

Entrance Are they sculptures? Installations? Buildings? All and none. Triggers of fantasy and strong statements on art, time, and individual and communal life, Louise Bourgeois' series *Cells* folds such categorical denominations of media and genre into one another.² The question of the architecturality of these *Cells* and, by extension, a great number of Bourgeois' works, including works on paper or in oil and the object of this text, *Spider* (1997), imposes itself.³ From the series or genre of works called *Femme-Maison*, which explores the relationship between body and building, to the overtly built *Cells*, the architectural is present in Bourgeois' art. Present, but never straightforward, and never alone.

Le Corbusier once defined architecture as "the precise and monumental interplay of form within light." All of the terms used in this definition are, without exception, at stake in Bourgeois' *Cells*. But none is taken

It is only as an
image, which flashes
up in the moment of
its cognizability,
never to appear
again, that the past
can be apprehended.

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1. *Illuminations* 257. Cited by Weigel (1996: 9), who modified the translation.

2. The *Cells*, to which this *Spider* also belongs, are a series of—to date—40 large, uniquely significant works made between 1986 and 2000.

3. All references to *Spider* in this book are to the 1997 installation unless otherwise indicated. *Spider* belongs both to the *Cells* and to a series of works figuring spiders.

for granted, as will become clear below. Architecture is invoked, explored, and contested; it is critically engaged and brought to bear on the sculpture within which it is put forward. I will argue that the mediating term that glues experimental sculpture to the threshold of architecture in Bourgeois' work is "narrative."

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It may seem paradoxical to approach the architecturality of Bourgeois' art through the question of the place that narrative and art and art-writing occupy in it. But this is precisely what I propose to do here. For I contend that it is only by tackling this aspect—which, since narrative is the medium of temporality, seems to be the systematic counterpart of architecture, the emblem of spatiality—that her work's sense of architecture can be articulated in terms that go beyond a rigid division of media. As I will argue, it is primarily the architecturality of Bourgeois' work that allows it to overcome the boundaries that usually delimit and confine the different arts.

In order to assess the value of "architecture"—not in any referential, theoretical, or historical sense, but as a concept or key concept, or simply, a key—as an approach to art, the place of narrative in art and the habits around art need to be explored, made explicit, explained. Bourgeois' work is a particularly suitable body of art through which to do this. As I will attempt to demonstrate, her *Spider*, from 1997, one of her most famous recent pieces, is eminently productive as a case in point. For her work in general, and *Spider* in particular, sharpens a paradox inherent in the relationship between visual art and narrative, for which "architecture" offers a solution, or, more modestly, for which architecture is a meeting point. Narrative is a function of Bourgeois' architecture because, uniquely, she infuses form—including the form that informs her work's architecturality—with memory. Not one of her works leaves you indifferent to its personal atmosphere. Yet

the memories that inhabit them cannot really be “read,” because they are personal, while the works themselves, made public, are no longer uniquely bound to one person’s history. Moreover, I submit that on the level of their theoretical import, many of these works—and especially *Spider*, the work central to this essay—all of which are so architectural that they represent, seem to be, or envelop the viewer in houses, also find narrative a trap.

And rightly so. This is why I construe Bourgeois’ work, through *Spider*, as both an object and a subject of art-writing—of art history and art criticism. For one thing, the culture within which art functions today is suffering from an overdose of narrativity. Reading *Spider* from this double vantage point is a challenge. How can we both do it justice as a work of art and learn from it, as a theory on, and example of, thought about art? In the sense that they defy the cultural habit of reducing expressions in any medium to the narratives they are purported to convey, Bourgeois’ recent works—especially her *Cells*—are dumbfounding. They raise, with particular acuity, a question I find it productive to apply to many of the cultural fields that fall under art history’s program: How can visual works of art, specifically sculptures that resist coherent figurative readings, tell stories? And what is the point of attempting to answer such a question anyway? As an example of Bourgeois’ work from the last decade—astonishingly varied, dense in meaning, and exuberantly visual, yet difficult to “read” and far from “beautiful”—*Spider* will be examined here through this double question. As it turns out, the answers lie in the realm where sculpture becomes architecture and architecture sculpture. Where these two domains of incompatible scale, volume, and density bounce back on each other, narrative becomes a tool, not a meaning; a mediator, not a solution; a participant, not an outsider.

