

Olesya Turkina
Louise Bourgeois: Pandora's Box

In Greek mythology the first woman was Pandora. Zeus ordered Athena and Hephaestus to create her in an act of revenge against man after Prometheus stole fire from the gods. Molded out of clay in the likeness of the divine maiden of Parthenos, she was endowed with the character of a dog. She is therefore a figure of duality, carrying within herself the image of the immortal goddess and the nature of an animal. She is also the goddess who controls man's relation to birth and death. But we remember her most vividly because it is she who released human suffering from the box the god's entrusted her with, only to leave hope at the bottom. According to Jean-Pierre Vernant¹ the mythological figure of Pandora represents the answers to the questions: What is man? Why are there men and women? Why is there good and evil? Why is there image versus reality? It is in this figure of mythos and duality, a figure that embodies the tension between hope and fear that the main themes of Louise Bourgeois' work may be found.

Louise Bourgeois, who was born in Paris in 1911 and worked more than half a century in New York, is one of the most original sculptors of the 20th century. In fact her creative work reflects the century, with its revolutions and world wars, utopian hopes and crippling disillusionments. Never one to blindly follow fashion in art, she has been compared with such masters of the 20th century as Constantin Brancusi and Vladimir Tatlin, Hans Arp and Alberto Giacometti, and even Joseph Beuys and Bruce Nauman.² Her work is abstract and figurative, realistic and phantasmagoric, and is made from all manner of material such as wood, marble, bronze, plaster, latex and fabric. Probing themes of universal import, it is also highly autobiographical. In fact the personal and traumatic is Bourgeois' most vital material.

Throughout the 20th century one might say Louise Bourgeois has created an idiosyncratic symbolic dictionary in which certain personal experiences and fantasies are concretized into expressive images. In the words of the artist, "Symbols are only empty bottles. They function only through what you put in them – personal symbols mean personal alphabet, our uniqueness is all we have."³ For example, her use of the spider is not a sign of arachnophobia (terror of spiders), but a sign of the enveloping and diligent mother. In much the same manner, sewing needles are not represented as aggressive instruments but symbols of magic to signify the restoration of losses. And home is depicted not as a refuge, but as an enclosure where one is in danger of losing oneself. These objects thus recover magical properties connected to personal experiences well known since childhood. Childhood, in the artist's words, "has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama".⁴ In fact, Louise Bourgeois describes herself as a woman without secrets. For her, sculpture is an instrument of exorcism, a place to work through traumatic childhood experiences. In 1982 the artist formulated this principle in her artist's project for *Artforum* called "Child Abuse" where she says, "Everyday you have to abandon your past or accept it and then if you cannot

¹ The author expresses her thanks to one of the most influential scholars of ancient Greek thought, Jean-Pierre Vernant, whose lecture «**[I cannot get my computer to change this to a quotation mark]** Pandora – the first Woman”, presented at the Institut Francaise in St. Petersburg on 5 December 2000, served as the impetus for these thoughts on the symbolic meaning of Pandora.

² Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998, p.16.

³ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father. Reconstruction of the Father. Writings and Interviews 1923-1997. Edited and with texts by Marie-Laure Bernardac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. (London: Violette Editions), 1998, p.132.

⁴ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.277.

accept it you become a sculptor.” In this project, she disclosed the secret of her life—a tale that reads like a melodramatic novel. Louise Bourgeois grew up triangulated between an adoring but ill mother and an authoritarian father whose mistress of ten years was also Louise’s governess. The complex relationship with her father, in which the duality of love and hate were manifested, resulted in a lifelong ambivalence to authority. Within this context it is no coincidence that her creative work is metaphorically compared to the space of memory⁵. It can be said that Bourgeois’ drawings, prints, and sculptures constitute a unique theatre of memory. Each work is related to one or another important event in her life on the principle of free association. Memories therefore play a leading, not auxiliary, role.

In order to understand the unique nature of Bourgeois’ work, in other words, to reveal the secrets symbolized therein, it is necessary to present her history, i.e., the context in which the work was formed. As a child Bourgeois knead figures out of bread during family meals—a time when children are to be seen but not heard—in order to keep herself occupied. She also worked as a substitute in her father’s tapestry restoration business in Aubusson when worker’s were absent. “I started as a draftsman in my parents’ atelier at the age of fifteen, making cartoons for the repairing of tapestries. At the same time I majored at the Lycée Fénelon. Solid geometry was a revelation and was continued at the Sorbonne. It was the origin of my love of sculpture”⁶. In 1932, after graduating from the Lycée, she matriculated at the Sorbonne in order to study mathematics and philosophy. At this time she also began to visit several Paris studios in Montparnasse and Montmartre. In a soulful search for herself, she migrated from studio to studio refusing to follow a single tendency or to subordinate herself to the authority of a single teacher. Since she spoke English fluently and many Americans were studying in Paris she worked as a translator, which allowed her to pay for her studies. It is at this time she visited Moscow and Leningrad for the first time. In 1934 she returned to Moscow with a group of Paul Colin’s students. They visited in order to take part in the International Theatre Festival and to see the works of Russian Constructivists. After her return to Paris, she hoped to return to Russia and write an article, but the French publisher she proposed this to refused to pay for the trip.⁷

The artist’s work has been compared with the Russian Constructivists. In particular Rainer Krone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg have noted the typically Constructivist features such as the identity of forms and the effect of rotation found in *Memling Dawn* (1951) and *Spiral Woman* (1951-52).⁸ The combination of the inclined line and spirals in *Labyrinthine Tower* (1962) and *Sleep* (1968) is also reminiscent of Vladimir Tatlin’s famous *Monument to the III International* of 1920. Here we must note the absence of geometric rigidity and the unique deviation from the right angle as well.⁹ Bourgeois saw a model of Tatlin’s *Monument to the III International* in Paris in 1925 when it was on display at the World Exhibition of Decorative Arts. Tatlin’s work embodied a new representation of space, volume, and construction of

⁷ For example, one of the artist’s personal exhibitions held in 2000 in the National Museum of Modern Art, Korea called: Louise Bourgeois: The Space of Memory. September 7 – November 5, 2000.

