

Louise Bourgeois: An Existentialist Act of Self-Perception.

By Federico Sabatini

“Thank you father.

Father why, why, I said why does the touch of my friend’s skin feel so nice?

Well my child that’s a very good question, but I simply do not know

Thank you father.

Father, father listening to me who made the day and the night?

Well my child that’s a very good question, but I simply do not know.

Thank you father.

I will pass your wisdom unto my children.” (L. Bourgeois, *The Five W’s*, 1999)

The life and the work of Louise Bourgeois show, constantly and astonishingly, an incredible mixture of experiences, feelings and settings, as well as the intersection of several temporal layers, which she seems to recreate simultaneously within the inspiring tension of a single creative moment. Such a peculiarity poignantly leads to the complexity and to the forceful conceptual meaning of her artworks, which, as I’ll suggest in this essay, are infinitely open to discussion and interpretation.

Bourgeois was born in Paris in 1911 and moved to New York in 1938, where she soon became an integral part of the intellectual and artistic life of the city. After being involved with the French Surrealist Movement, she participated in the rise of Abstract Expressionism, shared the legacy of the New York School (the informal group of avant-garde artists active in the city from the 50s) and, in her early works, she anticipated the practise of Minimalism and of Process Art, namely that particular movement which didn’t focus on the art object *as a result*, but rather on the creative process itself, conceived as a journey with its own meaning and conceptual power. Bourgeois shared with Process Art artists (such as Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra, amongst others) the inclination to use non-traditional materials (latex, wax, felt) in order to create forms and objects which focussed on the craftsmanship itself, as for example on the process of cutting, hanging, or freezing.

Her art, however, defies any kind of categorization. She has shown a progressive exploration of themes, techniques and materials, ranging from small scale, fetish-like sculptures (from *Paddle Woman*, dated 1947, to *Germinal* (1967), *Maison Fragile* and the *Nature Study* series in the 80s) to prints and drawings (such as the famous *Femme Maison* (1947), *Spider* (1947) and *Father and Son* (1997)) and room-sized installations (*I Do, I Undo*,

I Redo – Tate Gallery of Modern Art, London, 2000). She has also mastered several techniques, such as carving, assembling, modelling and casting, and a varied range of media, including wood, plaster, latex, bronze, marble, as well as an array of *found objects*, so as to refer to the tradition of *readymades* originated by Marcel Duchamp in the early 20th century.¹

It has been argued in different contexts, that in all her work she explores her own past experience in an ongoing quest to exorcise the painful memories of childhood and adolescence. Bourgeois herself has said that all her work in the past fifty years, all her subjects, have found their inspiration in her childhood, which “has never lost its magic, its mystery and its drama.”² The childhood myths are often recreated in terms of loss and tragic cuttings off, especially the ones related to the house, another recurrent motif in Bourgeois’s art, most notably in her drawings, but often evoked in her sculptures as well:

The house represents the past. I go there, it's demolished. It was replaced by the Paul Eluard theater. The mayor of the little city said, Louise, I am going to put your piece in a park near the town hall; the French government placed a commission with me. It is a tiny place, but at least nobody's going to come and replace it with a high-rise. *The demolition of the house means that the present destroys the past--cuts it, breaks with it.* Oh yes, the idea of cutting is terrible. The guillotine appears all the time in my work--remember that poor guy the hysteric; he had no more arms, nothing.³ (my emphasis)

¹ Louise Bourgeois aligns herself with the tradition of Surrealism, even if her art shows a lot of divergent aspects. As for the use of *readymades*, it can be argued that for Bourgeois they don't only represent objects on which art is “imposed”. On the contrary, she uses many objects for particular purposes, such as the one of evoking past times or past cultures. The work *Choisy*, for instance, is mounted on an old sewing-machine stand. Bourgeois explains her aim to capture a 19th century atmosphere in contemporary New York, by using a “real” piece from that time: “It's a 19th-century workbench. I find this period of the end of the 19th century--the period of Charcot, the Salpetriere, you know - mysterious. You find these beautiful machines abandoned here in New York: I like the connection, because it is, in a way, a historical piece.” (Pat Steir, “Mortal elements - interview with artist Louise Bourgeois - Interview”, *ArtForum*, Summer, 1993; FindArticles.com. 05 Sep 2007 (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_n10_v31/ai_14156122)).

² Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000, exhibition catalogue, *Tate Gallery of Modern Art*, London, 12 may – 17 December 2000; first Unilever commission for the “Turbine Hall”, the monumental entrance of Tate Modern.

³ Pat Steir, “Mortal elements - interview with artist Louise Bourgeois - Interview”, *ArtForum*, Summer, 1993; FindArticles.com. 05 Sep. 2007, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_n10_v31/ai_14156122

Here, she describes the exact reproduction of her childhood house, realised for the installation *Choisy*, over which she put a guillotine. As a matter of fact, she seems to be dealing with universal themes, which have long obsessed her personally: anxiety, alienation, rejection, love, the search for identity, sex, death and, above all, human relations, communication and the suffering they inevitably involve. This is probably the main reason why her work has been considered, and is still defined as “autobiographical”, meaning that her main (if not only) source of inspiration was her life and the only aim of her art was to overcome her private pains and obsessions, such as her experiences as a child, her relationship to motherhood and fatherhood, and the complex physical states brought about by strong feelings. Nevertheless, her art can’t be easily dismissed as autobiographical, due to the high degree of sublimation that she achieves, reaching for her work a timeless and universal status which doesn’t only belong to her as a woman, but refers, more widely, to human consciousness and to human perceptual experience.

Considering Roland Barthes’⁴ conception of the “death of the author” and Jacques Derrida’s “disappearing of the human being”⁵, I would like to suggest a wider interpretation of Bourgeois’ work, an interpretation which goes beyond the mere (auto)biographical reference, giving plausibility to her art as a vehicle for expressing more profound and existential ideas. Both Derrida and Barthes have stated the necessity of the author to disappear, in order for the audience to exist in front of any piece of writing. In his essay, Barthes disapproves of the reader's propensity to consider aspects of the author’s identity (such as his/her historical context, religion, psychology, or other biographical events) to extract meaning from his/her work:

To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing. This conception perfectly suits criticism, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is "explained:" the critic has conquered; hence it is scarcely surprising not only that, historically, the reign of the Author should also have been that of the Critic, but that criticism (even "new criticism") should be overthrown along with the Author. In a multiple writing, indeed, *everything*

⁴All references from Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, Hill & Wang, 1977; *Aspen*, n.5 and 6; <http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html>

⁵ Jacques Derida, *Signature, Event, Context*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1977.

is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered;
 structure can be followed, "threaded" (like a
 stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all
 its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the
 space of the writing is to be traversed, not
 penetrated: *writing ceaselessly posits meaning but*
always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a
 systematic exemption of meaning. (my emphasis).

Readers must thus separate a literary work from its creator in order to get as close as possible to its real, and at the same time constantly changing, significance. Instead of discovering a "single theological meaning", readers must thus discover that writing is created to make its meaning evaporate and change endlessly, it constitutes "a space of many dimensions," which cannot be "deciphered," but only "distinguished" and disentangled. The implications of such a radical vision of critical reading reverse the balance of authority and power between author and reader: the "birth of the reader" can only happen after the author has ceased to exist. Similarly, Michel Foucault, in his influential 1969 essay "What Is an Author", has examined the "author-function" within a wider study of the "literary discourse". He conceives the works of literature as collective cultural products that are not to be referred to single psychologies or to authors as individual beings. The author is not the only reference for the meaning of a work but, on the contrary, is part of a larger system of beliefs that restrict meaning itself. Though with ideological differences (Foucault underlines the system of constraint that works upon us as readers), both authors agree on the fact that the author, or the "author function", may (or must) soon disappear. In a similar fashion, Jacques Derrida has argued that a literary work must continue to be readable even when what is called the author no longer answers for what he has created, so as to make the philosopher speak of the "disappearance of the human being", which leaves utter independence to the structure of the work and to its semantic units.