I will discuss a number of issues pertaining to the cultural status of, specifically, visual narrative and to its function as a cementing force that makes an ever-mobile flipping-over between sculpture and architecture possible. I will argue this in close dialogue with Bourgeois' well-known *Spider*. Gigantic and fragmented, enigmatic and suggestive, this sculpture or installation solicits, yet resists, a narrative approach. It raises the question of the relationship between architecture and narrative with more specificity than most of Bourgeois' other works from the same period, for it is situated within two different series, each concerned with home, body, and memory, but each engaging that cluster of preoccupations in totally different ways.

The forty works that—to date—comprise the *Cells* are, perhaps, best characterized as sculptural installations with a sense of *habitat* that makes them architectural. Each *Cell* is different, self-contained, an autonomy, to which the concept, form, and even the title of the series bear witness. But, despite this proclaimed completeness, the concept of each work is so specific and so consistently maintained that its most characteristic aspect—architectural self-containment—enforces the acknowledgment that what we have here is really a series.

Photographs of most of the *Cells* have been superbly published and thoroughly discussed and analyzed as a series in Rainier Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg's book, *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret Life of the Cells* (1998), which ought to be considered as a background for the present essay.⁴ In this essay, I will consider the *Cells*, hence, also *Spider*, as conceptually self-reflexive. That is to say, their concept makes a statement about their art, stipulating that it hinges between sculpture and architecture, a position that in turn

4. I will try to avoid overlap with this in-depth study, an attempt that entails sacrificing aspects of *Spider* that would otherwise require commentary.

hinges on ambivalence toward narrative. In other words, the *Cells* are, among many other things, richly theoretical in their conception and impact—so much so that the first word that came to mind when I was groping to grasp their impact was *theoretical object*.

As I have argued elsewhere, this term refers to works of art that deploy their own artistic and, in this case, visual, medium to offer and articulate thought about art.⁵ Here, I wish to make the most of this notion as a guideline for art-writing. My goal is to present not so much a method as an *attitude*. Looking at art from this attitude does not entail “applying” art-historical theory to the work, which puts the act of looking itself under erasure, but rather looking *at* art in the sense of looking *to* art for an understanding of what art is and does. To the extent that I construe *Spider* as a theoretical object, then, this essay is as much about my approach to that work as it is about the work itself.

But *Spider* is not only one of the *Cells*. It also belongs to an ensemble of works here called *Spiders*, which have been less systematically studied as a series. This series consists of a large number of drawings, sculptures, and installations, each representing a huge spider, sometimes in combination with a small one, hovering over a page, a wall, a ceiling, a room, and here, in the case of *Spider*, a cell. Although less studied, these *Spiders* have produced a different kind of text, one that it is more difficult to call critical (although for me criticism is one of its most important functions): literary narrative.⁶

5. In *Reading “Rembrandt,”* I theorized about this aspect of visual art in terms of propositional content. In *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, I argued that the term *theoretical object* is better suited to foregrounding both the theoretical thought and the visual articulation of that thought in visual objects. The term *theoretical object* is related to the term *meta-painting*; see Stoichita 1997. As far as I know, this term was first discussed at length by Louis Marin and Hubert Damisch in a series of two colloquia at Urbino in the late 1980s. Krauss (1990) speaks about it on the basis of these discussions. Careri (1985) also makes excellent use of the concept.

6. Marie Darrieussecq, *Dans la maison de Louise/Louise’s House*, bilingual edition, *hors catalogue* (1997).

The most frequently discussed aspect of the *Spiders*—the mood of the past they convey—is usually talked about in terms of quotations by the artist. The *Spiders* seem to resist critical analysis. It therefore seems fitting that the most extensive commentary on them takes the form of a literary, fictional narrative. They are intensely figurative, hair-raisingly strong in their affect on the viewer, and almost compulsorily narrative. How can you see a big spider and not go back to childhood curiosity, comfort, or terror, indeed, to actively experiencing those feelings?