⁸ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.83

⁹ Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells*, p.61

¹⁰ On the special imagistic features of V. Tatlin’s “Monument to the III International” and about differences between his artistic work as a whole and the works of constructivist artists, see: Anatolij Strigalev. *Vladimir Tatlin. Eine Retrospektive.// Vladimir Tatlin. Retrospective. DuMont. Buchverlag, Köln, 1993. Vasilii Rakitin. The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on To Artistic Careers. // The Great Utopia. Guggenheim Museum, N.Y., 1993*

“real materials in real space”. And in her own way Louise Bourgeois would resolve the combination of “construction and intuition” in the second half of the 20th century.¹⁰

Although Louise Bourgeois missed a major Tatlin’s exhibition, and the last one to be mounted during his lifetime, was on view in the Museum of Fine Arts, it is not important to pin down specifically what the artist may or may not have seen when she was in Russia. What is important is the general atmosphere of new art associated with Constructivism that was there for her to absorb. Along with Tatlin, the works of Mikhail Matyushin who created his organic sculptural forms from organic roots were on view. There was also an exhibition titled *Amazons of the Russian Avant-Garde*. This exhibition focused on the interior world of female artists Elena Guro, Nataly Goncharova, Olga Rozanova (the «intuitivist » of Russian futurism), as well as other women who rejected the role of serving only as a passive muse for male artists. It is worth noting that the influences Bourgeois was exposed to while in Russia deviated from the European modernist project of her world back home.

One of the most celebrated movements in Paris at the time was Surrealism, a movement she is often associated with in spite of her protests. Although well acquainted with the Surrealists –she rented a flat in the same building where André Breton’s gallery Gradiva was located from 1937 to 1938, and later became friends with André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, André Masson and Joan Miro in New York– she never identified herself with Surrealism. In fact, if asked to categorize herself at all she prefers to call herself an existentialist. Foremost among her reasons for rejecting the association is the fact that “woman” in Surrealism exists only as a passive being lacking subjectivity, whose main goal is to be the source of inspiration for man (playing the role of muse or “femme-enfant”).¹¹ Bourgeois’ artistic method involves the restoration of what has been lost and forgotten in contrast to the Surrealist’s desire to visualize the “unseen”. In this sense her work explores and undoes the mechanism of repression where painful, forbidden thoughts, images, and recollections are forced out into the unconscious.¹² It is not accidental that the paradoxical formula “the unconscious is my friend” belongs to the artist. Traumatic recollections, after all, are her treasure house.

In 1938 – “between conversations on surrealism and the latest tendencies in art” – Louise Bourgeois married the American art historian Robert Goldwater and moved to New York City. A year later the couple returned to France in order to adopt an orphan whom they named Michel Olivier. In 1940 and 1941, respectively, their sons Jean-Louis Bourgeois and Alain Matthew Clement were born. Motherhood thus became an important theme in her work. She began to reference the difficult relations between child and mother in her paintings, drawings, engravings and sculptures, particularly the mother as “good and “bad” object.¹³

¹¹¹⁰ The expression belongs to Yevgeny Kovtun, who was during 1970-90s one of the leading specialists in the field of research on the Russian avant-garde.

¹²¹¹ Not to mention such literary personages as Nadya, who served as the prototype for the work of the same name by Andre Breton. Even Leonora Carrington, a writer and artist, with whom in particular Louise Bourgeois participated in an exhibition «The Women» at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery in New York in 1945 was perceived rather as a personage of the surrealist drama, «femme-enfant» and «wild muse», as Breton expressed it.

¹³¹² On the theory of displacement, Sigmund Freud wrote, in particular in the works "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's "Gradiva" " (1906) and "Repression" (1915). The author expresses her gratitude to the art critic and psychoanalyst Viktor Mazin for pointing out these and other psychoanalytic sources, that were used in the process of writing this article.

¹⁴¹³ The parent-child relationships in later Bourgeois works have been analysed by Frances Morris. *A Family Affair Louise Bourgeois*. Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd, Millbank, London, 2000, p.17.

Such interest in the dual nature of the mother and women in general (as we saw in the case of Surrealism), returns us to the theme of the myth of Pandora with which this essay began. Pandora's role was to be the bottomless vessel of the achievements of others while also carrying the power to confer immortality. Bourgeois transforms the ancient comparison of woman with a vessel into her celebrated metaphor of the "femme maison". This figure, which recurs throughout Bourgeois' work, is a literal hybrid of woman and house. Woman is not only likened to a house, she is literally its "body". The house is substituted for the face in an act that both protects and blinds. Significantly it is after Bourgeois left France that the motif of the Femme Maison appears first in her paintings and engravings, and then in her sculptures.¹⁴

A similar principle of uniting woman with organic metaphors takes place in her later work *Topiary* (1999) where imagery of the woman's body is combined with imagery of a tree. The artist creates branches flowering with blue beads, where small sculpture (a miniature "lair") grow out of the female body. Standing on one column and supported by a wooden crutch in the shape of a woman, *Topiary* is the fruit of a fantastic interbreeding. The *Topiaries* can be compared with works linked to physical disabilities and prosthetic appliances such as *Couples* created in the 1990s, or *Henrietta* (1985), dedicated to her younger sister who suffered from a knee defect. These works call up the numerous amputations Louise saw while working as a docent in the Louvre in 1936 after finishing her studies at the Sorbonne. As she describes it, all the workers ate together in the cafeteria where "...it was like the Bruegel picture of the people who carry food. I was the only woman. To get a job in a museum in those days you had to be amputated; if you were wounded in the war you were entitled to a job. All of them were crippled in some way. It made a very big impression on me".¹⁵

