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Louise Bourgeois: A Visual Rejection of Dichotomies

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Candidate Number: 21959

Louise Bourgeois

A Visual Rejection of Dichotomies

Dissertation submitted for the Special Degree of B.A. Honors in History of Art

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Abstract

Over and against the predominance of overviews, this paper will approach Bourgeois's oeuvre through a close engagement with only a few works. If many of Bourgeois's critics have seen her work as being deeply personal and retrospective in tone, it seems that the more urgent issue is to recognize it as being generative and thought provoking in nature. The following two chapters will predominantly focus on Bourgeois's sculpture and aim to consider her artwork's interrogation of dichotomous viewpoints and categories.

Chapter 1 will examine Bourgeois's work's fusion of the binary oppositions and apparently polarizing terms; form and formless, interior and exterior, living and non-living, male and female. Chapter 2 will look at the ambivalent interplay between narrative and sculpture in her works that are collectively know as *Cells.*

Introduction

In 1982, to accompany her major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Bourgeois published an autobiographical text in *Artforum,* titled 'Child Abuse.' Accompanying pictures of her childhood she wrote:

> Everything I do was inspired by my early life.
> On the left, the woman in white is The Mistress.
> She was introduced into the family as a teacher
> but she slept with my father and she stayed for ten years.
> […] Everyday you have to abandon your past or
> accept it and then if you cannot accept it you
> become a sculptor.[1]

This statement, along with many others relating to childhood trauma, has haunted the vast majority of literature published on Bourgeois in the last three decades. Robert Storr notes that books documenting her art are filled with 'critical repackaging of her stories', or worse 'ventriloquist's dummies in bound form.'[2] In short, her monologue has been detrimental in restricting deeper inquiry into her work. Perhaps critics have been inclined to cling to her verbal narrative in an attempt to find stability when

[1] L. Bourgeois, in F. Morris (ed.), *Louise Bourgeois*, exhibition catalogue, (London, 2007), 80.
[2] R. Storr, 'Abstraction', in F. Morris (ed.), *Louise Bourgeois*, exhibition catalogue, (London, 2007), 22.

confronted with an oeuvre of wildly varying dimensions, in which 'shapes and ideas appear and disappear in a maze of versions, materials, incarnations.'[3] In the light of the fact that her powerful narrative and her artistic output are not interchangeable, the present analysis will aim to take up Storr's plea to consider her work 'with an open mind and with all of [our] senses.'[4] Mieke Bal comments that 'listening to [Bourgeois] is fine, but repeating her words reduces her work to one side of a multifarious complexity.'[5] Furthermore, her words are often highly contradictory. In complete paradox to the quote above Bourgeois said in a more recent interview:

> I am not interested in myself… 'I, me, myself' horrifies me.[6]

Bourgeois embroidered on one of her installations, 'I need my memories they are my documents.' Memory may well be the source of Bourgeois's creative drive, her 'life-blood'[7] according to Frances Morris; curator of the Tate Modern Bourgeois retrospective in 2007, but it cannot be the subject of her art. The viewer cannot own Bourgeois's memories. Instead, she cannibalizes her memories in order to bring her sculpture into being. Her work's highly distinctive vocabulary invites us not to experience souvenirs of her past, but to engage with an image or form that exists in its own realm, in the present, to precipitate responses on a visceral, intellectual and imaginary level. Writing on Bourgeois in 1994 Christian Leigh comments:

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[3] M. Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (London, 2005), 1.
[4] Storr, 'Abstraction', 26.
[5] M. Bal, 'Narrative inside out: Louise Bourgeois' Spider as Theoretical Object', *Oxford Art Journal* (1999), 122.
[6] R.Storr, P. Herkenhoff and A. Schwartzman, *Louise Bourgeois* (London, 2003), 11.
[7] F. Morris, http://channel.tate.org.uk/media/26515653001(15 February 2011).

> The magic of the work resides in its ability to keep us out while drawing us in. It is much like the frightening thrill of being in a relationship: the quest for total security and intimacy is always countered and subverted by the impossibility of entering a stranger totally. The mystery is what attracts, yet it is clearly what repels and keeps us fearful but wanting more.[8]

Leigh provides an insightful analogy for our experience of engaging with Bourgeois's work. However, perhaps terms such as 'magic' and 'mystery' risk the implication that her works derive solely from the dark recesses of the unconscious mind, holding close affinities with Surrealism, or that Bourgeois herself can be likened to a sorceress. Such interpretations simply serve to foreshadow evidence of the unique mix of 'intuition and erudition, psychological compulsion and sheer intelligence' that her oeuvre serves to reflect.[9] It seems that misinterpretations are born out of the angst surrounding a body of work that does not hold a specific position within the canon. Rather than trying to plant Bourgeois's aesthetic within the optimistic and nihilistic approaches that constitute the hallmarks of Modernism, her work can perhaps be more sharply defined if we accept, and indeed privilege, Bourgeois principally as a 'movement unto herself .'[10]

However, Bourgeois is not to be seen as an anachronistic figure with regards to twentieth century cultural discourses. It seems appropriate to construct a flexible framework that calls in part on both feminism and psychoanalysis as interpretative aids. Whilst Bourgeois's work's resistance to patriarchal patterns of genealogy can be

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8 C. Kotik, T. Sultan and C. Leigh (eds.), *Louise Bourgeois: The Locus of Memory. Works 1982-1993*, exhibition catalogue, (New York, 1994), 61.
9 Storr, 'Abstraction', 26.
10 Leigh, *Locus of Memory,* 52.

related to feminist theory, Mignon Nixon cites,

> Its disavowal of formal criteria of consistency and consecutive development, coupled with its intensive focus on the dynamics of sex […] point to the work's psychoanalytic logic.[11]

With regards to Freudian, Lacanian and Kleinian theories it seems that these well-known constructs offer privileged glimpses of the primary operations of Bourgeois's individual imagination as an artist. Whilst psychoanalysis turns time and again to the beginning of subjectivity to form new theories of culture, Bourgeois's work seems to attempt something similar. She returns relentlessly to give birth sculpturally and present pictorially the shape and structure of life, proposing new ways of provoking thought about art. Evidently Bourgeois herself had an interest in psychoanalysis as she at one point considered becoming a therapist. Her first acquaintance with feminism came from her mother, a feminist herself.

[11] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality,* 3.