Unlike the *Cells*, the *Spiders* do not invoke architecture directly, either through their form or their figurative meaning. Yet through the narrativity that inheres to their figurativity and their appeal to mood, they invoke the home, which is where the memories of spiders belong and where little children spin their dreams out of spiders and their webs, webs that catch and enfold whatever comes their way. Moreover, the legs of spiders, blown up on a Bourgeoisian scale, are sturdy columns, supporting the weight of the body and its descendants. Through sheer aggrandizement, they become the skeleton of a house. Thus they join the *Cells* in their endeavor to build a sense of habitat. Having become architectural in size, they become architectural in essence; the body is a building. Size alone can do that. Or can it? The building is a body. Here, memory comes in, spinning the stories that allow the spider to grow big enough to be a building.

So why the centrality of *Spider*? A theoretical object with a strong narrative appeal to create “homeness”: what else can I do but try to understand, on its own terms and by thinking about narrative, what this work has to say and do? On its own terms, mind you; and that prior decision, however obvious it may appear, is not easy to live up to when narrative comes into play. Narrative is centrifugal; it entices you to spin off, develop strands that move

away from the center of attention, from the work of art, like so many silvery threads that run outward from the spider in her web.

But why a single work in the first place? When confronted with an oeuvre as extensive as Bourgeois', even a study of only her recent work requires rigorous limitation. The limitation to a single work, in combination with wider claims regarding Bourgeois' work, visual art, and art-writing, is in a sense a "willful misreading" (Bloom 1973). This gesture of singling out one work is an attempt to redirect art-writing to the art it writes about but too often subordinates and subjects to the derivative status of illustration of the art-writer's argument. In defiance of the predominance of overviews, which all too often peter out into biographism, I wish to approach Bourgeois' oeuvre through a close engagement with just one of her works—without in the least claiming to give a comprehensive analysis of even this piece.⁷ For the duration of this writing, *Spider* will be my home.

Having seen this installation in two recent exhibitions, it seems to me eminently suitable as a means of questioning the predominant mode of discussing art in general and Bourgeois' work in particular, namely, through the narratives about it.⁸ But, although

7. It is as a consequence of one of the most baffling features of Bourgeois' work in general that my analysis of this installation in particular cannot be taken to "stand for" or represent her work as a whole, except to the extent that *Spider's* very complexity is representative of it. Nor can my analysis be considered comprehensive even of this single piece, because of another major feature of her work. The strong impact on the viewer makes my own participation in the construction of the analysis not only inevitable but also—paradoxically—necessary if I am to do it justice.

8. I saw *Spider* in the Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, in August 1998 and in the Serpentine Gallery, London, in January 1999. These were two widely different experiences. The impact of an exhibition space and its neighboring works in a specific show is both important and difficult to analyze. A significant feature of a work seems to be its ability to offer permeability to the dividing line between generalizations about a durable object and such contingencies as installations entail. Yet writing about that aspect seems to put my readers at a disadvantage. It is precisely that temporal and spatial existence in the world that characterizes the experience of this work. That experience cannot be fixed in writing or in photography. On issues of exhibition, see my book *Double Exposures*.

typical of Bourgeois' work, questioning common practices is never a significantly relevant purpose in itself, neither for art, nor for writing about art, including my own. Perhaps the strength of her art, and its appeal to me in my attempts to understand how to write about art more adequately, comes from her firm determination to do something with whatever she is critical of. Blowing up those cultural habits that clog thinking from within, this artist merrily goes on after a decisive turn, wasting no time in sitting down with negative conclusions. I wish to learn something of a wider cultural importance from this attitude. In other words, I seek to understand from it, taking up the work's specific effectivity, its *work*. This work is performed in the tense and intense relationship between narrative and architecture. *Spider*, then, stops narrative, as the sloth of art-writing, in its tracks, while at the same time proposing a conception of visual narrative that counters the reductionism inherent in the common mode of art-writing.

In short, this essay departs from the following view: Where the *Cells* seem to defy the notion of narrative, the *Spiders* seem to impose it. And whereas the late recognition of Louise Bourgeois as one of the most significant sculptors of the twentieth century has led to a flurry of art-historical and mostly biographical narratives, her work's resistance to attempts to reduce it to either type of story disturbs any comprehensive reading of it and of the surrounding—perhaps obscuring, and at any rate distracting—narratives. To understand *Spider*, therefore, it seems imperative to understand narrative and its persistent presence in writing about art. For it is from beneath the dust gathered by narrative compulsion that I would like to explore the way this work does not tell a story but builds one, a different one—but one that, in a multiplicity of ways, *matters*.