Many of Louise Bourgeois' memories are influenced by the fact that she experienced both World War I and World War II. Her childhood memories are laced with images of perpetual travel during World War I in order to be with her father who was serving in the French army. On the other hand, because she moved to New York before World War II, and was therefore the only one of her family to live in safety during the war, she experienced lifelong feelings of guilt and abandonment. As she put it:

There's no mystery at all... But there is a great intensity and very great personal emotion. This is apparent in the constant repetition of the word 'figure', which expresses the fact that I had left my family in Europe. At

¹⁴ Critics consider Bourgeois' decision to leave France a form of escape. In New York she took classes at the Art Students League where she studied with Vaclav Vytlacil and began to associate with art critics, gallery owners, and artists. "I made friends with American artists who were my age and I showed with them at the Peridot Gallery from 1949 to 1953, at Norlyst and at Egan, which was one of the key galleries for the Abstract Expressionists. And Alfred Barr was a supporter from the beginning. He included me in an early panel discussion along with de Kooning and the rest". (Louise Bourgeois in: Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells*, p.37) Their house was often visited by such famous art historians as Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, Meyer Shapiro, and Erwin Panofsky. Louise Bourgeois and her husband Robert Goldwater associated with gallery owners Peggy Guggenheim, Leo Castelli, and Pierre Matisse, American artists such as John Cage and Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Mark Rothko, as well as European artists who had emigrated in America, such as André Breton and Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and Fernand Léger, and Piet Mondrian and Yves Tanguy. (Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.244)

bottom, I wasn't ashamed, but I was sick at having abandoned them because I was the only one to leave. I married an American student and left along with him. Thus my entire family remained in France and the homesickness was doubled by a sense of abandonment. I felt I had abandoned them.¹⁶

In 1943 she took part in an exhibition entitled "The Arts in Therapy", launched as a part of a rehabilitation program for people wounded in World War II. Two years later, in 1945, she arranged an exhibition devoted to the activity of the French Resistance at the Norlyst Gallery in New York. In this show the works of Pablo Picasso, Pierre Bonnard and Jean Dubuffet were hung alongside photographs of German tanks, and texts by Louis Aragon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gertrude Stein.

In general, the period after World War II was an important time in her career. In 1943 and 1947 she mounted personal exhibitions of paintings at the Bertha Schaeffer and Norlyst Galleries respectively. She began to make prints in 1947, in particular her nine prints with text titled *He Disappeared Into Complete Silence...*¹⁷ In 1949, she exhibited sculptures for the first time in a show at the Peridot Gallery in New York. She called these pieces *Personages*. They were made of wood and resembled African sculpture (a popular source of inspiration for early 20th century modernists). The *Personages* represented her relatives who remained in France during World War II. Like totems the *Personages* were endowed with a magic force, a trait associated with the pre-logical¹⁸ or syncretic thinking¹⁹ of "primitive" societies and children's consciousness. As she put it, "they may not appear as figures at all"²⁰ because they were so abstract, yet the fact they were made to represent a person was crucial. In other words they were not made as part of a modernist project but as a personal project. Each "personage" is the symbolization of an actual traumatic event or feeling. This principle reminds us of a custom existing among Khanty peoples whereby a distinctive totem, e.g., a small figure made in soft fabric, is used to replace relatives who have died. Such a substitution, in the opinion of V. Samokhvalov, helps them to escape the depression caused by the loss of a beloved object.²¹ One can discover an analogy to this custom in Bourgeois'

21¹⁶ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.177

20¹⁷ See: Rosi Hunh. Louise Bourgeois: Deconstructing the Phallus within the Exile of th Self.// *Inside the Visible. An elliptical traverse of 20th century art. in, of, and from feminine.* Curated and edited by M. Catherine de Zegher. The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. The Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrijk, Flandres. Les editions La Chambre, 1996.

22¹⁸ According to the definition of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. *La Mentalité Primitive.* Paris: Retz, 1976

23¹⁹ On syncretic thought applied to children's thinking, see: Jean Piaget. *The Speech and Thought of the Child.* Moscow: Pedagogika-Press, 1994. Anton Ehrenzweig wrote about syncretic thinking in the context of artistic creativity. See: *The Hidden Order of Art.* London: Weidenfeld, 1993

2424²⁰ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.77

2526²¹ Since these parallels seem to us quite interesting and important, we will permit ourselves an expanded quotation of one of the leading psychiatrists, V. P. Samokhvalov (*The problem of interpretation of symptoms in psychiatry. Lecture at the Freudian Dream Museum.// Transfer-Express, no.1, St. Petersburg, 2000, p. 7-8*): «Among the Khanty there is a custom: as soon as a person dies, at the moment of his death, the relatives prepare a figure of the deceased. It is made of rags, its face is not marked. The figure is approximately 25 cm high and also 25

later fabric sculptures, which take the form of anthropomorphic figures and body parts. Such soft objects as *Why Have You Run so Far Away?* (1999) resembling a tragic mask and a prefabricated child's toy, such sculptures express the grief experienced over the loss of a beloved object.

