

Louise Bourgeois' *Spider*

the architecture of art-writing

M I E K E B A L

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P R E F A C E

Louise Bourgeois' installation *Spider* (1997) is one of those works of contemporary art that become familiar while retaining their fascinating strangeness. One of the most striking pieces of Bourgeois' genre series *Cells*, it solicits iconographic reading, while at the same time flaunting the mocking irrelevance of such a reading. It fits no genre or several: sculpture, installation, architecture. It relates to many currents of twentieth-century art, especially sculpture, but also beckons the baroque. Its contents and associations evoke social issues without being reducible to any one of them. It will doubtless become an icon of turn-of-the-century art.

Writing an entire book on this one piece has allowed me to address a great number of issues concerning the methodology of art history and other forms of art-writing, as well as to do full justice to the work itself. This methodological reflection through one work of art has been the driving force behind this text. The integration of close engagement with a single work and the discussion of questions of method lie at its core. Through this integration I have tried to make a simple point as forcefully as I can. The point I want to make is revisionist: I contend that art-writing must sever the all-too-tight connections between disciplinary dogmas, such as those relating to influence, context, iconography,

and historical lineage. Instead of following methodological programs, art-writing—I suggest in this book—ought to put the art first. It is from the artworks of contemporary culture, not from the tradition of the disciplines, that methodological procedure and art-historical content must be derived.

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Ever since I began writing on visual art, I have been caught up in an ambivalent relationship—not quite “love-hate” but something of that order—with the habits of art-writing. I have never believed in sayings like “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Such overvaluations of one medium above another make little sense for a reader of Proust, Mallarmé, and the Hebrew Bible, books in which words, sometimes single ones, *produce* images instead of commenting on them. These valuations seem apologetic, as if the quality of art-writing was doomed from the beginning, simply because words are poor substitutes. Some writers devote thick books to defending this position without noticing how contradictory such endeavors are and without justifying the essentialism on which they are based.

But a profound misunderstanding underlies this position. Writing *about* art is not a substitute *for* the art. Rather than standing in for the visual objects, texts about them ought, in the first place, to lead the reader (back) to those objects. Instead of being a substitute, a good text about art is a *supplement* to it. If all goes well, it unpacks some—and only points to others—of the many facets of that visual work of art. My major dissatisfaction with much—of course, not all—art-writing is that so little is said about what we see and what kind of seeing is involved. When we see with intelligence, the question becomes not where the work comes from, but what the work *is*, *means*, and *does* in the present time of viewing. In my view, as a literary specialist trained in close reading, the primary lack in traditional art-writing is the absence of a close engagement with the work itself. Close readings of vi-

sual works of art are perhaps the most exciting ones. For, instead of demonstrating language's inadequacy, they bring the object closer to the language we need—inevitably—to even be able to think about the visual experience. This essay offers one such close reading for consideration, as a suggested, unassuming, but, in my view, crucial contribution to the traditions of art-writing. Yet, as part of the argument, there is little in this essay that can pass for iconography, connoisseurship, or contextualism.

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This might sound preposterously immodest. But in the face of the changing positions of the writer and work of art, respectively, that such an approach entails, I claim that the opposite is true. Whereas in the more traditional approaches to art, works of art are more often than not illustrations to an intellectual argument, here they come first. This is not to suggest that the critic is silenced, hidden behind a false secondariness. No, the overt purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that the closer the engagement with the work of art, the more adequate the result of the analysis will be, *both* in terms of that particular work *and* as an account of the process of looking. Looking with “pictorial intelligence” entails an inevitable revision, based on that work’s particularities, of our conceptions of how we look and of what matters in art. This text aims to make a case for such an *attitude*—if that is the right word—toward the process or *work* of art as being the most adequate subject of art-writing.

The interactive principle underlying such an approach feeds into the constantly changing methodology of art-writing. It also undermines any possible attempt to reduce the analysis to a formalistic, descriptive mode. Based on the relational quality of the work, it is by necessity also a principle of openness toward the social as well as the emotional, cognitive, and affective processes that we call, for lack of a better word, aesthetic. But this word can only

be used if it is understood, as it was always meant to be, in terms of precisely that process that involves body and mind, viewer and work, in an inextricable mixture. If an account of any such process ends up articulating a different theoretical position, this is precisely because a theoretically strong work of art (one that proposes its own theory) has something to contribute to the way we look at art—at this particular piece, at others “like it,” at art in general. In this sense, I propose Louise Bourgeois’ *Spider* as a *theoretical object*.

As always, this text could not have been written in isolation. I wish, in brief, to thank all those who were there to discuss *Spider* with me, to start with, Jerry Gorovoy and Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi, who invited me to write on it. I subsequently wrote this essay while enjoying the auspicious hospitality of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in the spring of 1999. My thanks also go to Sherry Marx-Macdonald, who edited the text for me with great care and precision. And as I laid my hand on the last revisions, my grandson August Samuel Voskuil was born. I dedicate this small book to this small boy, for all the joy he will bring.

Amsterdam and Paris, June 2000

