

# Cell VII:

*Catalogue for  
an Attempt at  
Repair*



Louise Bourgeois, *Cell VII*, 1998

### Abode

- A place of residence, a lair or home. To find shelter in the inevitable language that rises to meet us. To nestle into words. A room to fill and drain of content, to meet and let go.
- Artist Louise Bourgeois' *Cell VII* (1997), exhibited in 'The Woven Child' at Hayward Gallery (2022), consisting of seven doors hinged to contain an assemblage of found and made objects that relate to the anxiety of separation from the artist's mother, such as the spectral toy mansion elevated on the left-hand corner: a model of the house in Choisy-le-Roi, south of Paris, where Bourgeois spent her childhood by the river Bièvre.
- After her mother's death in 1932, Bourgeois was overwhelmed by a "rage to understand"<sup>i</sup> the nature of her emotions about this loss. Her concern with types of enclosure manifest throughout her work (the *Femme-Maison* painting series of the 1940s, the *Lairs* of the 1960s and the *Cells* of the 1990s) bear witness to this fixation with containment as a form of repair, an attempt to resist rupture, to keep things whole.
- For Bourgeois, house and body were one – both fragmented, both containing:

scalp  
 The forehead  
 The ears  
 The base of the skull  
 The back of the neck  
 The back between the shoulder blades  
 The base of the ribs – <sup>ii</sup>

### The Locations

born in Paris in 1911 – 174 Bd St  
 German  
 Above the Café de Flore      familial to  
    say the  
    least  
    traditional

Choisy-le-Roi on the Seine  
 Antony on the Bièvre  
 Aubusson on the Creuse  
 Le Cannet on the siarne Canal de la  
 Siagne. <sup>iii</sup>

## Arise

- To begin to occur or to exist. A coming into being or attention of words, moods, things.
- To arise implies an absence of will. That which we encounter we cannot desire into existence. We could say the work of Louise Bourgeois was to observe what arises to the point of being “so tired. To observe is too much.”<sup>iv</sup> What kinds of arisings did she latch on to? Facts of feeling.
- Our practice as writers is not dissimilar, so that we might gather impressions, ideas and language into an environment and document things grow.
- To weave the sprouting words into a fabric with which to mend or gesture our attempt at mending, the same way Bourgeois repeatedly enacted (without conclusion) the patching of her wounds.

## Attempt

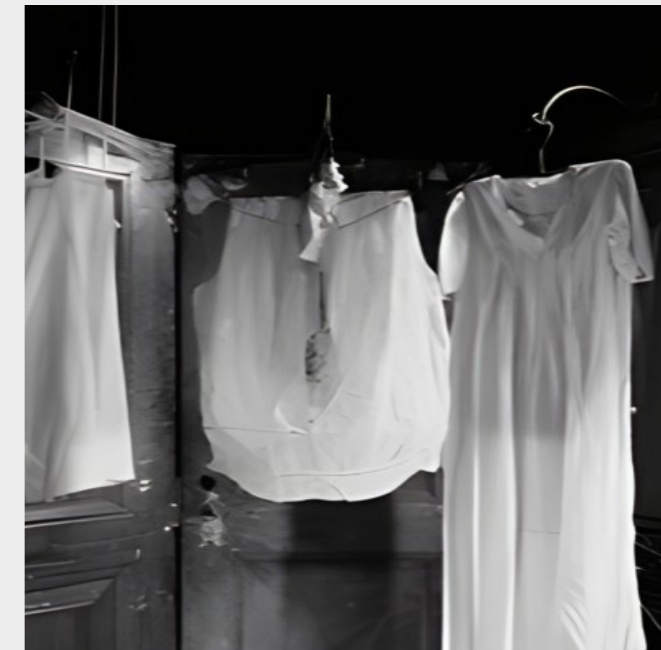
- To write a text about the attempt at repair as a form of repair itself. Bourgeois presents broken objects that have attempts at restoration rather than being completely fixed. In their new condition they acquire a new life that is as entire, even if it demands to learn to be content with the presence of absence as a surrogate for the presence of wholeness. Similarly, Bourgeois’ use of language to cultivate order by means of list-making – of writing thousands of loose sheets with inventories of words, phrases, and names – stems from the same urge to repair.
- My attempt at writing a list of definitions about Cell VII to blur the boundary between language and sculpture as different iterations of the same conduit; one that generates forms of classification to make sense of loss and fragmentation, whether that is by writing hundreds of lists or assembling sixty versions of the Cells over twenty years. To think of this conduit as a meaning-making vessel, so that containment and the fluid contained become the key notions through which to think about the nuanced relationship between words and objects and how they reveal the different attempts at repair sought by Bourgeois: physical, psychological, and semantic. Particularly regarding the loss of her mother, to which Cell VII makes constant allusion.