It is important that the *Personages* were exhibited without a pedestal. One of the ways Bourgeois changed the concept of sculpture in the 20th century was the new language she forged between objects and their environment. She describes her principle for arranging sculptures in space as follows:

...I see my works as groups of objects relating to each other. Although ultimately each can and does stand alone, the figures can be grouped in various ways and fashions, and each time the tension of their relations makes for a different formal arrangement. For these reasons the figures are placed in the ground the way people would place themselves in the street to talk to each other. And this is why they grow from a single point – a minimum base of immobility, which suggests an always-possible change.²²

It can be said that Louise Bourgeois accomplished in sculpture what the Cubists achieved in painting, she disrupted the correlation of figure and background. Space is secondary for the sculptor. It is a neutral three-dimensional container in which the sculpture is placed. Bourgeois takes this further in her suspended sculptures, which twist and move in space according to their own rhythms. In general the ability to change the spacing between static works was of cardinal importance for her. In her exhibitions of 1950 (Sculpture, Peridot Gallery, New York) she paid special attention to the intervals between objects as if tweaking with the "spatial noise" in the environment. The space was suddenly filled with the emotional interrelations of figures not just with the figures themselves. *Personages* were her first "environmental" sculptures although the definition came later.²³ They prefigured the complete emancipation from the exhibition space realized in later *Destruction of the Father* (1974) and series of *Cells*.

In discussing the works of Louise Bourgeois, it is important to consider the influences she drew from early 20th century modernism as well. For instance the enthusiasm for "primitive"

cm wide. 4 cords are wound around the figure by women, and 5 by men, because the Khanty believe that women have 4 souls and men - 5, and the woman gives one soul to the first-born child. They talk constantly with the effigy, give it to friends... They take it when they go visiting, feed it, place it at the head of the bed. The uninterrupted association with it lasts 5 years. If several of a person's close relatives died, then he/ she joins the figures with cords and carries them on his/ her belt. At the end of the 5 years for men, and 4 years for women – it's a strange period of time, as though corresponding to the ontogenesis of some sorrow – a little house is prepared on a post for the figure. ... because it is important for this object to exist after death, because it should be present and because in one culture it exists like a photograph of the deceased or the belongings of the deceased, and in another culture, it exists almost metaphorically, almost a complete figure of the deceased»

²² Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.66

²³ As also in the case of Marcel Duchamp's 'ready-made' which got its "names" later on.

art,²⁴ the search for a “basic language”, the primacy of form, and the rejection of art as narrative or storytelling. While in Paris she visited the studio of Constantin Brancusi who was known for his love of archaic art. She mentions in one of her letters the importance Pablo Picasso attached to African sculpture for European art.²⁵ But, the most important influence was her experience as the student of Fernand Léger. He was instrumental in guiding her towards sculpture when he noted the three-dimensional quality of her drawings.

And yet in spite of these influences, it is the pouring of her personal history into the vessel of modernist sculpture that makes her work stand out. She does not claim to subordinate the world to her creative will, but rather uses art to work through her traumatic past: “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.”²⁶ Her work is so personal that it is impossible to establish rules or construct a unified principle from it.

It is no coincidence in one of her interviews the artist declares, “Space does not exist, it is just a metaphor for the structure of our existence.”²⁷ As has been suggested, Louise Bourgeois opened Pandora's box, liberating and giving shape to the fears and sufferings of humankind. For her there is no universal world or man. Rather, Bourgeois' hero is the “personage” contained in her totemic figures, a figure splintered into separate parts; a figure decapitated, bent into the arc of an hysteric, twisted in a spiral, united in one male and female being, human and animal.

During the 1950s the artist continued to create wooden sculptures, however the forms became smoother and softer and were gathered in ensembles as in *One and the Others* (1955). Some scholars have drawn parallels between these mid-century works and the soft, Pop Art sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, and the polished surfaces of Minimalism.²⁸ Her work has also been compared to the work of Hans Arp in terms of the attention to geometry and color, the laconic form and the leveling of textures. But she denies Arp's influence saying, “Arp's sculptures have a certain pornographic aspect which doesn't interest me.”²⁹ Although

27²⁴ It is interesting that Louise Bourgeois' husband, Robert Goldwater, wrote a book on the influence of “primitive” art on contemporary artists. However, the artist says that she is not very interested in this art.

28²⁵ This passion was general. It is enough to point to the books of Vladimir Markov, such as, for example, “The Art of Easter Island” (St. Petersburg, 1914), or “Art of the Negroes”, which the artist prepared for publication in 1914, but which was published posthumously in Petrograd in 1919. For more detail about Markov's role in the discovery of African art see: E. F. Kovtun: Vladimir Markov and the Discovery of African Art // Monuments of Culture: Writing. Art. Archaeology: New Discoveries. Annual. 1980. Leningrad, 1981.

29²⁶ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.228

30²⁷ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.220 The paradoxical nature of such a statement by Louise Bourgeois partly resembles the history connected with the famous French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who once announced that there is no cosmos, the cosmos is a point of view. See in: Elizabeth Roudinesco. Lacan. Fayard, 1993, p.365

32²⁸ Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret...*, p.39

33²⁹ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.84

she does acknowledge the formal relations in his work are important for her. In general the theme of "symbolic abstraction", which combines "geometric structure and human individuality" passes through all of Bourgeois' forms.³⁰

In the 1960s she began to use plaster, bronze, marble, and latex. Her forms became "even simpler, but their relationships more complex. There was a gradual change from rigidity to pliability, and a change from upright verticality to spiral forms and structures that opened up to reveal internal rhythms."³¹ In 1984 she returned to the spiral in a small bronze sculpture *Spiral Women*, hung from the ceiling that turned in all directions. The spiral expresses an attempt to control chaos while maintaining an overall disorientation of space. A spiral brings two directions together, the force of the centripetal and centrifugal. Everything depends on whether you move from the periphery to the centre or the reverse. For her the spiral can represent the loss of control and the fear of disappearing, as well as – when reversed– the opposite: the force of life itself. *Spiral Women* is a twisted cocoon of polished bronze. "She hangs up. She turns around and she doesn't know her left from her right. What do you think it represents? It represents Louise. This is the way I feel. It doesn't mean that she is bad. It doesn't mean that she is ugly, right? It doesn't mean that she is useless. It just mean that she is herself, hanging, waiting for nobody knows what".³²