Although the question of authorship is still an open and vibrant one in critical writing, I think that the aforementioned intellectual positions prove to be still very fruitful in terms of a deep reflection on the visual work of art as well, especially when confronting authors who, like Louise Bourgeois, have challenged many aesthetic issues, including the ones of authorship, and, more specifically, of "autobiography." While taking into account post-structuralist views, moreover, we should also bear in mind that Louise Bourgeois only revealed details of her life in her late seventies and, therefore, the understanding of her work is not necessarily and directly connected to the events which strongly marked her life. Among these, however, it is worth mentioning the most debated sexual affair between her father and her governess, which, as she lately said, influenced her perception of the human behaviour as

a child and, subsequently, her work as an adult artist. Critic Frances Morris has talked out this crucial biographical event, by connecting some old and new declarations by Bourgeois:

It was not until she was seventy-one years old, and preparing for her first major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, that Bourgeois told the story of her early life in full. In an autobiographical slide show Bourgeois unravelled the detailed history of her family background and childhood, dwelling on the traumas of negotiating her identity within the triangular adult relationship of her ailing mother, her father's mistress Sadie, the children's English governess. (.....) As Bourgeois recalls: 'She was introduced into the family as a teacher for Pierre and myself...and she slept with my father. The thing about Sadie is that she lived in the house. And she stayed for ten years – the formative years of my sister and myself. The story of Sadie is to me almost as important as the story of my mother in my life.'⁶

Despite the importance of this episode (admitted and unravelled by the artist herself), it seems also impossible to reduce her work to a mere “representation” of it, due to the extreme “multilayeredness” of her aesthetics and to her acute awareness of the function of art. All her emotions and feelings, in fact, have been constantly sublimated and re-interpreted through the use of real, pre-existing artistic forms and devices. She mainly turned to spatial claustrophobic enclosures and to the image of the body in all its permutations and fragmented forms, as a vehicle for expressing ideas about universal questions such as suffering and pain, and as a means not only of connecting with the outside world, but also of reaching deep into her own psyche, and into the spectator's one as well. Discussing her need to express herself as “discharged”, she simply said “my subject is the rawness of the emotions and the devastating effect of the emotions you go through.”⁷

After a number of sculptures realised in the eighties (which mainly focus on the idea of the fragmented body, such as *Untitled, Fingers* and *Untitled, With Hand*), in the early nineties she analysed the body/emotion relationship by creating a series of installations called *Cells*, stating that “they represent different states of pain: the physical, the emotional and the psychological, the mental and the intellectual.”⁸ Like many other works she did before, the cells are highly architectural in structure, aiming to define, almost scientifically, emotions

⁶ Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p.9.

⁷ Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 10.

⁸ Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 12.

which are universally difficult to be described and profoundly communicated by any means of expression. Interestingly enough, her first formal training was in mathematics and geometry, two disciplines that have played an important role in the development of her visual aesthetics, acting as an organizing device, since “they offer a reliable world, a reliable system and an unchanging frame of reference.”⁹

Bourgeois’ architectures, however, are often dysfunctional, presenting, as in *Cell III*, an impossibility of access and ladders or passageways that don’t lead anywhere. It is fairly evident that the chaos in human inner lives is not likely to be given an order, reflecting this way the absurdity and difficulty of human relations, both to the external world and to the internal, personal one. As a matter of fact, her use of geometry and mathematics shows a constant ambivalence, given by her belief in the impossibility to geometricize emotion, even if a scientific frame of reference seems to be indispensable. Her need of such a “frame of reference” seems to reflect on our urge to explain psychic and physical phenomena, our urge to possess scientific means in order to prove our hypotheses. On the other hand, such means always show to be deficient and to provide a deficient explanation. In this respect, it is well arguable that Bourgeois’ geometry is more a non-Euclidean one (focussing on the *imaginary* relations between bodies in a curved space) and, above all, it reveals a non-Cartesian, non-analytic approach, or rather a more phenomenological one, more similar to the one offered by French Philosopher Merleau-Ponty,¹⁰ as I will further point out in this essay.

The cells, her most architectural works besides her room-sized and site-specific installations, are all enclosures. Constructed from a variety of scavenged materials such as wire mesh and steel frames, old doors and windows, these bricolages contain pieces of furniture, found objects, mirrors and sculptures by the artist. In addition, some of them contain the fragmented body parts from which many of her works are built: hands, severed arms, legs, hands, and torsos. In *Cell III – Eyes and Mirrors*, the viewer is denied access and a pair of enormous eyes (built as two perfect, immaculate, marble spheres), are set in the middle of the

⁹ Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p.12.