## Bone

- That which gives shape to a body.
- The cattle bones from which the nightgowns of Bourgeois’ mother hang in Cell VII, as if the memory of her being floated in the womb that is the room. A lump of sacral vertebrae juts out of white lingerie like the head of a foetus in the process of emerging from an amoeboid, pre-organized state.
- Take the b from bone and you get one. Word and bone share the same irreducible quality of the unit. Bones lock into a skeleton the same way words latch into a sentence. Yet words can also unroot bones from their structural performance and turn them into skin. I grab Louise Gluck’s *The First Five Books of Poems* from the shelf and read –

Bone-  
pale, the recent snow  
Fastens like fur to the river.<sup>v</sup>

- To the river Bièvre, which Louise Bourgeois loved so much.



## Care

- To consider the act of reparation, such as Bourgeois' attempt to reconstruct complex childhood feelings in Cell VII, as symptomatic of the psychological impulse to make amends.
- To forge a subtle sense of connection and attempt at atonement by embodying repressed feelings through the act of making, where the effort involved summons convoluted emotions such as guilt and gratitude. Bourgeois says

I need to make things. The physical interaction with the medium has a curative effect.<sup>vi</sup>

- Take the steel spider, nightgowns, and the cast wax bed in Cell VII, all of which are reminiscent of Bourgeois' mother, as examples of the attempt to darn the hole left by her absence. What absolves the consistent attempt and failure to decisively repair? The implicit act of care.

## Catalogue

- A complete list of items, typically one in alphabetical or other systematic order such as the ones exhaustively put together by Bourgeois, a self-proclaimed "petite glossarienne."<sup>vii</sup> She wrote lists of rivers from her childhood, houses she lived in, permutations of an action, or associations of a colour; all in an attempt to gain control.

*I am afraid to lose*    *my time*  
                                  *my knowledge*  
                                  *my money*  
                                  *my balance*  
                                  *my possessions*  
                                  *my security*  
                                  *my affections*  
*To lose control*        *my way* <sup>viii</sup>

- To consider the artist's cataloguing practice as a methodology to talk through, so that we can write a list of word definitions and take refuge in the impression of security granted by them to temporarily inhabit her work and act out the idea of repair as an attitude rather than an actuality.

## Cord

- A means to extend and connect yourself into another object or being, so that you might live the fantasy that the insularity of your body is concluded. To expose yourself to the possibility that the cord is cut and the other becomes a separate being and inevitably estranged, leaving you to reckon with the ensuing sense of abandonment.
- The three umbilical threads that tie the wax bed atop the tiny spiral staircase to the womb that is Cell VII. The same thread that is used for sewing to repair fragmentation. A way to ward off the feeling of separation. An attempt to fuse back into the unborn whole.