The movement from phallic verticality to spiral is exemplified in the sculpture *Intricate Tower* which was displayed with such works as *Inner Ear* and *Lair* at Bourgeois' personal exhibition in 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York. These sculptures seem to grow from within, according to the principle of organic matter. The invisible parts play an important role especially in *Lair*, where, as the artist puts it, especially in *Lairs*, where, as the artist puts it, each, "could be arrested at every level, but in practice each seems to have an internal life which causes it to grow to a certain size."³³ Thus, instead of moving from the detail to the whole, which predominates in modernist art, Louise Bourgeois emphasizes the personal saying, "sculpture is me, my body is my sculpture." Sculpture represents her fears and anxieties. Her creative work is related to the exteriorizing of her subjectivity. As the artist acknowledges "sculpture is a means of being in harmony with others" and that means also with oneself.

But she uses sculpture to overcome childhood trauma, in particular the pressure she felt because her father (whom she resembles physically) wanted a son instead of a daughter. Many of Bourgeois' works, most famously *Fillette* (1968), refer to the traumatic experience of ascribing oneself to a certain gender. She has even said, *Fillette* is "young Louise". This sculpture evokes the question of eroticism in her works, a question she is ambivalent about. "I have been told that there is quite a bit of eroticism in my work. Well of course there is, since I am constantly interested in the human body. But I don't feel the eroticism myself."³⁴

In order to understand the unique sculptural imagination of Louise Bourgeois, let us compare *Fillette* with Albert Giacometti's *Objet Désagréable* (1931). Both are sculptures of a phallus, but each solves the problem of gender identification in a different way. Giacometti's *Objet désagréable* is represented as aggressively male and shocking. The phallic object is deemed unpleasant because of the anxiety it provokes in bourgeois society. *Objet désagréable* is the embodiment of all the urges suppressed in polite society. It is an attempt to present the repressed, to symbolize what is hidden in the unconscious. On the other hand,

31³⁰ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.77

34³¹ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.78

35³² Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.258

36³³ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p. 82

37³⁴ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p. 80

the very name of Bourgeois' work *Fillette* is meant to arouse tenderness. In Robert Mapplethorpe's famous photograph made in 1982, Louise is pictured holding the piece under her arm. She exudes a façade of maternal instinct and humor rather than any sort of erotic feeling. *Fillette* is a portable sculpture, a sculpture without a base, signifying its role as phantasm and fetish. When suspended from the ceiling, *Fillette* creates the sensation that there is no stable position.

This sculpture, like other works of Bourgeois', is not merely corporal. It is a separate object, representing the anatomy of a split "I". Elisabeth Roudinesco³⁵ has argued that such fragmented representations of the human subject (figured as parts rather than wholes) are reflections of the narcissistic wounding of the human subject in the 20th century. In Bourgeois' art her interest in details, in separate objects, is directly related to her personal experience. The artist grew up working in her father's tapestry restoration business where it was necessary to restore lost details or to remove certain body parts, which, potentially, embarrassed puritanical consumers in the early 20th century. In one instance, Bourgeois' mother neatly cut off the genitalia of putti in order to replace them with flowers.

The bronze sculpture *Janus Fleuri*, which Bourgeois created in the same year as *Fillette*, also contains a duality of meaning. It is "symmetrical, like the human body, and it has the scale of those various parts of the body to which it may, perhaps, refer: a double facial mask, two breasts, two knees".³⁶ As in the case of *Fillette*, this is a self-portrait. Critics discuss the bisexuality³⁷ of these works because she does not present the world as an unambiguous division of male and female, active and passive, authoritarian and subordinate, but as an ambivalent space where male and female are in tension.³⁸

In fact, her work seeks to erode the very opposition between male and female. In *Nature Study* (1984-94) (as well as *She-Fox* (1986)) Bourgeois unites not only male and female imagery, but also animal and human. At first glance one sees a female form with many breasts. The merging of female breasts with the presence of a phallus gives *Nature Study* an androgynous character that is then taken one step further with the addition of the imagery of the sphinx. This enigmatic creature therefore represents the duality of human and animal as well as the suggestion of sex. In the neo-classical works of the 1980s, one can see not only Bourgeois' return to the history of sculpture, but a unique reference to the popular practice of culturism, forming and deforming the human body. If one of the sources of culturism lies in the attraction of the classic form, the desire to give to the body a sculptural precision by building up the musculature, then it is possible to imagine the shift of attention from the muscles to certain parts of the body.

³⁸ In her lecture "Why Psychoanalysis?" read on 29 November 2000 at the Institute Francaise in St. Petersburg, the historian of psychoanalysis Elisabeth Rudinesco in particular noted that modern man is no longer suffering primarily from the impossibility of realising this or that sexual fantasy, since the society is liberal enough and democratic. For her what is typical is precisely the narcissistic traumas, since modern man embodies his desires and fantasies not so much in relations with the partner, as in relations with himself.

³⁹ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p. 91

⁴⁰ Seung-Wan Kang. *The Bisexual Imagery in the Work of Louise Bourgeois: The Sapce of Memory*.

