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I need memories. They are my documents. I keep watch over them. They are my provocation and I am intensely jealous of them.

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The work of Louise Bourgeois, in all of its fascinating material, symbolic and conceptual dimensions, appears to be, still today, covered with so many veils that enclose yet so many interpretative possibilities. When thinking about the possibility of conceptualizing feminist creativity as a set of processes – a specific feminist *praxis*, that is, a category for thinking feminist agency and not just as a method in itself – we turn to the evolutionary process of the line in Bourgeois' books and how it clusters materials and ideas that have a particular and significant evolution in the artist's work.

The fact that the work that marked Louise Bourgeois's option for three-dimensionality is a book strikes us as highly significant, even though one of her goals when starting to make books in the late 1940s was to make her work more widely known¹. However, what could this mean and what are the implications of such a detail in terms of the way we look at Bourgeois' overall work? The "multiple juxtapositions" in Louise Bourgeois's work² become particularly evident when we look at her books. Through them, I will try to conceptualize "weaving" in Bourgeois' books as an archival practice. Here, I am considering weaving as a concept and not only as a material practice related to craft and textiles, even though it is not separate from these. This metaphorical exercise traces a path where we start to think of the lines of drawing as threads and drawing itself as fabric; moreover, in Bourgeois, there is the clear relation of this idea of thread to that of a spider web's, going back to the etymological root of the word "weave" (stemming from the Greek 'web' and from the Sanskrit 'spider', according to the Oxford dictionary). But the line is not just a trace or a thread, it is also a foundation, the basis for some sort of construction, that can be a house, a web, a book, or an archive. It is clear that, as Lucy Lippard remarked, Louise Bourgeois' oeuvre is not just to be addressed from a strictly formal point of view, looking at formal

¹According to information on Louise Bourgeois' daybooks indicated in Deborah Wye, *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994).

²Ibid., 98.

influences, for there is a strong animism inherent to her practice³. But still, one must remember that she studied mathematics, philosophy and her love of numbers and geometry is highly noted. As Lippard states in this regard, in spite of the deep psychological roots of her work, “it would, however, to be a mistake to see Bourgeois as the classically ‘feminine’ artist, adrift in memory and intuition, for her first formal ‘revelation’, and the origin of her love for sculpture was solid geometry”⁴. It thus seems particularly relevant that any attempt to think about Bourgeois’ work might take this dialectic between time (memory) and space as a starting ground. Also, to look at Bourgeois’ ‘weaving’ as a specific feminist practice is to be seen as metaphorical exercise based on form and not just psychological or symbolic content in the line of Briony Fer who said that “it’s not the gender that I claim to be metaphorical, but the form gender may take in an art work”⁵.

So, let’s start by looking at that shifting artistic object: *He disappeared into complete silence*⁶, a book made in 1947, which marks the transition from two to three-dimensionality, that is, from painting to sculpture, motivated by the fact that she was “not satisfied by its level of reality”⁷. Recognized nowadays as a touchstone for her oeuvre, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* followed an early period in which Bourgeois was dedicated mostly to painting before taking a definite turn to sculpture. It included a text and “nine engravings, three with dry point, limited to 44 numbered and signed copies, of which numbers 1 to 15 form a *de luxe* edition hand colored by the artist. Engraving brought fascination precisely for the fact that it introduced her to three-dimensionality. For Mignon Nixon, “this small, simply presented booklet has the status of an inaugural work. In it, the critic says, Bourgeois offers her blueprint for the construction of a «fantastic reality»”⁸ and can also be related to Duchamp’s seminal work *The bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even (The large Glass, 1915-1923)*⁹,

³ Lucy Lippard, "Louise Bourgeois: From the inside Out," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, ed. Lucy Lippard (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁵ Briony Fer, "What's in a Line? Gender and Modernity," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 1 (1990): 77.

⁶ Louise Bourgeois, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* (New York: Gemor Press, 1947). Introduction by Marius Bewley. Details and images available on the website <http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/lb/books/books>.

⁷ Louise Bourgeois quoted in Deborah Wye, *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 18.

⁸ Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*, October Books (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2005), 7/8.

⁹ The influence and admiration towards Duchamp was acknowledged by Bourgeois herself who even said “Marcel Duchamp could have been my father”. Donald Kuspit, *Bourgeois: An Interview with Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 31. Rosalind Krauss was the first one to address this direct

although it “reinterprets Duchamp’s autoerotic machinery of part-objects as, instead, a demonstration of schizoid mechanisms of defense. In this way, Bourgeois exposes a latent auto-aggression – or death drive – in the part-object logic of Duchamp’s production”¹⁰. It is quite inevitable to note the importance this idea of part-body/part-object had in the reception of Bourgeois’ work, particularly in its feminist critical guises¹¹. The book, already made in New York, also followed the two-dimensional series *Femme-Maison* (1945-47), which makes the discussion around the relation of the body, the part-object and the house even more relevant.