¹⁰ As I will argue, the difference in thought between Descartes (abstract space based on the notion of “extension”) and Merleau-Ponty (perceived space based on the notion of the “body”) seems here extremely relevant. Merleau-Ponty accused Descartes’ *extension* of having liberated space and spatial investigation from the role of our body in perceiving it and in arranging our perceptual experience in our mind. Similarly, in her “attempt at geometry”, Bourgeois reveals the importance of a geometric “frame of reference” which, however, must always connect to our body functions. At the same time, these are inseparable from a kind of abstract “measurement”, even though such a measurement proves to be fallacious and constantly subjected to modifications, and partial understanding. It is exactly in the space of this ambivalence that Bourgeois sets the (equally) ambivalent meaning of her art.

space to guard the entrance. A round heavy mirror has been inserted into the open ceiling, reflecting the fake marble eyes, which are surrounded by five more round mirrors of different dimensions. The only way for the viewer to enter the space is through his gaze through the cage. The work evokes the theme of looking but also being looked at, for the mirrors give different perceptions of the body. The viewer tries to see something but also feels that he/she is constantly seen, almost spied by the eyes and by the whole world enclosed in the cell. As a consequence, standing in front of the cell means also to be forced to perceive one's body, one's physical, but also psychological, self. And to realise the perspectival compromise that human perception ought to accept: we look differently, act differently, and are different, according to countless circumstances that occur in our lives.

In 1945, French philosopher Merleau-Ponty¹¹ published *Phenomenology of Perception*, a book which has largely influenced visual artists who were experimenting with the use of space (among which are included Alberto Giacometti, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt and all the members of the American Minimalist Group), whose aim was to create simple but highly conceptual works, which had to confront the audience and make them aware of their presence in the exhibition's space, aware, above all, of their own perception and (changeable) point of view. As in Merleau-Pontian terms, in these artworks space and body become inseparable concepts, due to the essential influence of our personal and unique "horizon" of perception:

All my knowledge of the world....is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless [...] I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself....the horizon whose distance from me would be abolishedif I were not there to scan it with my gaze.

Many artists, including Bourgeois, put such theories into operation in their own aesthetic discourse and started to focus on the importance of the human's point of view (and its mutability) for a wider understanding of reality. They began to conceive the audience, and the exhibition's space, as fundamental parts of the artwork, creating a kind of mutual communication between them and the viewer, who ceased, therefore, to be a mere addressee of their message. As a result, Bourgeois' cell, which is originally meant to be self-contained

¹¹ Merleau Ponty Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge London, 1995.

and isolated, becomes a place of interaction, which, though the viewer is forced to remain external to it, asks for a complex process of self-consciousness and for a broader comprehension of one's own experience of suffering from the impossibility to fully look at (perceive) oneself. Such a theory convincingly echoes the relationship between self and "others" as expressed by Russian theorist Bakhtin, a theory that, in this context is able to enlighten Bourgeois' aim as well:

In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are others.¹²

If we consider such a complex relationship between self and others, it is also important to realize that a fragment body (and a body "perceived as fragmented") corresponds in Bourgeois to the fragmentation of the "self", of a self which is made up by countless voices, often contrasting, often stimulating, each other. In this respect, we ought to take into account all the connotations of the title "cell"¹³ she adopted, here carrying the primal meaning of a small and confined room, but also the biological one referring to the basic structural unity of an organism, which has to establish a relationship with other cells in order to exist, and in order to "form" our body (analogous to the semantic units of a text for Derrida and, similarly, to the single elements with which Bourgeois constructs and structures her works).

Mirrors, for instance, also play a crucial role in the work.¹⁴ They can be mythologically seen as an allegorical embodiment of vanity, but looking into them (as an act)

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Aileen Jelly, "Bakhtin, The Outsider", *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 1993.