⁴¹ In 1978, Louise Bourgeois invited her friends to take part in a living installation, "Confrontation". This work was specially created for the performance "Banquet / Fashion Show of Body Parts" which took place on 21 October 1978 in the Hamilton Gallery in Soho in New York.

The parts of the body, or rather, the protruding and dome-shaped latex forms that resemble parts of the human body, are the central motif of *Destruction of the Father* (1974). *Destruction of the Father* is constructed in the likeness of a cave, with forms that hang down from above and sprout upward from below. Louise Bourgeois created the piece after the death of her husband in 1974. She said the objective was therapeutic, to create a piece that would help rid her of fears that had returned after losing her husband. For instance,

What frightened me was that at the dinner table, my father would go on and on, showing off, aggrandizing himself. And the more he showed off, the smaller we felt. Suddenly there was a terrific tension, and we grabbed him – my brother, my sister, my mother – the three of us grabbed him and pulled him onto the table and pulled his legs and arms apart –dismembered him, right? And we were so successful in beating him up that we ate him up. Finished. It is a fantasy, but sometimes the fantasy is lived...³⁹

Destruction of the Father looks like a table prepared for a cannibal feast. Painted blood-red and illuminated from within, the sculpture serves as an illustration of a totemic meal described by Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo*.⁴⁰ Freud discusses the totemic meal as a recollection of the moment when the sons rise up, kill, and eat the cruel and jealous father, putting an end to the paternal horde. The children's ambivalence – love coupled with destruction and the desire to replace the father – are transferred into the ritual of animal sacrifice and feasting. The animal, as a totem, stands in as a substitute for the father. Freud views the family meal in contemporary society as an echo of the totemic meal. Evidently Louise Bourgeois' reflections and recollections of family meals as scenes controlled by an authoritarian father are transferred literally into *Destruction of the Father*.

The predominant architectural motif of *Destruction of the Father*, taken and developed in the series *Refuges* and *Cells*, is the psychological need to build a nest, lair, shelter, or place where it is possible to conceal oneself from danger. (One dinnertime ritual her father would engage in was to make a small useless figure from an orange peel and then call it "Louise".⁴¹) In part this building of a refuge resembles the child's desire to screen him or her self from the adults' world, to construct a private space, hiding under a table covered with a table cloth, or wrapped in old tapestries.

Articulated Lair was made in 1986 and is the first in the series of *Cells*. The *Cells* are different from spontaneous sculptures, which, "are subordinated to a certain dynamism of emotions, the desire to express something quickly, without being interrupted". On the contrary the *Cells* take "great restraint, care, reflection, and time" to mount because they are made up of so many different parts. The word "articulated" suggests "the possibility of endless minor changes and adjustments."⁴² The fragments of the installation, made from black rubber, evoke a variety of associations reminding us how, as in poetry, there is always a hidden

⁴³³⁹ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.158

⁴⁴⁴⁰ The artist said once that Freud and Lacan gave nothing to artists, betrayed her expectations, just as her father also did.

⁴⁵⁴¹ The artist told about this in the film by Camille Guichard: Louise Bourgeois. *Entretiens réalisés par Bernard Marcadé et Jerry Gorovoy* (New York, février 1993). Un film de Camille Guichard. Mémoire.

⁴⁶⁴² Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.85

meaning.⁴³ Bourgeois' works draw on the principle of free association regardless of the result. "The forms have a language understood by a few...Symbols can be literal and literary as in Surrealism or they can be suggestive as in abstract art."⁴⁴ Ultimately, what is most important is for the viewer to discover associations between objects and symbols for her or himself; associations ranging from pleasure to fear.

The title *Cells* contains the double meaning of the prison cell that deprives one of freedom, and the biological cell that gives life. Similarly the physical space of each *Cell* is closed and hermetic while also quite accessible to our gaze. One can look through the windows and doors and sometimes enter and sit inside. Several *Cells* are viewed through transparent grilles. But the objects in the installation also evoke a domestic space. The bed, lamp, chair, table, glass dishes, medical bed-pan in *Cell I* are commonplace objects that are quite familiar. Even the windows and doors, serving as a boundary between the outer and inner world, have their associations. They protect not from cold and hostile weather, but from fear and anxiety. "The *Cells* represent different types of pain: the physical, the emotional and psychological, and the mental and intellectual."⁴⁵ Each object relates to the artist's personal recollections and is therefore a metaphor. The bed can be a symbol of insomnia; the glass vessels, a symbol of human brittleness; the hands a symbol of protection. The artist's words are also sewn onto sheets in phrases that speak about memory ("I need my memories: they are my documents"), about pain ("Pain is the ransom of formalism"), and the healing character of art ("Art is the guaranty of sanity"). In sum, her art contains one protagonist – the artist herself. This is in contrast to an artist such as Ilya Kabakov who places various characters into his claustrophobic installations.⁴⁶ These artists articulate two poles of human experience. Bourgeois stresses individual experience to the point of solipsism, while Kabakov presents us with the experience of living collectively in Soviet communal flats.

Of additional importance is the way the *Cells* invert the relationship between public and private space. In fact the separation between internal space (in terms of an internal state) and external space is represented in an ambivalent manner. The *Cells* are like topography of spiritual life in which each event is portrayed in terms of a particular scale. Scale is also important in the *Spider* series where questions of size, fragility and equilibrium are evoked. Enlarged a thousand times each *Spider* grows into an architectural structure where its legs resemble the flying buttresses of a Gothic cathedral. The sculpture stands without supports and foundations as a gigantic bronze insect that seems to force the environment around it to oscillate. Like an actual spider swaying in a wind swept web, it is never in a state of complete rest. Although of unnerving proportions akin to the giant's relation to the Lilliputian's in Gulliver's Travels, *Spider* does not evoke fear. On the contrary, *Spider* is a symbol of the maternal. In *Nest* the artist places smaller, hence infant, spiders inside the larger sculpture. Here the artist once again creates her own mythology where the common perception of the bloodthirstiness of the female spider, which devours her partners, is replaced by the spider that is welcome because it devours harmful insects. It is the patience of the spider that sits motionless for hours, combined with diligence as it spins its web, which reminds Bourgeois of her mother.