CHAPTER 1

Morphological Ambivalence

This chapter will focus initially on the sculptural pieces produced by Bourgeois during the 1960s. Collectively the sculptures relate to the body, or perhaps in more abstract terms the body 'ripped open […] so that the contents of the body - the psychical as the well as the physical body - spill out, in a general catastrophe of disintegration.' [12] Within their art historical context, Bourgeois's 'most base, scatological and seemingly "formless" sculpture' did 'spill out' almost as if to soil the hard-edged Minimalist aesthetic so widespread at the time.[13] Deborah Wye notes that 'the disparateness of these pieces demonstrates the fertility of Bourgeois's imagination and her own originality as the inventor of images.'[14] Amongst the sculptures that this chapter will focus on are works included in the exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*, curated by Lucy Lippard in 1966. For Lippard, the term 'abstraction' referred to 'non-figurative evocations of the body.'[15] However, as Rosalind Krauss has suggested, calling Bourgeois's work 'abstract' only serves to reflect the 'unanalyzed acknowledgment of the morphological ambivalence that grips the objects.'[16]

Le Regard (1966) might be seen to form a blinking genital-eye, the eye and vagina amalgamated into a new and disturbing 'hybrid organ.'[17] Yet, simultaneously the viewer is confronted by an ovoid mass barely distinguishable as anything beyond 'a

[12] D. Kuspit, *Psychostrategies of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, 2000), 141.
[13] A. Coxon, *Louise Bourgeois* (London, 2010), 36.
[14] D.Wye, (ed.), *Louise Bourgeois*, exhibition catalogue (New York, 1982), 24.
[15] M. Nixon, 'Eating Words', *Oxford Art Journal* (1999), 61.
[16] Krauss, R. E., *Bachelors* (London, 2000), 71.
[17] V. Honoré in F. Morris, (ed.), *Louise Bourgeois*, exhibition catalogue (London, 2007), 242.

mucous membrane evoking a wet/dry interplay that constantly shifts as globules of thickness catch the light.'[18] Such readings of the work revolve in unresolved reciprocity. Latex is commonly associated with human skin. Lorna Collins suggests that *Le Regard* transgresses this polarity between inert matter and living matter. In her article 'The Wild being of Louise Bourgeois; Merleau-Ponty in the Flesh' Collins identifies a common interest shared by both the French philosopher and Bourgeois to denote an 'a primordial fabric' that precedes categorical opposition 'in the binary logic of dichotomy seen in Hegelian dialectics.'[19] Made by pouring latex onto a piece of thick cloth, the latex subsequently sticks and slickens into threads of the cloth. Collins notes that in 'the intertwining and sublimation of these materials […] inert matter becomes pure flesh that comes alive as this transgression is re-enacted in our encounter with it.'[20] This encounter is remarkably direct premising, not metaphorical or conceptual interpretation, but a raw, chthonic sense of elemental reality.

Le Regard sits on the ground, and therefore holds a low physical status in its relationship to the viewer, Mignon Nixon comments that *Le Regard* elicits 'a blank refusal of language […] oppositions that in linguistic terms make the articulation of meaning possible […] dissolve in roiling surfaces and molten flows.'[21] Through the lowest possible effective register of the body in representation, as if the figure has been dissolved into liquid flesh, *Le Regard* perhaps belongs within George Bataille's notion of the *informe,* developed in the late 1920s. In his Critical Dictionary he

[18] L. Collins, 'The Wild Being of Louise Bourgeois: Merleau-Ponty in the Flesh', *Romance Studies*, Vol. 28, No.1 (January, 2010), 52.
[19] Collins,' Wild Being of Louise Bourgeois', 48.
[20] Collins, 'Wild Being of Louise Bourgeois', 52.
[21] Nixon, 'Eating Words', 59.

Fig.1

described the *informe* as:

> formless […] a term that serves to bring things down in the world… What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like the spider or an earthworm…. it collapses hierarchies and rejects the duality of form and content.[22]

Bataille aimed to dissolve fixed meaning and *Le Regard* might be seen to provoke a similar linguistic chaos. In her *Artforum* article (1975), Lippard described Bourgeois's works in somewhat contradictory word salads. She wrote of 'breast-phallus protrusions', 'hill-breast-clouds' and 'overtly sexual membranes.'[23] It is as if due to the literalism of Bourgeois's work, Lippard had sought consolation in adjectives in the face of their lack of representation and formal independence. *Le Regard* shows blunt refusal to take on a symbolic logic. The work might be seen to make manifest the *informe* through its attempt to liberate the viewer's thinking from the semantic and servitude to thematics.

It seems important to avoid reflecting on Bourgeois's works as demonstrating a kind of superficial anthropomorphism, perhaps in part encouraged by Bourgeois's statements such as 'My body becomes material and I express what I feel through it.'[24] Briony Fer states that what is interesting in works such as *Portrait (1963)* is not to think in terms of subject matter, as Lippard has done by concerning herself with the notion of bodily empathies, but the way the work situates the spectator within the

[22] G. Bataille, 'Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939'
cited in Coxon, *Louise Bourgeois*, 41.
[23] L. Lippard, *Artforum*, March 1975, p.27 cited in B.Fer, 'Objects beyond Objecthood', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Louise Bourgeois (1999), 27-36.
[24] N.Finch, 'Louise Bourgeois: No Trespassing', *Arena Films*, BBC, London (1993).

field of vision. In a confusion of latex bulges or entrails, *Portrait* hangs on the wall, directly in the viewer's visual field. This positioning results in it taking on 'magnified proportions in the imagination.'[25] Fer cites:

> Within the realm of the imaginary, which is where Bourgeois work has to be placed I think, the subject may identify with precisely what is repellent as a kind of pleasure.[26]

According to Jacques Lacan, looking provides a form of 'pleasure', in that the rational conscious look is always coupled with an irrational desire to see sex, to see our infantile fantasies in the visual field. The immensely tactile viscosity of this work perhaps alludes to such desires.[27] However, we might argue that *Portrait* equally embodies looking as destructive. The lumpy latex surface serves to fragment the spectator's field of vision. In painting, it is often assumed that the viewer has visual mastery over the object. However, Bourgeois through hanging a sculpture in a way more typical of portraiture makes an ideal viewing position impossible to sustain. The viewer, standing in front of *Portrait* is teased into viewing the two types at once, which cannot be reconciled. We might conclude that in the same way that Lacan saw Holbein's *Ambassadors(1533)* as annihilating the self, breaking the dream of the unified self, so Bourgeois's *Portrait* performs a similar function. The work acts as an unconscious reminder that our position is relentlessly unstable.

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[25]B. Fer, 'Objects beyond Objecthood', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Louise Bourgeois (1999), 32.
[26] Fer, 'Objects beyond Objecthood', 35.
[27] M. Hatt, and C. Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods* (Manchester, 2006), 186-194.