This small booklet starts by telling the story of a man who missed a date with a woman, and the engravings that follow, made mostly out of straight lines, depict architectural structures, elevator shafts, ladders that lead to nowhere, cranes, water towers, a lighthouse, a guillotine. And the stories that follow keep appearing in a sequence of incommunicable parts at each turn of the page. Plate 3 is next to a text that astonishingly synthesizes this process of incommunicability:

Once a man was telling a story,
it was a very good story too, and
it made him very happy, but he
told it so fast that nobody understood it.

The plate however, depicts three vertical structures, three sets of vertical lines that had the same title as the whole book and the alternative titles *Three Figures* and *New York USA*. Referring to these three ‘figures’, Bourgeois talks about a relational narrative that adds up to this incommunicability between herself (the figure on the left side), the moving lighthouse (in the middle) and a third party on the right. She says: “These are creatures of dignity, not of hostility. They are desperate to the right thing. The lighthouse is there to throw light... to give guidance. But it is a difficult world... The left is *moi*; the other two are always moving and manipulating. Even the lighthouse

relation with Duchamp and *The Large Glass* in her essay Rosalind Krauss, "Louise Bourgeois: The Portrait of the Artist as Fillette," in *Bachelors* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999).

¹⁰Nixon, *Fantastic Reality. Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*, 8.

¹¹Nixon recalls the importance of Louise Bourgeois’ objects in the gender politics of postmodernism (Ibid.). In this respect one must inevitably consider Rosalind Krauss’ *The Portrait of the Artist as Fillette* in which the author the part-object in Bourgeois’ sculpture in light of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of desiring machine. Krauss, "Louise Bourgeois: The Portrait of the Artist as Fillette."

moves closer, inviting jealousy. There are differences within relationships”¹². Such inability to communicate is probably one of the main issues enclosed in *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*; it is somehow a feeling that emerges in each engraving whether by enclosure, whether by reaching dead ends. And here, the line, the basis or foundation of drawing as practice, acquires here a certain sculptural quality (due to the engraving process). It acquires depth. And the superposition of lines actually goes hand in hand with the book, an object that can be described as a layered, pliable structure. It is a noticeable fact that this particular book was produced after Bourgeois arrival to New York in 1938 after marrying art historian Robert Goldwater. The city of skyscrapers brought in her a growing preoccupation with “the relation of one person to his/surroundings”¹³ that was “augmented by her spatial fascination with and alienation from New York”¹⁴. Bourgeois did not have the intention of matching the parables with literal plates, so the reading of this book cannot be straightforward and this also reveals that language is not a surrogate of the image. Language assumes a very specific role in her work, it is a “strategy in itself”, as Deborah Wye puts it¹⁵, quoting Bourgeois, who thinks “words out in connection open up new relations... a new view of things”¹⁶. There is always a narrative aspect to the images, that opens up the limits of the images, that allow them to mutate constantly instead of fixing them in a particular reading or meaning.

The book can actually work here as a space in which this difficult sense of alienation can actually be restrained. The overwhelming sense of alienation expressed in these prints seems to be balanced by the medium, by its small dimensions, its close connection with the reader and its ability to contain something, to provide an “inside” for this intangible, unlimited and uninhabited space. I would like to focus on the importance of the line on this whole dynamics of space, since each line of a drawing can be seen as a different space, a different level that keeps being added to another one; the overlapping of lines, eventually, starts to be an intertwining of lines when Bourgeois starts making web-like forms. In a certain way, the same evolution can be seen in her books, not in terms of what they depict, of the images they enclose, but in terms of the objects themselves. One can imagine how a traditional line in a drawing can correspond

¹² Bourgeois quoted in Wye, *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois*, 80.

¹³ Louise Bourgeois quoted in Lippard, "Louise Bourgeois: From the inside Out," 239.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Wye, *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois*, 72.

¹⁶ Ibid.

to the geometry of the traditional page and, later on, how the lines that compose a web's drawing (*Ode à ma mère*, 1995) start to entangle, corresponding to the threads that add up to form the fabric she used in works like *Ode à l'oubli* (2002) or *Ode à la Bièvre* (2002).