## Diary

- Bourgeois' period of psychoanalysis from 1951 (her father's death), to 1985, (her psychoanalyst's death), corresponded with a surge in diary writing that she continued until her own passing and that explored psychoanalysis and art as a symbiotic continuum.
- Artefacts and words become for Bourgeois forms of cleansing containment, so that she could engage in a process of reparation and detoxification of anxiety by identifying internal objects of distress, like the sense of rejection from her parents, and exteriorizing them through sculpture and writing in a way that meant they could be understood and thought about – what psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion termed the 'container-contained'<sup>x</sup>, yet another form of containment as an attempt at repair.
- For Bourgeois, it famously meant that "art is a guarantee of sanity."<sup>x</sup>

## Encounter

- Encounter as the intermediary between object and word. I turn my gaze downward and see a shadowy shape lurking in the back of Cell VII  
a physical encounter.  
I close my eyes and glimpse the faint trace of the shape  
a mental encounter.  
Immediately a word rises to meet me: spider  
a semantic encounter.  
The word-object arouses in me fear, attraction, and amusement  
an emotional encounter.
- And so the long-legged arachnid is reconfigured as many kinds of objects, each with varying forms and with different contents: as if the hollowed shape of each container demanded to be filled up with different kinds of liquid.



## Float

- The subtle distance between a word and a sensation. If you pay close attention, the word floats on top of it: two slightly different kinds of encounters.
- The floating nightgowns I stare at in Cell VII. White and ghostly, hanging, ungrounded. For Bourgeois, the state of suspension allows a kind of rinsing or purging shaped by the passage of water, whether of the unconscious or the river Bièvre –

the running water of a river where you wash away the dirt literally the water is always clean. The Creuse the Bièvre [...] seen up close.  
[...]  
same day immediately after I want to hang things and to see them hanging<sup>xi</sup>

As if the urge to see her mother's garments floating in the amniotic fluid of Cell VII was driven by the desire to create for her a state of intactness absolved from the world.

## Focus

- From the Latin focus 'hearth, fireplace' (also, figuratively, 'home, family'). To bring something into light.
- To bring something in and out of focus, like the word Bièvre: on one focal level we attune to the meaning of the word and picture a now-disappeared river on the suburbs of Paris, a black-and-white expanse on a creased photo surface. If we slowly turn the lens, we hone in on the sound of the letters devoid of concept – bjɛvr̥.
- John Cage says of music, which could be said of words too:

When I hear what we call music [words], it seems to me that someone is talking. [...] But when I hear the sound of [a river] I have the feeling that sound is acting. And

I love the activity of sound. It gets louder and quieter, higher and lower, longer and shorter. [...] I have no need for them to be anything more than what they are. [...] I don't want a sound to pretend that it's a bucket, or that it's the president, or that it's in love with another sound. I just want it to be a sound.<sup>xii</sup>

- To exercise bringing into focus the sound of language. To attune to the continuously changing stream of sound as opposed to the semantic content of the sound changing. To experience sound shifting as a fluid material pervading everything – and in its condition of material, escaping the possibility of being shattered. Which is another way of saying: we speak with words because we are broken.



### Form

- The shapes materials take when they stand in the service of an idea – whether it is sound and word, wax and bed, wood and door, iron and spider or textile and nightgown in Cell VII. Just as with sounds that speak, materials moulded into a form speak. They don't just tell their inherent history – the previous life of door as tree, the building genesis of wax – but they speak of Bourgeois' wrecked childhood, of her resolute impulse to amend it.

I want to bring to a conclusion a concern of many years – [the] creation of a vocabulary of forms<sup>xiii</sup>

- Sometimes different forms, or containers, can hold the same liquid, so that although the shape of a steel spider and that of the word 'Maman' are different, they cup the same idea – mother.<sup>xiv</sup> Other times, the forms vessels adopt are identical despite carrying different substances. Bourgeois sews the words 'Merci / Mercy' in a garment belonging to her father inside of the cell Precious Liquids (1992). The same sound: one object contains gratitude, the other guilt.