¹³ Frances Morris has introduced the concept: "It was not until the *Cells* that Bourgeois created a dynamic, spatial formula for the exploration of body and environment, self and past, past and present. (...) Evoking the biological cell as well as the imposed cell of the prison or the self-imposed cell of the convent, each one explores, through metaphor, an aspect of human pain or suffering." (Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p.13).

¹⁴ Bourgeois used mirrors in several other works, including in the installation *I Do; I Undo; I Redo*. The site-specific work was composed by three gigantic towers which the viewer could climb through a steep vertiginous spiral staircase. At the top of each tower was an open balcony delimited by several round mirrors, which the viewer was almost forced to use.

is really about having the courage it takes to look at oneself, and really face oneself or, as Lacan says, to delineate one's contours and to perceive oneself as a whole:

Mirrors are devices for reflection, for capturing a kind of truth, but when polished or curved they are also a means of intensification and magnification. Both effects contain aspects of distillation and clarification, but also of distortion and manipulation.¹⁵

Complaining about critics who kept misunderstanding her work, Bourgeois famously said "I'm not a surrealist, maybe I could be an existentialist". The act of courage involved in *Cell III – Eyes and Mirrors* could be seen in terms of her own identification with – and simultaneous distance from – Albert Camus, whose work *The Myth of Sisyphus* she often quotes in her interviews:

An artist performs his/her problems. There's no cure anyway because the representation itself doesn't involve any learning. It avoids it. That is why it continually repeats. Sisyphus liked pushing his rock up. It was his reason for life. A form of self-expression that taught him nothing. Camus didn't want to learn. He wanted to justify his suffering. I want to learn.¹⁶

Both for Camus and for Bourgeois, however, action is always a necessary gesture, no matter how absurd or futile. It is the same dilemma Friedrich Nietzsche outlined in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his parable of overcoming the unconditional, infinitely repeated circular course of existence, the conviction that the universe will always recur for an unfathomable number of times. Speaking about her installation *I Do; I Undo; I Redo*, Bourgeois expressed ideas that are closely related to existentialism:

The *Undo* is the unravelling. The torment that things are not right and the anxiety of not knowing what to do. *There can be total destruction in the attempt to find an answer*, and there can be terrific violence that descends into depression. One is immobile in the wake of the fear. It is the view from the bottom of the well. In terms

¹⁵ Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p.6.

¹⁶Christiane Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois, Designing for Free Fall*, Ammann Verlag, Zurich, 1992.

of a relationship to others, it's total rejection and destruction. It is the return of the repressed. I take things away. I smash things, relations are broken. I am the bad mother. It is the disappearance of the love object. *The guilt leads to a deep despair and passivity*. One retreats into one's lair to strategize, recover and regroup.¹⁷

Bourgeois' ambiguity is close to Nietzsche's overcoming and to Camus' existential absurdity, i.e. the human limitations to find meaning in the universe: it is her response to the recursive condition of mutual dependency between individuals and their environment, which she must see as forces of opposition and/or indifference. Despite the abundance of visual cues, mythological subtexts and symbolic devices, Bourgeois is more interested in establishing a rapprochement which takes advantage of the viewer's proximity to – or perspective on – her arranged objects (i.e. the fake eyes and the mirrors within the cell). Although her art is based on her experience, it doesn't speak *only* to the primacy of our intimacies, but to also the ways we must engage in social interactions to give plausibility to our identities.

In Louise Bourgeois' *Cells*, the emotions she derives from memories become a more generalized outrage at a universal inability to communicate or to find answers, not only because the right questions are not being asked, but also because the right answers might not exist. The artist, as much as the audience, remains impotent, a child who is no longer innocent and struggles against the difficulty of understanding why. Her work spasmodically tries to find the right answers,¹⁸ and constantly questions itself, the artist's mind, and the public's mind. It is what Italian philosopher Umberto Eco calls an "open work", a work which can be read at several different levels, according to several different factors, and which doesn't communicate a final unique message but, on the contrary, suggests a wide range of possibilities, an endless interpretation within an endlessly moving geometry of anxiety.

¹⁷ Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 20, my emphasis.

¹⁸ "The *Redo* means that a solution is found to the problem. It may not be the final answer, but there is an *attempt* to go forward", Interview in Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 20.