In another one of her book projects, *The Puritan* (1990)¹⁷, Bourgeois reveals how geometry is central in work, assuming the importance of 'a tool of understanding', moving from the "rigidity of the Euclidean towards freedom"¹⁸. This movement towards freedom is expressed in the evolution of the line in the plates that constitute this books, or from straight, grid like shapes to round, cocoon like or oval shapes that share a space in the book with ladder like forms. In 1947, Bourgeois wrote about the plates assembled in his book, always intertwining the layers of form, psychology and narrative: "All these plates are different. These are optical illusions... all have more than one meaning. You have one reality, I have another reality. How much liberty will geometry take... how much will you take? What are the limits before it snaps? There is always fear of losing consciousness of one's limits... But the optical illusions are comforting... they have a measure of secrecy. People don't know what you are talking about. They force you to adjust your vision. You can not be so rigid... You must adjust to the picture"¹⁹.

In a wonderful reflection on the role of drawing in Bourgeois' oeuvre, *De fil en aiguille, l'écheveau du dessin*²⁰, Marie-Laure Bernardac writes about the significance of drawing and how it can somehow be seen a form of writing. These "dessins-écriture" that reveal an "organic vitality" are, for Bernardac, closely linked to Bourgeois activity in her parents tapestry restoration business²¹. It is, as she notes, an immediate form that gives the artist an easier and more direct way to access all the levels of her psyche and of her memory. So, the line becomes *fil* (thread) entangling in the drawing as *écheveau* (a spool of yarn), acquiring the same formal characteristics of a spider's web. Bernardac makes a point by emphasizing the metaphor of the line as thread: "Prenant à la lettre la métaphor du trait comme fil, Louise Bourgeois a mis au point une technique particulière

¹⁷ Louise Bourgeois, *The Puritan* (New York: Osiris, 1990). Details and images available on the website <http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/lb/books/books>.

¹⁸ Bourgeois quoted in *ibid.*, 1991.

¹⁹ Bourgeois quoted in Wye, *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois*, 191.

²⁰ Marie-Laure Bernardac, "De Fil En Aiguille, Lécheveu Du Dessin," in *Louise Bourgeois. Pensées-Plumes* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou/Cabinet d'Art Graphique, 1995).

²¹ "L'apparition du dessin dans la vie et l'oeuvre de Louise Bourgeois ne tenait qu'à un fil, celui fragile et ténu des tapisseries lacunaires et usages que restauraient ses parents dans l'atelier de Choisy-le-Roi". *Ibid.*, 5.

de dessin, aisément reconnaissable et très personnelle, qui lui permet toutes les variantes formelles ou iconographiques”²². We can here establish a clear relation of the drawing becoming more structural, more sculptural, which in case of Louise Bourgeois actually comes to being effective and not just metaphorical. In the same way that the line of the drawing transforms itself in a material structure and body (the spider’s web and the actual spider, who builds the web) so do her books progress into a kind of habitable structure that encloses memories, therefore becoming an issue of entanglement of time into space and of space into time. Let’s take, for example, *Ode a ma mère* (1995)²³, in which the spider appears as a figurative element, since the nine dry points are still have the line as its structure. Here, we get to know the story about this spider that is “tired” and that “leans against the wall”. In plate number three, the represented spider becomes more vertical, and her body, that is much bigger than the head, almost blends in with the line of the corner where she stands looking up to a small web above her. This plate anticipates the next one, in which two spider are, as the text goes, “Caught in a web of fear / La toile de l’araignée / The Deprived Woman”²⁴. In these plates, the lines of the drawing have a more organic and less geometric quality which somehow relates to the story of a body, a woman’s body, that is being told. At a certain point, the spider even becomes something close to a spool of yarn, from which fat, augmented spider’s legs come out with a pair of eyes in the middle. The story goes on, reminiscent of a family episode, talking about fear, guilt, punishment and (the lack of) redemption and shame, then coming to an end when the spider starts metamorphosing into something else, by having two human-like heads attached to her body. These phantasmagoric small heads are neither clearly feminine nor masculine, and it seems as if the body lost its structure as it progressively became more organic, having lost its referent with the architectural dimension of the drawings.

Like the spider’s web, the book itself is a construction, a layered construction, an architectural object that is also a home, with a memory, a before and an after, with an inside and an outside. In a way, one can say that Bourgeois’ fabric books make this even more evident, as they also relate in a closer and perhaps more direct way with some of her sculptural work. In *Ode à L’Oubli* (2002)²⁵, Bourgeois uses fabrics that she kept

²²Ibid., 11.

²³Louise Bourgeois, *Ode À Ma Mère* (Paris: Les Éditions du Solstice, 1995).

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵*Ode À L’oubli* (New York: Peter Blum Edition, 2003-2004). Fabric illustrated book with 35 compositions: 32 fabric collages, 2 with ink additions, and 3 lithographs (including cover). Description

throughout the years²⁶; she thus constructed a book from part of her material memories; or, said in a different way, she constructed a sculptural book that works as a house for the material form of her memories. *Ode à l'Oubli* is built from monogrammed linen towels with the embroidered initials LBG (Louise Bourgeois Goldwater) that were folded to form pages and then bind together with a cover²⁷. The “sense of metamorphosis” created by the turning of the pages in this fabric book described by Wye²⁸ finds a strict correlation to that of the forms and figures we identified previously, between straight lines and rounds, spider and human, body and house.