⁴⁷⁴³ Author would love to thank you writer and editor Thierry Cabot for underlining this poetic side of Bourgeois's works

⁴⁸⁴⁴ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.75

⁴⁹⁴⁵ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.205

⁵⁰⁴⁶ The author expresses her thanks to the artist and writer Pavel Pepperstein, in a conversation with whom this comparison was made.

At the end of the 19th century the renowned French psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot published *Iconographie Photographique*,⁴⁷ a book of photographs cataloguing the poses of his female patient's during hysterical attacks.⁴⁸ According to Charcot parallels may be drawn between the iconography of gestures used by ancient masters to express certain interior states and the gestures of hysterical patients. *(Cell) Arch of Hysteria* (1992) executed in bronze, is of a decapitated male body (cast from the actual body of Bourgeois' long time assistant Jerry Gorovoy). According to Bourgeois *(Cell) Arch of Hysteria*, "deals with emotional and psychological pain. Here is the arch of hysteria, pleasure and pain emerged in a state of happiness".⁴⁹ The following year she made *Hysterical Arc* (1993), a suspended sculpture mirroring the suspension of time and space that takes place during a hysterical attack. *Hysterical Arc* embodies the sculptor's rejection of the law of gravity. She achieves a state of weightlessness within the boundaries of the earth's surface (as opposed to the condition of weightlessness that Malevich – rejecting the "worm-eaten earth" altogether– aspired towards).

Although Louise Bourgeois is one of the most important artists of our time, recognition came quite late. Yet it is better this way: "I made my art as a means of survival. It was basic necessity for me... I have ridden out my success because it was not really the purpose of my work to be successful. My work will outlive its success, be more enduring and stronger than success."⁵⁰ Remarkably, this maverick artist who cannot be placed neatly into any one category and never followed artistic fashions, has managed to become one of the "major" enduring artists of our time. Contemporary art means "that you have to keep finding new ways to express yourself, to express the problems, that there are no settled ways, no fixed approach".⁵¹ It is precisely this personal approach to art, where each spiritual trauma is expressed, which makes her work so important as we cross the boundary from one century to the next. The art of Louise Bourgeois turns us towards our internal life and seems to be the best model for creating a universal language in art as well as a "correct" model in life. Yet, the emphasis on human individuality, which seems incompatible with truth as it is sought in social-political utopias, ironically, is brought about at the price of this individuality. In sum, having become the embodiment of human sufferings released from Pandora's box, we find in the art of Louise Bourgeois we are destined to exist between eternity and the present, between past and future, between fear and hope.

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⁵¹⁴⁷ On the photographs of Charcot see: Griselda Pollock. Abandoned at the mouth of hell or a second look that does not kill: the uncanny coming to matrixal memory. Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's Eurydie 1992-1996// Doctor and Patient. Memory and Amnesia. Sergei Bugaev Afrika & Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Porin Taidemuseo, 1997, p.138-139

⁵²⁴⁸ Later on Freud who studied at Charcot demonstrated that men can also be hysterical.

⁵³⁴⁹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.207

⁵⁴⁵⁰ Louise Bourgeois in: Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. Louise Bourgeois: The Secret, p.37

⁵⁵⁵¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.166

Endnotes

¹ The author expresses her thanks to one of the most influential scholars of ancient Greek thought, Jean-Pierre Vernant, whose lecture "Pandora – the first Woman", presented at the Institute Francaise in St. Petersburg on 5 December 2000, served as the impetus for these thoughts on the symbolic meaning of Pandora.

³ Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998, p.16.

⁴ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father. Reconstruction of the Father. Writings and Interviews 1923-1997. Edited and with texts by Marie-Laure Bernardac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. (London: Violette Editions), 1998, p.132.

⁵ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.277.

⁷ For example, one of the artist's personal exhibitions held in 2000 in the National Museum of Modern Art, Korea called: Louise Bourgeois: The Space of Memory. September 7 – November 5, 2000.

⁸ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.83

⁹ Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells, p.61

¹⁰ On the special imagistic features of V. Tatlin's "Monument to the III International" and about differences between his artistic work as a whole and the works of Constructivist artists, see: Anatolij Strigalev. *Vladimir Tatlin. Eine Retrospektive. Vladimir Tatlin. Retrospective*. DuMont. Buchverlag, Köln, 1993; Vasilii Rakitin, *The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers. The Great Utopia*. Guggenheim Museum, N.Y., 1993

¹¹ The expression belongs to Yevgeny Kovtun, who was one of the leading specialists in the field of research on the Russian avant-garde in the 1970s –90s.

¹² Not to mention such literary personages as Nadia, who served as the prototype for the work of the same name by Andre Breton. Even Leonora Carrington, a writer and artist, with whom Louise Bourgeois participated in an exhibition «The Women» at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery in New York in 1945 was perceived rather as a personage of the surrealist drama, «femme-enfant» and «wild muse», as Breton expressed it.

¹³ On the theory of displacement, Sigmund Freud wrote, in particular in the works "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's "Gradiva" " (1906) and "Repression" (1915). The author expresses her gratitude to the art critic and psychoanalyst Viktor Mazin for pointing out these and other psychoanalytic sources, that were used in the process of writing this article.