Fig.2

In both titles, *Portrait* and *Le Regard,* a human gesture is injected as a clarifying addendum to an otherwise unlocatable form. We might understand Bourgeois to be traversing paradigms in order to articulate her insistence that even the most abstract form can strongly convey a human presence. *Portrait* can be seen as an aggressive assault on the idea of figurative sculpture. However, Mignon Nixon notes that whilst performing a kind of 'dis-figuration' or 'a deflation of the phallic form', the sculpture simultaneously engages an internal logic of the body.[28] In the mid-twentieth century there were a number of works, produced by Jasper Johns, Yayoi Kusama and Eva Hesse that had the ability to invoke an aimless drive, or act symbolically, generating symbolic effects from the body while 'refusing to act as symbols as such.'[29] Nixon suggests that *Portrait* evokes the death drive placed at the beginning of subjectivity. This theory was proposed by Melanie Klein who argued that to be at the beginning of life is 'the stuff of nightmare', a 'fundamental negativity', perhaps not dissimilar from the blur of brownish knobs and lumps that compose *Portrait*.[30] However, Nixon argues that the negativity of the work lies, not in its aesthetic form perhaps invoking the residue of the drives, but through illustrating the process by which many of her latex works are made. *Portrait* is the negative of sculpture in that it is the cast mold of a form first made in soft plaster. The two entities are separated, whereby the pouring, cutting and separating begin again once more. Bourgeois described this as 'the ebb and flow of my work.'[31] Her reference to circular rather than sequential time, like that of sea tides, invokes the death drive that can never be satisfied. It moves in perpetual circles never nearing it's ultimate goal; to reduce life to an inorganic state.[32] *Portrait*

[28] Nixon, 'Eating Words', 59.
[29] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 174.
[30] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 187-190.
[31] M-L., Bernadac and H-U. Obrist (eds.), *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997* (London, 1998), 91.
[32] P. Thurschwell, *Sigmund Freud (Second Edition)* (Oxon, 2009), 86.

might therefore be seen to exhibit an invisible psychic drive, as visible, blurring the boundary between inside and outside the human body.

Bourgeois herself remarked 'hanging and floating are states of ambivalence and doubt.'[33] It therefore seems excusable to provide an alternative interpretation of *Portrait.* In her work referred to as the 'bulimia' pictures of the 1980s, Cindy Sherman explored the 'iconography of misogyny.' Within patriarchal society, the castrated woman's body is the site of the 'wound' and the feminine interior seen as limp, moist and formless.[34] In Sherman's work the body's final disappearance into a spread of waste is seen by Laura Mulvey as the point at which the distinction between the exterior female body as fetish object and the interior wounds of bodily fluids mold into one. We might therefore see Bourgeois's *Portrait* as a refusal to represent the female body as fetish object, instead representing 'the direct, unblinking confrontation of the wound.'[35] If the assumed function of portraiture is to capture a likeness, perhaps even to flatter the subject and to provide a depiction to be treasured forever, *Portrait* does not conform as it 'slips' down the wall into oblivion.

Bourgeois's concern during 1960s with process and malleable materials might be seen as a regressive technique within the practice of sculpture, or perhaps as sculpture in the process of emergence. Nixon suggests that in psychoanalytic terms, Bourgeois's works such as the *Lairs series* can be read as going back in time. She suggests that the works gesture towards a spatial analogy for the beginning of infant subjectivity.[36] In

[33] C. Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall* (Zurich, 1992), 69.
[34] L. Mulvey, 'A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The World of Cindy Sherman,' *New Left Review*, no.188 (July/August 1991),146, cited in R. Krauss, '*Informe* without Conclusion', *October*, Vol. 78 (Autumn 1996), 93.
[35] Mulvey, 'A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The World of Cindy Sherman', 148.
[36] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 179.

harmony with this interpretation, Bourgeois's description of her *Lairs series* focuses on a human aspect: 'They grow from the centre, the more important organs being hidden; the life is inside… which causes it to grow to a certain size.'[37]

With a first hand account of the hanging, pendulous, plaster tear-drop - *Fée Couturière (1963)* - Daniel Robbins commented that it 'dare[d] the whole range of intricate relationships between inside and outside.'[38] According to Kleinian theory, as the infant begins the process of psychic sublimation, it seeks to build up an internal reality whilst at the same time using the resources of the external world to create itself. *Fée Couturière* is a porous structure that perhaps illustrates the polarity between tenderness and violence felt during infancy within the maternal body. The internal structure is partially secluded, yet the various holes allow the eye's gaze to penetrate. The viewer is witness to a small world in the making. Deborah Wye comments on *Fée Couturière* as the 'residue of a psychological process' the structure's form attesting 'to unfathomable inner motivations.'[39] Wye's interpretation points inwards, straight towards the psychic topography of Bourgeois's mind. The implication here is that to speak of a formal influence would be something of a threat to the mystery that shrouds the work. However, Lippard noted that 'Bourgeois has a very literal imagination.'[40] The title of the sculpture makes poetic reference to a bird, a 'fauvette couturière,' implying that Bourgeois was inspired by nests. Anne M. Wagner highlights that in Bourgeois's notebooks of the 1960s she wrote of the importance of hollow forms in her work. The formal vocabulary of *Fée Couturière* seems inspired by 'a visit to the Lascaux caves with their visible manifestations of an

[37] L. Bourgeois cited in L. Lippard, *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York, 1976), 241.
[38] D. Robbins, 'Sculpture by Louise Bourgeois', *Art International 8* (20 October 1964), 30.
[39] Wye, *Louise Bourgeois*, 24.
[40] L. Lippard, *From the Centre*, 248.

enveloping negative form.'[41] It seems that whilst *Fée Courturière* alludes to Bourgeois' notion of 'sculptural embodiment- the idea of self-sensing, self-generating sculpture'[42] the viewer must not allow this to eclipse the fact that the sculptures of the 1960s 'develop nevertheless in the atmosphere of figuration.'[43] If the earlier works looked at, *Le Regard* and *Portrait*, allude to sculpture as a quasi-bodily function, 'a system of processes akin to circulation and digestion'[44] we might see *Fée Courturière* as the organic architecture through which these processes are carried out. As a result of the ruptured sculptural surface, the viewer gains an intimacy with the work, serving to highlight bodily concerns. We might conclude that *Fée Courturière* lacks some of the fleshy hostility of the latex works, instead inviting the viewer closer to explore the multiple orifices incorporated in its structure.

[41] A.Wagner, 'Bourgeois Prehistory, or the Ransom of Fantasies', *Oxford Art Journal* (1999), 15.
[42] Wagner, 'Bourgeois Prehistory', 30.
[43] P. Marandel cited in L. Lippard, *From the Centre*, 248.
[44] Wagner, 'Bourgeois Prehistory', 10.

