

*"Things need us homeless ones
in order to have a home somewhere."*
Ingeborg Bachmann

Designing for Free Fall

by Christiane Meyer-Thoss

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Louise Bourgeois's studio in Brooklyn, New York, was once a garment factory. The factory's light system has never been replaced: each seamstress had her own fluorescent bulb, and a pull-chain hangs over each place where a sewing machine once stood. These electrical relics give Bourgeois the ability to adjust the vast space at will, and to yield to it, dividing it into independent regions delineated by shifting, substance-less islands of light. Bourgeois believes she only learned to use the huge room when it occurred to her to break it down this way. She feels that she has absolute dominion over the place. Let there be light, she is able to say with the pull of a chain. Or, with another tug of the chain, Let there be darkness. Animated by the studio's mutable visual space, the sculptures that have accumulated over the years have their own life. In the perfect isolation of the studio, relationships among them are more uninhibited; Bourgeois wants these relationships to run rampant. Only such solitude will enable them to touch each other fleetingly and with no ulterior motives. With every change of light, affinities realign in the wild disarray.

I found Bourgeois's studio to be a labyrinthine garden, an organic yet orchestrated wilderness riddled with escape routes. Every morning at the same time, Bourgeois enters her space, her forgotten sky, and makes the rounds, rearranging as she goes the stacks and assemblages of ribbons, wooden blocks, metal tubing. As time passes, she wears paths through the studio like those that animals make to flee through underbrush. After a while, these escape routes, as changeable as the light, show where Bourgeois is going. She is only interested in fresh trails.

The density of Bourgeois's sculptures in her studio has an overpowering impact. They are of daring finality; their serenity is imperious. They seem to have escaped natural

catastrophes, devasta- tion. They seem to know about the fatal consequences of emotional involvement; they embody the quest for laws that will govern spiritual imponderables.

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Often there is a sense of personal history, of undergoing once again the fragments of the past. The work is about survival, about starting from scratch every day; each new sculpture is an overcoming, a “*liquidation of the past*.” This does not mean that she suppresses or excises history, but rather that she exhausts and dissolves the past in the forward thrust of her own life. Louise Bourgeois turns to the past only to interrupt, contradict, and oppose herself in the process. Or rather, it’s the elusive past that turns to her, “*keeps knocking at the door until it is admitted*.”

“*Happy people have no stories*,” she likes to say. Bourgeois’s father, who liked to hold forth on the virtues of conjugal love, openly betrayed his wife, making Louise’s childhood English tutor his mistress and keeping her under the same roof with the family for ten years. A sexual double-standard was common in France in those times, when divorce was almost unknown. It was not unusual for a wife to suffer the presence of her husband’s mistress. The consequence for Bourgeois was that she felt betrayed by both her father and her mother. Furthermore, her father was a macho, domineering man who seems to have enjoyed belittling and embarrassing his daughter, especially in front of an audience. His subterfuges took the form of assaults on her sexual identity: “*My father cut the shape of a girl out of a tangerine peel, and then he held it up and said, ‘Look everybody, this is Louise. She has nothing! All she’s got between her legs is a couple of white threads!’ Everybody laughed at me.*” Bourgeois recalls a rite that she enacted to compensate for the contempt and shame her father caused her. “*Once when we were sitting together at the dining table, I took white bread, mixed it with spit, and molded a figure of my father. When the figure was done, I started cutting off the limbs with a knife. I see this as my first sculptural solution. It was right for the moment, and it helped me. It was an important experience and certainly determined my future direction.*” By making the problem physical, Bourgeois was now able to deal with it and control it. *The Destruction of the Father* (1974) reenacts this trauma of the past and her original solution.

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Louise Bourgeois’s work operates through the emotions of aggression, suffering, despair. It is in a relentless state of rawness. Yet at the same time, the sculptures characteristically impart a stunned euphoria.

“*A sculpture has to stand*,” Bourgeois says. No matter what, her sculptures do not fall. In fact, they monumentalize spiritual injuries; they show how mighty and cruel is their effect on us. A state of degeneration thus rises to crowning heights and is informed with untold dignity.

Designing for Free Fall means clearing away whatever resists it, then looking at the results. It means addiction to relief and dissolution. At most, free fall results in an artificial

figure, a negative shape to be examined and studied.

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Sculpture, like sex or love, is an affirmation, an attempt to devise methods and instruments “*to prove that you are.*” “*A ferocious desire for independence is present in all the work. It is in all the figures. . . a determination to exist at whatever fragile level you can achieve.*”

American version by Catherine Schelbert

Louise Bourgeois in Conversation with Christiane Meyer-Thoss

Christiane Meyer-Thoss

Many people admire the shocking quality of your work and your voice. Are you embarrassed by the character of your recollection, its confessional tone and bluntness?

Louise Bourgeois

I want to be accurate, not shocking.

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CM

I always have that feeling of dialogue in your work. It's as if your sculptures were filled with a real interior personality: they are ensouled. And some of your pieces actually seem like sets demanding human action, implying the tension of the other's presence. I believe that you have in fact animated them sometimes, in performance-like works.

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CM

And do you love your sculptures for
longer than three minutes?
What is your feeling for them?

LB I love sculpture eternally, because sculpture is the *only* thing that challenges me. But it is also not enough. If I have expressed today what I wanted to express, good, it's true for a minute, but then I have to prove myself again. So I start a new one.