¹⁴ The parent-child relationships in later Bourgeois works have been analysed by Frances Morris. *A Family Affair Louise Bourgeois*. Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd, Millbank, London, 2000, p.17.

¹⁵ Critics consider Bourgeois' decision to leave France a form of escape. In New York she took classes at the Art Students League where she studied with Vaclav Vytlacil and began to associate with art critics, gallery owners, and artists. "I made friends with American artists who were my age and I showed with them at the Peridot Gallery from 1949 to 1953, at Norlyst and at Egan, which was one of the key galleries for the Abstract Expressionists. And Alfred Barr was a supporter from the beginning. He included me in an early panel discussion along with de Kooning and the rest". (Louise Bourgeois in: Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. p.37) Their house was often visited by such famous art historians as Alfred Barr,

Clement Greenberg, Meyer Shapiro, and Erwin Panofsky. Louise Bourgeois and her husband Robert Goldwater associated with gallery owners Peggy Guggenheim, Leo Castelli, and Pierre Matisse, American artists such as John Cage and Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Mark Rothko, as well as European artists who had emigrated in America, such as André Breton and Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and Fernand Léger, and Piet Mondrian and Yves Tanguy. (Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.244)

16¹ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.177

17¹ See: Rosi Hunh. *Louise Bourgeois: Deconstructing the Phallus within the Exile of th Self. Inside the Visible*. An elliptical traverse of 20th century art. in, of, and from feminine. Curated and edited by M. Catherine de Zegher. The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. The Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrijk, Flandres. Les editions La Chambre, 1996.

18¹ According to the definition of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. *La Mentalité Primitive*. Paris: Retz, 1976

19¹ On syncretic thought applied to children's thinking, see: Jean Piaget. *The Speech and Thought of the Child*. Moscow: Pedagogika-Press, 1994. Anton Ehrenzweig wrote about syncretic thinking in the context of artistic creativity. See: *The Hidden Order of Art*. London: Weidenfeld, 1993

20¹ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.77

21¹ Since these parallels seem to us quite interesting and important, we will permit ourselves an expanded quotation of one of the leading psychiatrists, V. P. Samokhvalov (The problem of interpretation of symptoms in psychiatry. Lecture at the Freudian Dream Museum.// *Transfer-Express*, no.1, St. Petersburg, 2000, p. 7-8): «Among the Khanty there is a custom: as soon as a person dies, at the moment of his death, the relatives prepare a figure of the deceased. It is made of rags, its face is not marked. The figure is approximately 25 cm high and also 25 cm wide. 4 cords are wound around the figure by women, and 5 by men, because the Khanty believe that women have 4 souls and men - 5, and the woman gives one soul to the first-born child. They talk constantly with the effigy, give it to friends... They take it when they go visiting, feed it, place it at the head of the bed. The uninterrupted association with it lasts 5 years. If several of a person's close relatives died, then he/ she joins the figures with cords and carries them on his/ her belt. At the end of the 5 years for men, and 4 years for women – it's a strange period of time, as though corresponding to the ontogenesis of some sorrow – a little house is prepared on a post for the figure. ... because it is important for this object to exist after death, because it should be present and because in one culture it exists like a photograph of the deceased or the belongings of the deceased, and in another culture, it exists almost metaphorically, almost a complete figure of the deceased»

22¹ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.66

23¹ As also in the case of Marcel Duchamps' «ready-made» which got its “names” later on.

24¹ It is interesting that Louise Bourgeois' husband, Robert Goldwater, wrote a book on the influence of "primitive" art on contemporary artists. However, the artist says that she is not very interested in this art.

25¹ This passion was general. It is enough to point to the books of Vladimir Markov, such as, for example, "The Art of Easter Island" (St. Petersburg, 1914), or "Art of the Negroes", which the artist prepared for publication in 1914, but which was published posthumously in Petrograd in 1919. For more detail about Markov's role in the discovery of African art see: E. F. Kovtun: Vladimir Markov and the Discovery of African Art // *Monuments of Culture: Writing. Art. Archaeology: New Discoveries*. Annual. 1980. Leningrad, 1981.

26¹ Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father*, p.228

27¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.220 The paradoxical nature of such a statement by Louise Bourgeois partly resembles the history connected with the famous French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who once announced that there is no cosmos, the cosmos is a point of view. See in: Elizabeth Roudinesco. Lacan. Fayard, 1993, p.365

28¹ Riner Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. Louise Bourgeois: The Secret..., p.39

29¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.84

30¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.77

31¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.78

32¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.258

33¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p. 82

34¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p. 80

35¹ In her lecture "Why Psychoanalysis?" read on 29 November 2000 at the Institute Francaise in St. Petersburg, the historian of psychoanalysis Elizabeth Rudinesco in particular noted that modern man is no longer suffering primarily from the impossibility of realising this or that sexual fantasy, since the society is liberal enough and democratic. For her what is typical is precisely the narcissistic traumas, since modern man embodies his desires and fantasies not so much in relations with the partner, as in relations with himself.

36¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p. 91

37¹ Seung-Wan Kang. The Bisexual Imagery in the Work of Louise Bourgeois: The Sapce of Memory.

38¹ In 1978, Louise Bourgeois invited her friends to take part in a living installation, "Confrontation". This work was specially created for the performance "Banquet / Fashion Show of Body Parts" which took place on 21 October 1978 in the Hamilton Gallery in Soho in New York.

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47¹ On the photographs of Charcot see: Griselda Pollock. Abandoned at the mouth of hell or a second look that does not kill: the uncanny coming to matrixal memory. Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's Eurydie 1992-1996// Doctor and Patient. Memory and Amnesia. Sergei Bugaev Afrika & Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Porin Taidemuseo, 1997, p.138-139

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51¹ Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father, p.166