The importance of the house in Bourgeois’ work, and the fact that it relates deeply to issues of memory, entangling both space and time, has been noted by several writers and scholars. Charlotta Kotika writes: “This recurrence is understandable in view of the artist’s concentration on the psychological drama evolving in her own oeuvre for the past five decades; this drama takes place in the spaces of familial, social gathering or in solitary, isolated realms provided by man’s habitat. The house becomes a major catalyst for memory, for it is in this certain and defined locale that the range of human relationships and feelings – from the most primary to the most complex – take place. The image of the house represents the topography of our most intimate selves and relates to a spectrum of experiences connected with the universe of our first domicile”.²⁹ It is, therefore, very interesting to recognize the close relationship between the house and the body, as both items of confinement or protection, but also of escape³⁰ particularly a woman’s body. As Bourgeois herself said, “since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body”³¹. However significant, the relevance of the house as visual and symbolic apparatus, is mostly ascribed to the tendency of reading work in light of the artists’ biography, even though one does not intend to neglect such a relevance, we will not add many more lines to this narrative,

and images available on the website <http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/lb/books/books>. For more on Bourgeois’ fabric works see Germano Celant, *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works* (Milão: Skira, 2007).

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²⁷ This description is based in Deborah Wye’s text on *Ode à l’oubli*. Deborah Wye, “Louise Bourgeois,” in *Modern Women. Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: MoMA, 2010).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Charlotta Kotik, “The Locus of Memory: An Introduction to the Work of Louise Bourgeois,” in *Louise Bourgeois. The Locus of Memory, Works 1982-1993* (1994), 24-25.

³⁰ The image of the *Femme-Maison* drawings come to mind here as more literal expressions of this idea.

³¹ Louise Bourgeois quoted in Kotik, “The Locus of Memory: An Introduction to the Work of Louise Bourgeois,” 24.

embarking on an effort close to that of Mieke Bal³² when trying to elude the reductive biographism in the critical writing around Bourgeois's work for, as she states "theoretical reason can be alleged against biographism"³³. Bourgeois' statements counter the theoretical proposition of at least this one of her works. For the explicit statement of the artist about *her* work cannot account for the spider's most decisive contribution to the work's *affect*³⁴.

The book, as a sum of layers, be they pages, images, words or materials, works as an arc from which meaning is drawn through the act of engaging with a body – viewer and reader. And it does not only enclose images that evoke time and spatial relations. It is in itself an object with its own temporality and spatiality. Besides, it engages with the viewer producing yet other levels of relationship – we might talk about a lived spatiality, or the art object as a space were something more than the passive act of seeing is put into action. As Ulisses Carrión puts it, "a book is a sequence of spaces. Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment – a book is also a sequence of moments"³⁵. The relational character of the book, encompassing both space and time, is one of the most interesting characteristics in the books by Louise Bourgeois. One might say that they, in a certain way, act as foundational acts for her entire practice, either by inaugurating actual shifts (*He disappeared into complete silence*), either by synthesizing deep concerns, unveiling material processes, meanings and memories that are somehow secluded in such a multiple and complex work. The book as an artistic form as therefore an archeological vocation for it intertwines rhythm and action in its relationship to the viewer/reader/engager and it also works a site of re-collection in which memory is inscribed. It is, thus, an archive³⁶ in itself. Metonymically, weaving, in Bourgeois' artist

³² Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' spider. The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

³³ Mignon Nixon also stands with position, saying that "too often, the variety and discontinuity of Bourgeois' art have given rise to strict biographical interpretations". Nixon, *Fantastic Reality. Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*.

³⁴ Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' spider. The Architecture of Art-Writing*, 73.

³⁵ Ulisses Carrión, "The New Art of Making Books," in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology And Sourcebook*, ed. Joan Lyons (New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1985), 31.

³⁶ The construction of an archive implies certain attributes: it is a recollection of items in a specific, common, space that put the past in relation to the present, bringing forward issues of memory, repetition, reproduction but also of power, for it confronts reality and representation, virtual and actual. As Jacques Derrida defines in *Archive Fever*, there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation". It therefore enacts a set of time/space relations that can be both constructive and destructive. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

books, can thus also be considered as an archival practice for the way the lines of the drawing come to gether into particular forms that both dialogue with the form of the book and with the totality of her work. The book is, here, a particular fertile ground from which all of these aspects emerge countless times, in countless ways, with every turn of a page.

Bio note:

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