Because I have been involved so deeply in my sculptures, they are kind of sacred to me. I have transferred my maternal instinct, which is very strong, to them. I would never destroy them. But on the other hand, once I've made them, I don't care for them any more. My feeling for them is that I wouldn't let them be destroyed or broken. I take care of them.

CM

Don Juan, seduction, maternity:
again, when you talk about your work,
you often use the language of the body,
of sexuality, of human relationships.

LB With the emotions there is always the physical reaction – the heartbeat, breathing, perspiration. The body always takes part. A while ago I was looking at an early sculpture that I hadn't seen in a long time. The trembling emotions that I felt when I made it came right back. The magic is in the artist's own identification with the work, and that magic brings it back to other people.

To make art is to wake up in a state of craving, a craving to discharge resentment, rage. It's not a linear progression; it goes like a clock; every day, when you reach a certain spot on the clock, it recurs. It's a certain rhythm occurring every day. And the making of art has a curative effect. A tension you are under disappears, dramatically. The making of art is an insight into the source of compulsion, a relief and a deflation of compulsion. Tension builds for an unknown reason, and yet it can be explored. Think of the top coming off a pressure cooker, and the steam releasing; or of the relief of sexual tension. Cravings like this, or like the craving for food, may be solved by understanding what they mean. Can you do without chocolate, for example? Perhaps the craving for chocolate is tied to a recollection of a kiss you did not get; the craving was not satisfied, and you feel the painful emotion. Art is the privilege of insight into craving. The craving is not cured, but it is acted out, indulged, and in some way understood.

In my work, I see from the point of view of the seducer. The fact that I might be passively seductive doesn't even enter my mind; I am the hunter who actively tries to seduce someone else. Of course, this effort is eternally in vain, but also eternally repeated. I am both the unfortunate seducer and the indefatigable seducer. The fact that I might appear seductive to someone else doesn't even occur to me.

CM

In this relationship, you are
always the active one.

LB The move from the passive to active is life itself. It means survival through your own will. I am not the victim, the other is. I am alive. I despise victims; I refuse to be cast as a victim, even if I admit that I don't know how to play the game.

CM

Let's take a specific sculpture. I have always thought of your piece *Rabbit* (Ill. p. 30) as a self-portrait. How does that work reflect your rejection of the role of victim?

LB Many works begin with a passive role. To be in a passive role is to inhabit chaos. The chaos has to be dealt with and put into order. If you are active you organize order. You feel better and safe.

I was working on a small sculpture about 15 inches high. It was sitting in the center of the table. I became uneasy, progressively anxious, terrified. The pain was physical, and yet it was so deep within the sculpture. What was wrong with the sculpture was what was wrong with me. Knowing what was wrong with the sculpture would enlighten me. To effectuate this shift from the sculpture to the person, you have to feel very loose, very accepting very humble. What crept into my mind was that the sculpture had nothing to stand on, no relation to the floor. One half of its being was cut off by the table. I had this feeling that I might be cut in half myself. There was this terrific, intense identification with the sculpture. I felt cut in two. I visualized the caryatid or a woman cut in two. I thought of the kitchen cleaver, and of the fear of the cleaver, which would cut me in half. I had an identification with an animal I put into the cooking pot. I had this tension around my waist and I relived this fear of a little child. But I kept thinking, "You're not a caryatid, you're not an animal, you're not passive. You're active. Don't let this happen to you. Just do it to someone else." The compulsion subsided. I rebuilt the sculpture from the floor up.

I will add that this kind of experience is very tiring. The quality

and amount of energy it takes to go from the unconscious to the conscious is enormous. It's like the sexual act: it's exhausting, yet at the end you are at peace, and completely tired. People who talk after the sexual act, by the way, have not really had an experience. They did not or could not take part in the experience. If they had had a release, they would be tired instead of intellectualizing.

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This interview is an edited version of conversations that took place between 1986 and 1989 in New York.

Louise Bourgeois

Self-Expression Is Sacred and Fatal

Statements

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I need my memories. They are my documents. I keep watch over them. They are my privacy and I am intensely jealous of them. Cézanne said, “I am jealous of my little sensations.”

To reminisce and woolgather is negative. You have to differentiate between memories. Are you going to them or are they coming to you. If you are going to them, you are wasting time. Nostalgia is not productive. If they come to you, they are the seeds for sculpture.

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My father provoked in me a continual loss of self-esteem. My mother represented self-confidence. “Don’t bother, you know how men are. You agree with them, humor them; men are like children.” She convinced me. It was her form of feminism.

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If a person is an artist, it is a guarantee of sanity. He is able to take his torment.

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Self-expression is sacred and fatal. It's a necessity. Sublimation is a gift, a stroke of luck. One has nothing to do with the other.

I am saying in my sculpture today what I could not make out in the past. It was fear that kept me from understanding. Fear is the pits. It paralyzes you.

My sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it a physicality so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality. Sculpture allows me to re-experience the past, to see the past in its objective, realistic proportion.

Fear is a passive state. The goal is to be active and take control. The move is from the passive to the active. If the past is not negated in the present, you do not live. You go through the emotions like a zombie, and life passes you by.

Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.

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Art is a sacrifice of life itself. The artist sacrifices life to art not because he wants to but because he cannot do anything else.

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The subject comes directly from the unconscious. The formal perfection is the important part and very conscious. The form has to be absolutely strict and pure.

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I want to hide and have the object define itself. I don't want my objects to depend on my presence. The sculptures have to last long after me. They have to have a value outside of people, outside of history. They have to have an intrinsic value, otherwise they are not successful.

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