Fig.3

Robert Storr notes that 'the tendency in her work has always been to fuse rather than divide, or to divide in order to reorient, recombine and extend.'[45] The first part of this chapter focuses on the impulse within Bourgeois's work to avoid the logic of form. Through her use of materials such as plaster and latex she in part relinquished her control over the material, allowing it to take on its own undefined existence. The works analyzed so far can be seen to erode categorical distinction between inside and outside the body, form and formlessness, the living and the non-living. The subsequent part of this chapter will focus on Bourgeois's transgression of a further logical category; the distinction between male and female.

Terrie Sultan notes that Bourgeois's refusal to accept the dichotomy between figuration and abstraction was set forth in 'sexual terms' in *Nature Study (1984).*[46] The blurring of distinction between male and female is presented through an ambiguous admixture of characteristics. Sultan sees the intention of this work as presenting the idea that 'a pre-sexual body remains a natural part of our make up , certainly in terms of out psyches even if not specifically in terms of our genitalia.'[47] *Nature Study* reflects a fluid state of being, which like the sculptures of the 1960s, delights in a refusal to provide solid ground for interpretation. Anne Wagner comments 'These are works to which we will never quite have access; they are available, if at all, as spectacles of calculated resemblance, translated sensation, and insistent independence.'[48] Perhaps we might more specifically explain Bourgeois's work as being 'Anti-Oedipus', that is to say, against the drive for symbolization, for

[45] Storr, 'Abstraction', 26.
[46] Sultan, *Locus of Memory,* 36.
[47] Sultan, *Locus of Memory,* 38.
[48] Wagner, 'Bourgeois Prehistory', 23.

representation, and the assumption that the experience of desire is always a desire for meaning.[49]

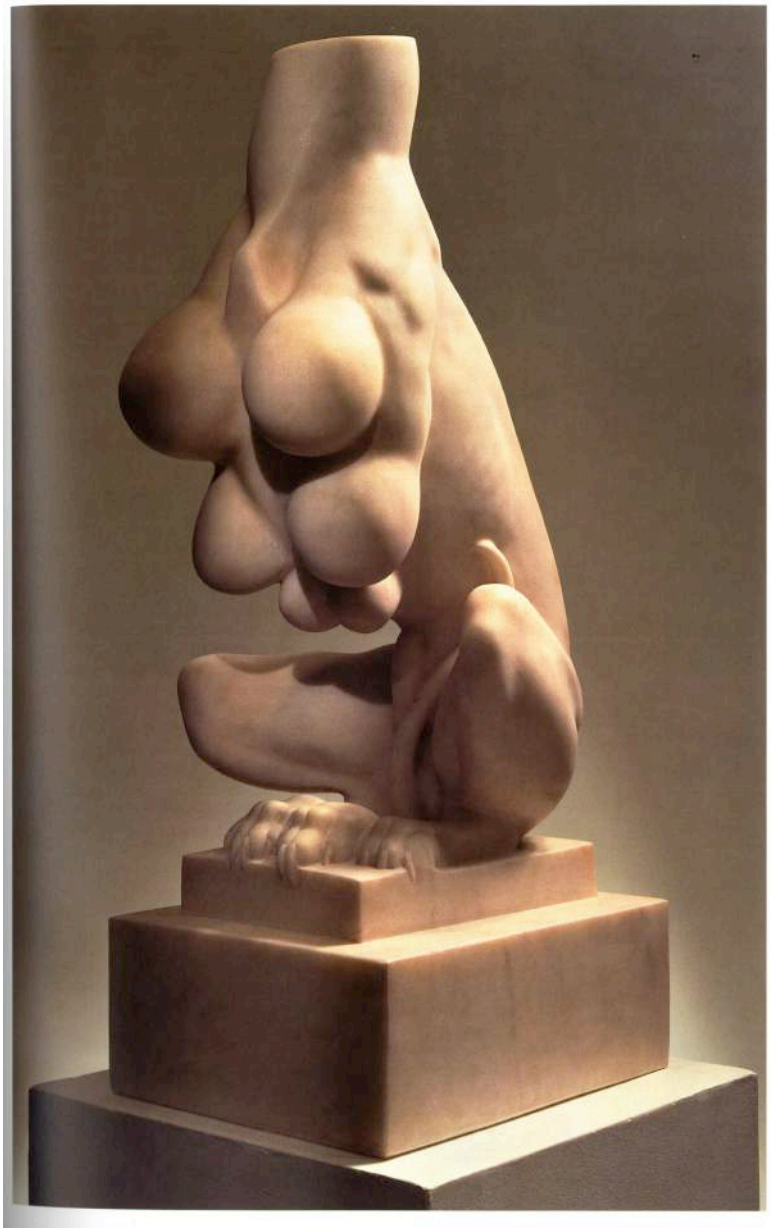

Fig. 4

[49] Krauss, *Bachelors*, 73.

Marina Warner comments that *Nature Study* 'transmute[s] female power (a sphinx) into tumescent maleness' because whilst it has no face, it is heavily swollen with bulging, erect volumes.[50] In addition to the turgid protuberances around the dog-goddess's neck, it also has a phallus between its legs. However, an alternative interpretation suggesting not male dominance, but a parody of it, can be found in Mignon Nixon's article, 'Posing the Phallus'. Nixon notes that one means by which to mock the phallic symbol is by multiplying it, and therefore 'sending up the latters defining and transcendent singularity.' [51] In light of Bourgeois's assertion that she began reading Lacan's work in the 1970s, we might be able to expand on Nixon's idea that *Nature Study* undermines the phallus as a patriarchal symbol.[52] Lacan based his theories of language and sexual difference on a symbolic order structured around the transcendental signifier, the phallus. In order to circumvent Lacan's notion that language is one of the mainstays of patriarchy, *Nature Study* refers back to the pre-sexual stage of polymorphous infancy, before sexual difference has been established.[53] *Nature Study* perhaps instead works on the basis of the semiotic order that co-exists with the pre-Oedipal stage. Julia Kristeva marks the semiotic as 'preverbal, linked to the bodily contact with the mother.'[54] Like the semiotic, *Nature Study* threatens the dominance of spoken language and in a move away from fixed signs it focuses on ambiguous meanings. The hermaphroditic creature, refuses Lacan's desire to find absolute sexual difference, assigning everything a gender, and searches instead for the integration of the sexes.

[50] M. Warner cited in F. Morris (ed.), *Louise Bourgeois*, 186.
[51] M.Nixon, 'Posing the Phallus', *October*, vol. 92, (Spring, 2000), 123.
[52] J. Nicoletta, 'Louise Bourgeois's Femme-Maisons: Confronting Lacan', *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol.13, No.2 (1992/3), 22.
[53] M-L. Bernadac, *Sculpting Emotion*, 122.
[54] Nicoletta, 'Louise Bourgeois's Femme-Maisons', 24.

