregnated by surrealist narrativity and infiltrated by bodily analogies; abstract remnants reinhabited by representational content. This was arguably the result of a late feminist investment in the surrealist movement, and modernism at large, politicising narrative sculpture as a feminist articulation.

Finale: a caesarean in cloth

Madame Bovary, c'est moi!⁶³

(Gustave Flaubert, n.d.)

Returning to the question of feminist aesthetics and the source text itself, one might find it surprising that Flaubert could have been making a feminist statement with his novel *Madame Bovary*, for as Brooks claims: 'Emma Bovary has no body – of her own.'⁶⁴ In leaving some threads necessarily loose and tangled in order to prompt further interpretations, I would like to conclude with the bold statement that Tanning is *Emma* or rather that 'Dorothea Tanning' is Emma Bovary.⁶⁵ I am suggesting that *Madame Bovary*, the novel, serves as the literary equivalent of *Emma*, the sculpture. The latter is not so much an illustration but rather an *embodiment* of the character. Text and image nourish one another as mutually reinforcing media. By reversing the traditional X/Y model of source and influence, *Emma* not only remakes 'Tanning' but also, by implication, 'Flaubert'. In my reading, *Emma* becomes a 'historiographic' instrument, a theoretical object that allows us to better understand 'Mieke Bal', particularly her innate feminist politics and useful theories on anachronism, so inherent to the surrealist project and modernist dilemma.

Questions of selfhood persist in the scholarship on Tanning, at times unproductively. I would argue that Tanning's embodiment of Emma Bovary offers a displaced envisioning of biographical interpretation. Imitating Madame Bovary's favourite pastimes, Tanning both sewed and read in order to make *Emma*; needlework and reading being conventional, if clichéd, historical hallmarks of femininity. Like Flaubert, Tanning offers Emma as a parody of herself. Here Tanning's focalisation unravels visions of nineteenth-century femininity, while subtly commenting on twentieth-century feminism at one remove. A final concept from Bal can serve us well here: *Emma* as 'autotopography' – a shift from the authorial intention of the artist's autobiography towards the more bodily sculptural mark as the 'site' of the fictive self, capable of accommodating the 'viewer's dreams.'⁶⁶

Throughout this essay I use a series of nested birthing metaphors: navel, umbilicus, womb, fraternity, caesarean, and placenta. *Emma* herself is all *mise en abyme*; all navel as historical trace; a narrative crux of Tanning's entire oeuvre. In investigating this sculpture, we cut into a *series* of subjective histories, including our own, and throw emphasis on to an artist/writer who worked through an intergenerational cultural history, flirted with surrealism, negotiated the material implications of late modernism, and skirted the feminist pursuit in order to make a compelling statement about the embodiment of reading. In sum, *Emma* is an insider who demonstrates the capacity to unpick

historical accounts, fudge her own pinning, and, as with all Tanning's works, recurrently give birth to new readings.

Notes

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- 1 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: A Story of a Provincial Life* (1857), trans. by A. Russell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 47.
- 2 These are the dates of the initial batch of Tanning's soft sculptural activity. A larger version of *Pincushion to Serve as a Fetish* was made in 1979, and *Primitive Seating* appeared in 1982. Others were (re)upholstered at various points.
- 3 Dorothea Tanning, 'Some parallels in words and pictures', in Mark Rudman (ed.), *Pequod: A Journal of Contemporary Literature and Literary Criticism*, 28–30 (1989), 170.
- 4 Tanning, 'Some parallels in words and pictures', 169.
- 5 Tanning, 'Some parallels in words and pictures', 167.
- 6 Dorothea Tanning 'Statement', in Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg (eds), *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 228.
- 7 Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), xii; Anna Kérchy, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing From a Corporeographic Point of View* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 295.
- 8 Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 24. Drawing on Bal, Fred Botting makes a similar point about the navel as being 'in excess of sensible classification', *Sex Machines and Navels: Fiction, Fantasy and History in the Future Present* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 2.
- 9 Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (London and New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001), 281.
- 10 I owe this observation to Ilene Susan Fort during a roundtable discussion at Gallery Wendi Norris (January 2013).
- 11 Victoria Carruthers, 'Between sound and silence: John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen and the sculptures of Dorothea Tanning', in Patricia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas (eds), *Art History and the Senses: 1830 to the Present* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 105.
- 12 Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 87. For more about the 'haunted' nature of Tanning's soft sculptures, see Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 144.
- 13 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 62–3.
- 14 Grateful thanks to John Sears for suggesting theoretical potential of the placenta.