### Hole

- A presence through absence, like the opaque windowpanes in Cell VII or the slipperiness of a memory or word that withdraws the moment you try to pin it down.
- Bourgeois says, "memory is moth-eaten / full of holes."<sup>xv</sup> What she doesn't mention is that the configuration of the holes changes every time, so that to remember (or forget) something is to produce it anew, like the different manifestations of her Cells. Each Cell allowed her to repair fragmented childhood memories, nurture the wound holes to restore herself to a semblance of (w)holeness, just as, when she was a girl, she repaired her family tapestries alongside her mother in Choisy-le-Roi by the river Bièvre.
- A hole through which fluid flows, so that containers holding different types of fluids may leak, their meaning effaced.



### Language

- Language as a form of care and repair, as a way of exorcising emotion so that “you can stand anything if you write it down,”<sup>xvi</sup> a means to set a distance to what is felt yet also a means to cocoon us with a faint sense of intimacy when we encounter a word, so that language is the only thing that remains reachable, close and secure amid all losses.<sup>xvii</sup> So that language provides us with an anchor to transcend what has no name, an anchor at the bottom of a murmuring, formless river.
- Or perhaps, language is the river: a liquid mesh that permeates us all like water so that we become submerged in a dismal plain, the light ripples from above blurring the shapes beyond, and our movements so slow and dense that we can barely touch each other.

### Liquid

- Bourgeois made all kinds of receptacles to hold all sorts of liquids. She frequently used dictums like ‘I need my memories, they are my documents’<sup>xviii</sup> to contain beliefs, or glass vials to hold emotions equated with bodily fluids. Some of these are:

- 1) sweat
- 2) tears
- 3) [...] snot
- 4) Saliva
- 5) ear lubricant
- 6) bile
- 7) Urine
- 8) milk
- 9) pus
- 10) seamen [sic]
- 12) blood<sup>xix</sup>

- To seek “a liquidation of the past”<sup>xx</sup> through its continuous re-enactment in sculpture and writing as the attempt to repair ourselves from the trauma of loss.

### Mother

- In a 1998 interview, Bourgeois spoke of how she “came from a family of repairers. The spider is a repairer. If you bash into the web of a spider, she doesn’t get mad. She weaves and repairs it.”<sup>xxi</sup> She often represented her mother as a giant spider: Maman.

### Nightgown

- A piece of clothing to sleep in, a house for the body. The nightgowns belonging to Bourgeois’ mother that hover inside Cell VII, as if onlooking its contents, safeguarding her fractured memories.
- The object-making of Louise Bourgeois often tended to the psychological process of idealization, disintegration and reintegration. In Cell VII, the

idealization of her mother ensues a sense of guilt. Bourgeois remarked “I never saw my mother angry in her fifty two [years]. So, if I get angry I’m ashamed [...] it makes me scream. It attacks my identity.”<sup>xxii</sup> The disintegrated child falls into a violent “centrifugal force / [...] you need [...] / the center of gravity to change from / the container toward the contained.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In true (rather than manic) reparation,<sup>xxiv</sup> the internal objects (the mental and emotional images of external objects taken within which the self projects itself to)<sup>xxv</sup> conduct Bourgeois’ inner child’s search, and transforms her anxieties from a domain of indistinct, generalized saturation into symbols that contain meaning and hence a semblance of security and repair:

- Her mother’s nightgowns
- A cast model of her childhood house in Choisy Le Roi
- A steel spider
- A replica of a spiral staircase leading to a tiny wax bed threaded to the Cell walls
- A low-reaching chair
- Floating bones
- Damaged doors

#### River

- Yet, a container can be filled up with different kinds of liquid, so that the same internal object can hold multiple meanings. Aged 38, Bourgeois dreamed how a newborn (herself) was “wiggled out” from beneath a despotic boot; but another infant (her brother Pierre, who was to die institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital) was left at the “bottom of the well” (as she would describe her depressions), a pit flooded by the “bad Bièvre” mother rather than the “good Bièvre.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Throughout her work, Bourgeois imbues the memory of her childhood river with both an oppressive quality and a liberating sense of belonging. Even in her attempt at cataloguing words, they surface with contradictory definitions, full of holes.
- What to do when symbols rise from the unconscious

fractal and fractured? Bourgeois shows us to latch on to the only consistent presence: the experience of making concrete the sense of loss. To find solace in the re-enactment of an absence by making it present and not expect resolution in the content of the work.