Bourgeois herself has said: 'Sculpture is a simple subliminal language. Few people know or even understand it. It is a rare language.' [55]

However, Bourgeois's blurring of gender boundaries is not confined to her sculptural pieces. In a recent exhibition at the GL Strand Gallery (Copenhagen), an ink drawing entitled *The Good Mother (2007)* showed a figure of ambiguous gender. The 'mother', much like in *Nature Study*, wears a collar of forms that seem to muddle the penis up with the breasts, and the breasts with the testicles. These round lumps are equally almost blade-like. The red gouache makes the figure look quite aggressive, and yet it also looks fragile, particularly at the point where the head, or phallic point, is only loosely joined to the figure's body. It only takes a small shift in our imagination to see *The Good Mother* and *Nature Study* as perhaps both relating to 'a figure in which the creative power of ambivalence is lodged.'[56] In Freud's account ambivalence is passed only from father to son. Opposing the latter, Kleinian theory argues that ambivalence is born in the infant's phantasy struggle with the maternal body. Klein wrote that ambivalence can only be understood if,

> We explore the early interplay between love and hate, the vicious circle of aggression, anxieties, feelings of guilt and increased aggression, as well as various aspects of objects towards whom these conflicting emotions and anxieties are directed.[57]

Nixon has commented that Bourgeois visually extends Klein's position through the suggestion that the maternal figure, that is the mature female, nurtures this condition.

[55] Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, 256.
[56] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 272.
[57] Klein, 'The Origins of Transference', 207, cited in Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 272.

In both works the maternal imago is simultaneously protective and menacing, and both the object and emblem of aggression. The comfortingly feminine and yet aggressively masculine round protuberances in both works might therefore represent the manifestation of ambivalence to which patriarchal culture remains blinkered. [58]

Fig.5

[58] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 274.

The Maternal Man, 2008 | Gouache on paper | 31,1 x 25,4 cm

Fig.6

A red gouache at GL Strand, *The Maternal Man (2008)*, combines male genitals with the female womb and breasts, evoking Lucy Irigaray's term that describes female sexuality as 'this sex which is not one'.[59] However, it is a phrase often quoted in reference to one of Bourgeois's most well known sculptures, *Janus Fleuri (1968)*, and it is this work that concludes this chapter. Hanging at eye level, two dense muscular forms; two flaccid penises or breasts are linked by a blossoming, eruption of female genitalia; 'a conflation of labia, vulva, and clitoris that overspreads the *janus* like a lick.'[60] Bourgeois has commented on the sculpture 'Janus is a reference to the kind of polarity we represent… the polarity I experience is a drive towards extreme violence and revolt.'[61]

It might be suggested that Bourgeois's 'revolt' is against any fixed kind of identity and the binary divisions of male and female. In this way we might align Bourgeois to the radical anti-essentialist position adopted by some queer theorists, who argue not only that sexuality is socially constructed, but sex itself too. Queer theory argues that there is 'no foundational truth to the body to which we can appeal.'[62] That is to say, when we identify a figure or part of a figure as being male or female, it is already bound up with a socially conventional way of seeing the world. In *Janus Fleuri* Bourgeois violently attacks our notion of objective reality. Through mingling sexual organs so beautifully into such a heightened reality, she dissolves the male/female distinction that is laden with assumptions. Bourgeois notes in reference to *Janus Fleuri*, 'it is perhaps a self-portrait - one of many.'[63] We might conclude, a self-

[59] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 274.
[60] Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 274.
[61] Wye, *Louise Bourgeois*, 75.
[62] Hatt, *Art History: A Critical Introduction*, 166.
[63] *Art Now*, New York, vol.1, no.7., 1969, cited in Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, 161.

portrait of the artist as the ‘undoer’ of meaning, of categorical distinctions and the creator of ambivalence.

Fig. 7

CHAPTER 2

Between Narrative and Sculpture

Through the work Bourgeois collectively described as *Cells*, she presented the art world with an 'incomparable, challenging, cataclysmic notion of sculpture.'[64]

An inquiry into the symbiotic relationship held between narrative and sculpture in these works must begin by focusing on the associative power held by the term 'cell.' At present, The Oxford English Dictionary boasts 1,428 definitions.[65] However, it is the subtle ramifications of the cell in biological terms that holds the most hope in peeling back some of the deep realms of meaning of these sculptures. A cell is 'the simplest structure that displays all the characteristics of life,' and is 'capable of growth and reproduction as a result of the assimilation of substances drawn from the environment.'[66] If we apply the latter definition to Bourgeois's *Cells*, there is the suggestion that the multi-object work remains sadly lacking unless it is activated by some kind of interaction with the viewer; then the further suggestion that such interaction sets in train a relentless production of psychic resonances, 'capable of growth' in the viewer's imagination. However, as Alex Potts notes, there is 'no lingering unease that allowing a powerful psychic or affective charge to take over the viewer's response might compromise a work.'[67] In an attempt to gain detailed insight, this chapter will focus on three of Bourgeois's architectural statements, *The Red Room (Parents) (1994), Precious Liquids (1992)* and *Spider 1997.*

[64] R, Crone, and P. Graf Schaesberg, *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells* (London,1998), 85.
[65] http://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=Cell&_searchBtn=Search. 15 February 2011.
[66] Crone, *The Secret of the Cells*, 102.
[67] A, Potts,'Louise Bourgeois: Sculptural Confrontations', *Oxford Art Journal* (1999), 40.