- 15 As Kara Q. Smith has noted, abdomens abound in Tanning's work (2013). Though Tanning chose not to have children for financial and practical reasons, she did complete several canvases on the theme of *Maternity* (1946–47; 1976; 1980). Grateful thanks to Victoria Carruthers for the suggestion that Tanning may have been 'embodying' pregnancy through the imagination.
- 16 Amy Lyford, 'Refashioning surrealism: The early art of Dorothea Tanning', in *Beyond the Esplanade: Paintings, Drawings and Prints 1940 to 1965*, exhibition catalogue (San Francisco: Frey Norris, 2009), 8 and 12.
- 17 Carruthers, 'Between sound and silence', 114.
- 18 Ann Temkin, 'Dorothea Tanning', *Grand Street*, 72 (Autumn 2003), 137.
- 19 Mieke Bal, 'Narrative inside out: Louise Bourgeois' *Spider* as theoretical object', *Oxford Art Journal*, 22:2 (1999), 110.
- 20 Roland Barthes, 'From work to text', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. S. Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 159.
- 21 Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd edn (London and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 66 and 64.
- 22 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 81.
- 23 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 40.
- 24 Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 91–2.
- 25 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 47.
- 26 Dorothea Tanning, 'Souvenirs', in Sune Nordgren (ed.), *Dorothea Tanning*, exhibition catalogue (Stockholm: Malmö Konsthall, 1993), 35. Later Tanning would make a collage entitled *L'Education sentimentale* (*Sentimental Education*) (1988) after Flaubert's novel of the same title (1869).
- 27 Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 303.
- 28 Anna Green, *French Paintings of Childhood and Adolescence, 1848–1886* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 224.
- 29 Grateful thanks to The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art curator Sarah Biggerstaff for her correspondence and advice. See also Jan Storr Schall, 'Dorothea Tanning', *Sparks! The William T. Kemper Collecting Initiative*, exhibition catalogue (Missouri: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2008), 118–19.
- 30 Gen Doy, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 59–62.
- 31 Barthes, 'From work to text', 160.
- 32 Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider*, 32.
- 33 Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 58–9.
- 34 Thanks to Patricia Allmer for this idea.
- 35 Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, trans. A.-L. Milne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 31; Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider*, 87.
- 36 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 9–10; Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider*, 5.

- 37 Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.
- 38 Bal, *Reading Rembrandt*, 19–23.
- 39 Bal, *Reading Rembrandt*, 19.
- 40 Bal, *Reading Rembrandt*, 21.
- 41 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 336; John Gruen, ‘Dorothea Tanning’, in *The Artist Observed: Twenty-Eight Interviews with Contemporary Artists* (Chicago: Capella Books, 1991), 189.
- 42 Griselda Pollock, ‘Review: Reading “Rembrandt”’, *The Art Bulletin* 75:3 (September 1993), 531.
- 43 Benjamin Bennett-Carpenter, ‘Quoting Mieke Bal’s navel: Contemporary theory, preposterous religion’, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 4:1 (2002), n.p.
- 44 Botting, *Sex Machines and Navels*, 9. Dwelling on its literal and metaphorical meanings, Botting also notes that: ‘The navel... is not literally a knot, but the site where a knot – a ligature – has been tied around a cord so that it can be cut’, 18.
- 45 Tanning, ‘Afterword’, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 343.
- 46 Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker, ‘Mrs B: The film analysis of a novel’, *Flaubert* [Online], Translations/ Adaptations, posted 7 December, 2012, <http://flaubert.revues.org/1837>.
- 47 Bal and Williams Gamaker, ‘Mrs B’.
- 48 Mieke Bal, ‘Narrative inside out: Louise Bourgeois’ *Spider* as theoretical object’, *Oxford Art Journal*, 22:2 (1999), 103–26; Mieke Bal, ‘Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as builder’, *Biography*, 25:1 (Winter 2002), 180–202; Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider*, 2.
- 49 Bal, ‘Narrative inside out’, 105.
- 50 Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider*, 5.
- 51 See: Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009).
- 52 Thinking more thematically, Bourgeois’ *Femme Maison* series are also worthy of note here, especially a more recent soft sculptural manifestation of 2001 (Figure 5.6). Although beyond the immediate scope of this chapter, installations which might be brought into concert here include: Bourgeois’s *Destruction of the Father* (1974) with Tanning’s installation *Poppy Hotel Room 202* (1970–73), or, in a slightly different vein, Joseph Beuys’ *Model for a Felt Environment* (1964), and Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store* (1961). All these examples encompass a ‘soft’ sculptural aesthetic that moves into environment art on a grander scale.
- 53 Robert C. Morgan, ‘A separate anthropology’, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 301–7.
- 54 Robert Pincus Witten, *Postminimalism* (New York: Out of London Press, 1977), 46.

- 55 James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 228.
- 56 Meyer, *Minimalism*, 6; Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism*, 17.
- 57 de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 223.
- 58 Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 42.
- 59 Meyer, *Minimalism*, 256.
- 60 Meyer, *Minimalism*, 30.
- 61 Gruen, 'Dorothea Tanning', 192.
- 62 Jennifer Mundy (ed.), *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* (London: Tate Publishing Ltd, 2001), 310–13.
- 63 Flaubert cited in Alan Russell, *Madame Bovary*, 8.
- 64 Brooks, *Body Work*, 95.
- 65 Here I am also inspired by Alison Rowley's assertion that Lily Briscoe's fictional painting in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) 'is' Helen Frankenthaler's later painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952), *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting History, Writing Painting* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), xiii.
- 66 Bal, 'Autotopography', 185.

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