#### Writing

- To let writing drift (even when attempting to list definitions in a catalogue) and to consider drifting as a kind of seeking, so that the sentence for what you thought it meant will change, so that to arrive somewhere you first need to get lost.
- To think of Bourgeois’ use of childhood forms and eroded materials in Cell VII as generating an extensive web of associations around the motif of loss akin to a text, just like words weave a reality on the page. A reality consumed with ordering and making sense of, betraying a desire to mend.
- To see words as temporary vessels of a meaning that is dependent on our encounter with them. The experience of a word is different every time we meet it, so that we might say a word is really many kinds of encounters acting out a semblance of content – as if it were the psychological sound of John Cage.
- Bourgeois worked with these shifting liquids, forms that waxed and waned. Repair was never an option, but this was: to feel contained by the guarantee of encountering, regardless of its content or form. To take refuge in the attempt at repair as an atmosphere or tone.



# Endnotes

- i LBD-1991 (February 24, 1991). Note: this format (XX-0000) notes the cataloguing of her extensive diaries. The publication containing the diary entries used in this review is: Larratt-Smith, Philip (2012) *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed / Psychoanalytic Writings*, Violette Editions.
- ii LB-0768 (c. 1959).
- iii LB-0718 (c. 1982). These are locations Bourgeois lived in.
- iv LBD-1996 (30 April, 1995).
- v Gluck, Louise (1997) *Early December in Croton-on-Hudson in The First Five Books of Poems*, Carcanet Press, pg. 17
- vi Kellein, Thomas (2006), *Louise Bourgeois: La Famille*, Walther Konig, pg. 16
- vii Larratt-Smith (2012), Introduction in *Louise Bourgeois: Psychoanalytic Writings*, Violette Editions. Pg. 9
- viii LB-0022 (February 1962).
- ix Harris-Williams (2012), *The Child, The Container and the Claustrom: The Artistic Vocation of Louise Bourgeois*, in *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed*, Violette Editions. Pg. 32
- x LBD-1991 (25 August, 1991). Also featured in her installation *Precious Liquids*.
- xi LB-0136 (13-14 September, 1957).
- xii Jdavidm (2007), *John Cage about silence*, 14 Jul. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcHnL7aS64Y> (Accessed: 09/11/2022)
- xiii LB-0685 (c. 1968)
- xiv Bourgeois equated the symbol of spider with her mother. For instance, she titled her famous 1999 giant sculpture of a spider 'Maman'.
- xv LB-0551 (21 June 1994)
- xvi Coxton, Ann, (2010), *Louise Bourgeois*, Tate Publishing. Pg. 89
- xvii Inspired by what Paul Celan said about language on his 1958 Bremen Literature Prize acceptance speech.
- xviii The phrase features in *Cell I* (1991).
- xix LBD-1993 (21 July, 1993).
- xx Bourgeois, Louise; Meyer-Thoss, Christianne, (2020), *I want to be accurate, not shocking: In conversation with Christianne Meyer-Thoss*, mikrotext.
- xxi Louise Bourgeois in an interview with Cecilia Blomberg, 16 October 1998.
- xxii LB-0023 (9 February, 1994)
- xxiii LBD-1987 (28 May, 1987)
- xxiv LBD-1987 (28 May, 1987). Manic reparation psychologist Melenie Klein's thought is associated with the child's belief in magic power. Bourgeois notes that Klein repudiates magic.
- xxv Theory of 'Internal Objects' by psychoanalyst Melenie Klein
- xxvi LBD-1994 (July 3, 1994). "The good mother and the bad mother. / The Bièvre and the false bièvre [...]"