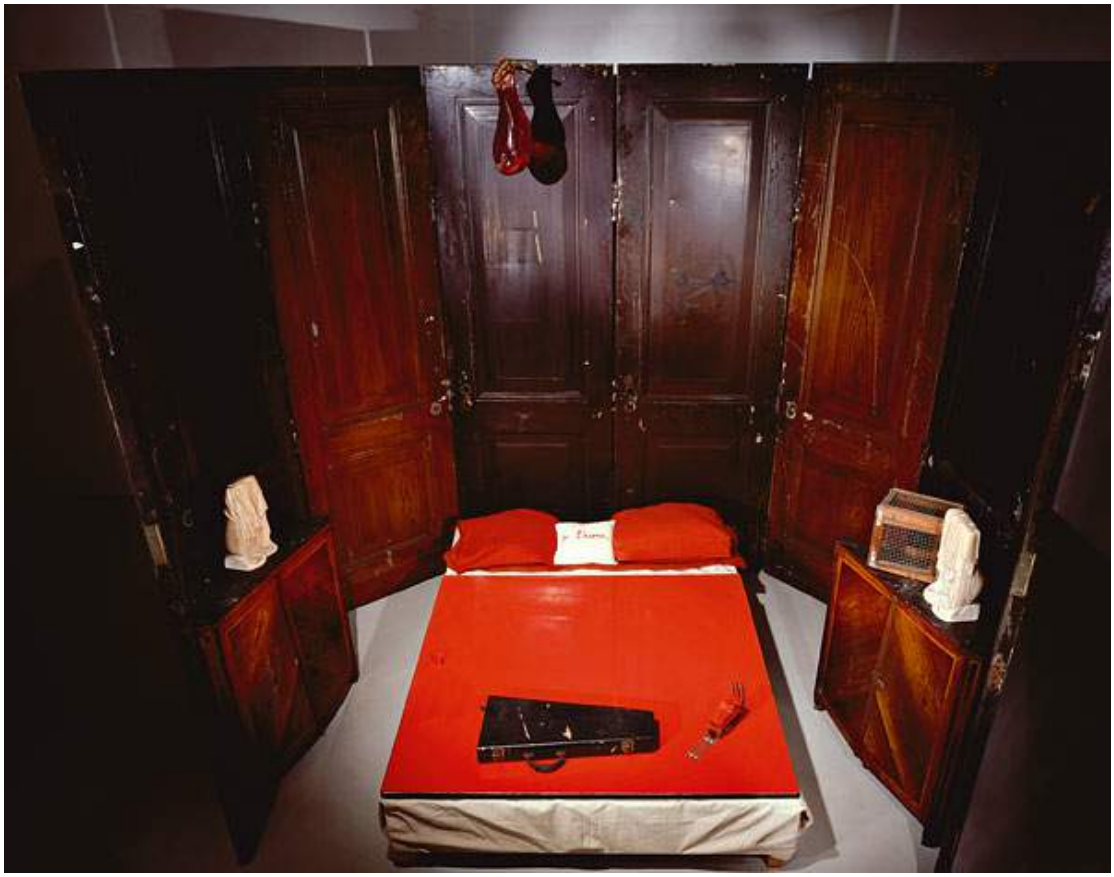

Fig. 8

The *Red Room (Parents)* was presented at Peter Blum's gallery in New York in 1994. The work is composed of a single cell, a confined space surrounded by dark wooden doors taken from theatre boxes or hotels.[68] Due to the fact that the work cannot be entered it functions by absorbing the viewer psychologically. In *Red Room (Parents)* the dominance of the colour red, combined with black has led Marie-Laure Bernadac to conclude that 'it signifies tragedy.'[69] This is what Bourgeois's narrative of her childhood, coupled with the child's train; a toy perhaps more fit for a boy, placed on the double bed, would lead us to believe. Indeed, Jan Greenburg and Sandra Jordan note that when Bourgeois was born in 1911 'she was the wrong sex. The Bourgeois family already had a daughter.'[70] However, it seems that to argue that the work signifies Bourgeois lamenting over her 'tragic' birth would be to undermine her artistic genius.

It has been argued that Bourgeois awakens not her own childhood, but instead 'elemental, wild instincts, to the dumb, traumatic memories and involuntary feelings that shackle our mind.'[71] Perhaps through the *Red Room (Parents)* Bourgeois asserts her interest in Freudian theory. For Freud, the Oedipus complex provides the structure of law and society; and within it family and the home. He acknowledges, however, that these entities are constantly disturbed by the unruly unconscious; the source of all human desire.[72] In *Red Room (Parents*) the painstaking order of the objects being housed are put into oblivion by the captivating red of passion, violence, and blushing of our hidden desires that terrorize this habitat. We might conclude that this is the small world of a family where unconscious desires have been made

[68] Bernadac, *Sculpting Emotion*,149.
[69] Bernadac, *Sculpting Emotion*,149.
[70] J. Greenberg, and S. Jordan, *The Runaway Girl: The Artist Louise Bourgeois* (New York, 2003), 8.
[71] Crone, *The Secret of the Cells*, 102.
[72] Nicoletta, 'Louise Bourgeois's Femme-Maisons', 24.

manifest. However, such interpretation serves to obscure rather than illuminate meaning. It opens the door to an unsolvable question: whose 'wild instincts' are being witnessed? The artist's, her parents, her father and his mistress, the viewer's? Rather than simply illustrating an aspect of a psychoanalytical narrative perhaps Bourgeois is more concerned with its shortcomings. Arguably, this is the intention of Bourgeois's *Red Room (Parents).*

The Oedipus complex is based on the Greek tragic hero, Oedipus, who unknowingly murders his father and commits incest through marrying his Mother. Oedipus's deeds, Freud claims, characterize a crucial stage of any boy's development, although on a less dramatic scale. Freud claims that Sophocles articulates an eternal truth of human psychosexual development.[73] Bourgeois subverts the logic of the Oedipus complex that depends upon a family triangle of mother, father, son. The two plumped pillows on the double bed and the small white pillow embroidered with *'I love you' (Je t'aime)* leaves the sexuality of the perfect couple, due to take up their predestined position, ambiguous. Further ambiguity is created by the two marble sculptures that are 'no more than material shields for nude figures'[74] who refuse to reveal themselves. Bourgeois teases Freud, who in *Three Essays on Sexuality* claimed 'perversions' outside of heterosexuality to be 'pathological.'[75] She mocks both the patriarchal notion of the family unit and sexual relations that dictate a socially conventional way of seeing the world. In accordance with this idea, whilst one recent critic has it that *Red Room (Parents)* invokes 'the fearful reality of madness,'[76] it could be suggested that Bourgeois instead alludes to the 'the fearful madness of

[73] Hatt, *Art History: A Critical Introduction,* 177-179.
[74]Crone, *Secret of the Cells,* 103.
[75]Thurschwell, *Sigmund Freud,* 49.
[76] Crone, *Secret of the Cells,* 102.

reality.' That is, reality that serves to consolidate the patriarchal ideas of Freudian theory. Whilst on the one hand this interpretation refuses to regard Bourgeois's personal narrative and her sculpture as inseparable, it suggests that *Red Room (Parents)* remains closely aligned with a notorious narrative; the Oedipus complex. However, there is no single interpretation of Bourgeois's work. The smooth surface of the mirror in the corner of *Red Room (Parents)* serves to emphasise this as it 'refracts the clarity of the insights just gained.'[77] Indeed, at the end of a television interview in 1993, relating to *Cells*, Bourgeois holds up a mirror to the camera.[78] She insinuates that we are to make our own judgment and to work it out for ourselves.

Precious Liquids consists of a water tower-turned-installation. The viewer is invited to enter 'rather as Alice making her way into wonderland's garden'[79], to find a child's iron bed surrounded by a tree of phials containing bodily fluids. Hanging to one side is an oversized coat within which nestles a child's dress. Bourgeois describes the scenario she creates:

> Precious Liquids relates to a girl who grows up to discover passion instead of terror.[…]Glass becomes a metaphor for muscles […] when the body's muscles relax and untense a liquid is produced. Intense emotions become a material liquid, a precious liquor.[80]

[77] Crone, *Secret of the Cells,* 100.
[78] N.Finch, 'No Trespassing'(1993).
[79] G. Pollock, 'Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses: Louise Bourgeois and the Question of Age', *Oxford Art Journal* (1999), 75.
[80]Bernadac, *Destruction of the Father, 235.*

Fig.9

Fig.10

Alex Potts suggests that Bourgeois's verbal narrative, an archetypal childhood trauma, is not an insight into meaning but instead an 'allegory' for the viewer's engagement with the work. Her personal obsessions and traumas are the backdrop against which the work stages 'a vivid psychodynamics of viewing.' With specific regards to the installation works, Potts mentions 'two distinct yet overlapping psychodramas' of viewing.[81] Perhaps we might apply this idea to *Precious Liquids*. Positioned in the dark interior of the cedar water tank, the intense physical intimacy of the objects and walls condition a visceral response in the viewer. The viewer is simultaneously aware that this inwardly felt sensation takes place within the gallery space, making public what is normally a personal experience. The viewer is left feeling both fearful and fascinated. By involving the viewer in a vividly physical sculptural drama Bourgeois reveals that the intention of her own verbal narrative is, not to reiterate but to provoke an innovative interplay between the formal and the psychic elements of the work.

However, with reference to an analysis by Griselda Pollock it might be suggested that the specific content of Bourgeois's verbal narrative regarding *Precious Liquids* has larger resonances beyond setting the desired 'mood' for engaging with the work, as suggested by Potts. Both Pollock and Bernadac identify what we might term a visual narrative between Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* and *Precious Liquids.* Both works show signs of the difficulty of desire signified through a mechanistic evocation of the body. Bernadac interprets the water tower of *Precious Liquids* as the 'moist fecundity of maternity', whilst the glass structure of Duchamp's work represents the

[81]Potts,'Sculptural Confrontations', 39.

'dry sterility of the bachelors'.'[82] Pollock, however maintains that by citing *Precious Liquids* as a feminine equivalent of Duchamp's *The Large Glass* the 'phallocentric script remains unchanged,' serving to imply that Bourgeois's work equates to the feminine in the phallocentric regime of 'difference'.[83]

Pollock instead asserts that *Precious Liquids* creates an internalized dialogue with Duchamp's work. Rather than employing the canonical, phallic sexual imagery, the source of the girl's 'terror', Bourgeois creates a system of glass vessels that decant a liquid into the middle of the bed, illustrating the 'daughter-become-woman's "passion."' [84] Through 'reference, deference and difference' *Precious Liquids* illustrates both the pleasure and trauma of a girl coming to maturity.[85] The small dress within the large overcoat marks the introduction to adult sexuality that often evokes the restimulation of infantile fantasies, images and desires. Whilst the work reflects Bourgeois's sexually disturbed childhood at Choisy, this 'trauma of subjectivity' is not exclusively hers. The glass 'muscles' and leaking liquid strongly allude to psychic tension being expressed through bodily symptoms. In this way the work alludes to the female hysteric, born out of the 'predicament of the daughter in patriarchal culture and language.'[86] Perhaps we might conclude that in *Precious Liquids*, Bourgeois's verbal narrative becomes a participant, not an outsider, in viewing the work.

In past times there have been many works of art that have drawn heavily on stories from classical myths and the bible. Due to these stories being so well known, they could direct the narrative of the visual material. Bourgeois's own stories are equally

[82]Bernadac, *Sculpting Emotion*,140-141.
[83] Pollock, 'Old Bones',82.
[84] Pollock, 'Old Bones', 75-81.
[85] Pollock, 'Old Bones', 82; G. Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London, 1999), 23-29.
[86] Pollock, 'Old Bones', 82.

well known to anyone interested in engaging in her work. However, to read her *Cells* this way would suggest that their success should be measured in terms of accuracy between visual and verbal narrative. One possible interpretation is that Bourgeois questions our tendency to add words and stale narratives to art works. Paradoxically, through her verbal narratives she blows up this cultural habit to huge proportions only to show us its inefficacy when we are overwhelmed by the impact of her work on its own terms. This in not to say that Bourgeois attempts to abandon narrative in her work. Mieke Bal notes that *Spider 1997* proposes,

> New ways of thinking this age-old mode of communicating through stories,
> so that, in the end, narrative can come forward again, but in a new guise.[87]

Under the body of *Spider 1997*, which is full of glass eggs, there is a cylindrical steel cage festooned with artefacts of the past. Attached to the large cage are fragments of tapestry. The work combines two of Bourgeois's major themes, the cell and the spider, and it both invites and rejects a narrative approach. The spider looms large in fictional literature and is the protagonist of numerous childhood memories that lead us back to moments of fear, panic or intrigue. Bourgeois herself has repeatedly insisted that the spider is her mother because 'she was as intelligent, patient, clean and useful, reasonable, indispensable, as a spider.'[88] In the spider's hugely figurative presence, however, the viewer is struck by its 'virtual viscosity'[89], the spindly legs do not verify whether Bourgeois's tale is true or false, only that it falls short of experience of the work. Mieke Bal has noted that *Spider* 'does not tell a story, but builds one, a

[87] Bal,'Narrative', 133.
[88] Bernadac, *Sculpting Emotion*, 147.
[89] Bal, 'Narrative', 75.

Fig.11

different one, but one that […] matters.'[90] It seems that biographical narrative is reductive if employed for this purpose. We might find an example of the latter in Vincent Honoré's comment on *Spider 1997* as 'a chain of metonymic and metaphorical rapprochements (spider-weaving-tapestry-mother-spider).' [91] Honoré denies the visual metaphor its disinhibiting license for applied ambiguity, but more critically he tries to offer what we might think of as a 'snap shot' of the work; an all encompassing overview which is simply not possible in a spatial arena punctuated by disparate objects and other presences. It seems at this point that we need to consider some of the ways in which *Spider 1997* plays with the very notion of 'narrative.'

The cage presents the interior of the *Cell* in all its nakedness, its transparency puts forward the idea that 'an inside knowledge triumphs over ignorance.'[92] However, a work that integrates discarded perfume bottles, pieces of bone, a stopwatch and old fabric is difficult to decipher. Perhaps these props are Bourgeois's memories. She comments 'I work with found objects, and I found a magic overtone in them.'[93] However, if there is something magical in their overtone, it is their undertone of trauma that stops the formation of a visual narrative of memory. Bal comments that memories as objects are often found in narrative frames, they are penetrable as iconography because they derive from the 'cultural stock' available to us. [94] Bourgeois's memory objects forfeit interpretation because they were found outside of this cultural stock, they relate to personal trauma and thus they do not provide a framework through which to experience them. That the objects cannot be read collectively is perhaps the intention of the artist, as Christian Leigh notes, Bourgeois

[90] Bal, 'Narrative',105.
[91] Honoré, in Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, 279.
[92] Crone, *Secret of the Cells*, 99.
[93] Crone, *Secret of the Cells*,105.
[94] Bal,'Narrative',110.

aims 'to transport the viewer from the rational mindset to a state of emphatic mind-or soul-searching, to a place where experience supersedes memory.' [95] Rather than invite a narrative of memory, the objects cause the viewer to embark on an alternative narrative journey, one that takes place in the present, known as the *jetz-zeit* according to Walter Benjamin.[96]

The viewer's participation in creating a narrative in the present tense is guided by the structure of the sculpture. The scattered fragments of tapestry contain details of human bodies, nature and ancient architecture. Confronted with the mere skeleton of an ancient narrative, the viewer's psyche embarks on a mission to piece the tales back together. However, the seven legs of *Spider 1997* preclude visibility and the viewer's attempt to come up with a plot. Bourgeois insists that the viewer utilizes both faculties, mind and body, if they are to partake in the experience the work imposes. The sculpture confirms the words of Michel de Certeau: 'Every story is a travel story - a spatial practice.'[97] The viewer must journey around the sculpture. However, according to Bal, the cylindrical cage invites narrative, through its deployment of time, whilst paradoxically destroying it; 'Roundness offers no beginning, no end.'[98] This is the essence of *Spider 1997.* The sculpture oscillates between emptying the mind of all concept of narrative in one moment, and then inciting it to re-emerge with unforeseen intensity the next. This circular course has the potential to be infinitely repeated. We might ask whether *Spider 1997* in part evokes the culmination of Zarathustra's preaching in Friedrich Nietzsche's 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'; the

[95] Leigh, *Locus of Memory*, 57.
[96] Bal,'Narrative',112.
[97] T. Schirato, and J. Webb, *Understanding the Visual* (London, 2004), 82.
[98] Bal,'Narrative',110.

doctrine of the eternal recurrence, which claims the unconditional and ceaseless repetition of existence.[99]

Ultimately it is the process of viewing, of engaging with this architectural sculpture from multiple perspectives, over a period of time that conditions what Bal describes as a 'performative narrative.'[100] It neither conforms to narrative as it is construed in theoretical schools or drama in the Aristotelian sense of action, but hovers somewhere between the two. With regards the latter we might note that *Spider 1997* seems to privilege both a plot and an imitation of action and life, both of which are key to Aristotle's notion of tragedy.[101] The plot function of the shadowy lighting (in exhibitions, the *Spider 1997* is almost always dramatically lit) plays a vital part in enticing the viewer to take on a fantasy role in the empty chair that lies at the heart of this installation.

To conclude this chapter it is perhaps worth mentioning the difficulty in dealing with work that so heavily provokes the subject's participation through narrative. In all three works the absence of a bodily presence, evoked by the empty chair or bed, anticipates the viewer imaginatively projecting himself/herself into these fictitious scenes. Narrative inevitably comes into play. Its overruling power seduces us into developing thought that moves radically away from traditional critical analysis. Whilst I have attempted to remain faithful to the latter, the viewer's participation is imperative to the completion of Bourgeois's *Cells*, my own intuitions have therefore resisted absolute exclusion from my analysis. Like literary narratives, Bourgeois's visual narratives, aim at psychological absorption. Her works perhaps evoke Freud's

[99] F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London, 1961).
[100] Bal,'Narrative',125.
[101] http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html#234 16 February 2011.

comparison of psychoanalysis to archaeology; the viewer is cast in the role of excavating, uncovering the works one by one as if retrieving for analytic illumination the dark and murky contents of Bourgeois's psyche.[102] However, it is the account of the visual journey we take in the face of our inability to master her obscure amalgamations of the familiar and yet equally unfamiliar objects, that results in 'processual narrativity.'[103] This is instigated by Bourgeois, and performed by the viewer. *Spider 1997* is perhaps the most explicit example, as we journey through the cage in psychic space, and around the spider in physical space.

Bourgeois's own biographical narratives or allusions to past narratives should perhaps be thought of as functioning as stimulants. These narratives may well be latent within her work, but they exist not to take over, but to activate the viewer into thinking on his/her own terms. After all, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, perception is not solely about what we see in a work. The inter-relationship between the viewer and Bourgeois's *Cells* is a matter of embodied perception. Therefore what we perceive depends on our being at any one moment physically present 'in a matrix of circumstances' that determine how and what it is that we perceive.[104] The philosopher wrote:

> I do not see [space] according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not just in front of me.[105]

[102] C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London, 2005), 22.
[103] Bal,'Narrative',125.
[104] Bishop, *Installation Art*, 50.
[105] Merleau Ponty, 'Eye and Mind' (1961), in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston,1964), 178.

Perhaps this is exactly how Bourgeois intends us to experience her *Cells.* Ironically, it is within her very own verbal narrative that she asks us to appreciate that 'Art is a way of recognizing oneself.'[106] Bourgeois the artist informs us why her personal narrative cannot stand in for a critical engagement with her work, and the independent thought that each personal encounter offers.

[106] Crone, *Secret of the Cells*,99.

Conclusion

This paper cannot claim to have even come close to digesting the output of one of the most disturbing and inventive sculptors of our time. Louise Bourgeois has never succumbed to the seductive dogma of a given stylistic approach. Instead, she is the mistress of her own diverse and resonant language; self-invented and self-contained. If at times she has glanced at the major trends of twentieth century sculpture, her works reflect not a desire to pursue their legacy, but to chew on it whilst contemplating means by which to subvert sculpture's most basic grammar.

In the first chapter the works call into question the physical presence of their own formal structure. Through a visual rejection of the dichotomies that rule our culture, the physical and perceptual realities of Bourgeois's sculptures seem to counter the translation of elements into words. As we have seen, for example in her insistent subversion of sexual differences, ambiguity becomes a powerful instrument capable of mutating the visual reality we thought we knew into an abstract icon with infinite associate overtones. An encounter with a Bourgeois work can be unnerving, As one recent critic comments,

> This is a three dimensional art that thoroughly negates the traditional sculpted funerary moment and its customary message ' May he or she rest in peace.'[107]

As the second chapter has shown, Bourgeois's *Cells* point towards a wholly new sculptural approach. These architectural structures refuse the dichotomy between

[107] Potts,'Sculptural Confrontations', 52.

narrative and sculpture, but also between body and mind as we must physically enter the space and traverse Bourgeois's psyche. That is, a psyche striving to amalgamate structures of fatally heterogeneous elements with a pictorial form of thinking in images.

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