Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder

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AUTOTOPOGRAPHY: LOUISE BOURJEAN AS BUILDER

MIEKE BAL

1. AGAINST BIOGRAPHISM

The concept “autotopography” refers to autobiography while also distinguishing itself from the latter. It refers to a spatial, local, and situational “writing” of the self’s life in visual art. In this paper I will argue that in the case of self-expressive artists such as Louise Bourgeois, art criticism wrongly props itself up against the artist’s statements and stories, to produce biographical narratives that sidestep or even ignore what is most characteristic of the artist’s work: its visual nature. Yet the element “auto-,” or self, need not be thrown away with the bathwater. Nor, of course, can “-graphy,” or writing, be so easily dismissed. I propose the term “autotopography” to accomplish three goals: to explain the biographical tendency in Bourgeois criticism, to characterize Bourgeois’ work as visual art, and to position her work culturally. As will become clear, when Bourgeois’ work is conceived of as autotopographical, its relationship to autobiography—to writing one’s own life—becomes more rather than less meaningful but can no longer be an alibi for criticism’s intellectual laziness.

Since estranging criticism from its obsession with the biographical is my first goal, I will engage a single work closely, so that its visual properties and cultural significance can be brought to the fore. I have selected one of Bourgeois’ most famous and most frequently exhibited works, her 1996 installation Spider. I have chosen it both for its public accessibility and because it triggers biographism most strongly, almost irresistibly. The huge spider hovering over an iron cage “is” the artist’s caring mother, and the fragments of tapestry decorating the cage come from her parents’ workshop in tapestry
restoration. Suspending—but not ignoring—these autobiographical elements, I will first broach this work as the installation it primarily is: as a piece of building.

Indeed, nowhere more clearly than in her Cells, a series of installations from the late 1980s and 1990s, of which Spider is an example, is Louise Bourgeois’ work architectural. The installations are huge and yet have a great intimacy. They invite the viewer to enter a space that is filled with the artist’s gadgets, memorial objects, bedroom furniture, or body parts. If they don’t invite physical entrance, then at least their doors are left ajar to allow peeping in; inviting, that is, an act of voyeurism that is emblematic for looking at art from the principle of “non-indifference.” Not only are these works fundamentally architectural; more specifically, they are domestic. Their personal quality intensifies the critical tendency—it appears nearly irresistible—to read Bourgeois’ work as autobiographical. While at the same time acknowledging that her work and her own rhetoric strongly solicit it, I object to such a tendency for two reasons. I find it authoritarian, as if the artist rather than the public is the master of its meanings. And I find it paraphrastic, reiterating the artist’s words—in Bourgeois’ case, primarily her writing and interviews—time and again, thus saying about the work what concerns its maker and what we already know. Instead, Bourgeois’ visual rhetoric is geared toward a fiction of autobiography that is shaped through a domestic environment that literally surrounds its content—the Cells are round. Thus, autobiographical reading ought to yield to reading these works—in ways I will suggest below—as autotopographies.

Autobiographical readings of works of art are predicated upon two assumptions: that the work narrates elements from the artist’s life and, at the same time, that it expresses her/his personality. Both narrative and expression are problematic as modes for reading Bourgeois’ Cells. Narrative, on the one hand, is a function of Bourgeois’ architecture, because, uniquely, she infuses form—including the form that informs her work’s architecturality—with memory. Memories are made present by the indexical use of actual objects from her past: they are combined with objects that could have been from that past. Not one of the Cells leaves you indifferent to its personal atmosphere.

I first viewed Spider in Lisbon in 1998, at which time I made the following notes (Fig. 1):

The work consists of a round cage, about 4.5 meters in diameter and 5 meters high. Woven steel—sturdier than chicken wire—in sections of about 1 meter. Inside is a sitting-room chair, with a fragment of old woven tapestry lying on it.
Correction: at first sight, this structure is dominated by a gigantic bronze looming over it. On one side of the outside of the cage a fragment of tapestry is affixed in which antique architecture is represented. This representation of architecture is quite emphatic: the forms in the woven trompe-l’oeil are strikingly square, representing linear perspective extending to the left. The squareness seems introduced as a counterpoint against which the round form of the Cell agitates. Another fragment of tapestry mounted on a plank shows the lower body of a putto whose smile we can only imagine. He lifts his left leg, displaying the gaping hole between his legs, where scissors have exercised censorship in yet another past. The woven steel of the cage’s wall behind the figure unwittingly offers a cross, crossing out what was there and foregrounding the act against the body.

This work, as I have suggested elsewhere, is built out of fragments from, or suggestive of, the artist’s past. It consists of what I tag as “memory traps.” The objects and fragments are traps because the memories that inhabit the work cannot really be “read” as narratives. They are personal, while the works, made public, are no longer uniquely bound to one person’s history. For, on the level of their theoretical import, many of them—which are so architectural that they represent, seem to be, or envelop the viewer in homes—conjure up a narrativity that refuses to yield stories. Expression, on the other hand, suggests that the personal and intimate quality of the works “betrays” the subject’s self; suggests, that is, that the memory permeating the works hides—and if expertly read—reveals the artist’s own memories that could then be traced to build the story of her past. Together, narrative and expression form the ingredients of autobiography or—when predicated upon the acting out of unconscious memories—of dreams.

While Bourgeois’ work and her personal communications, both replete with autobiography, do solicit biographical criticism, I have two theoretical problems with the latter.6 Within biographism, a peculiar blending occurs: I mean the appeal to the artist’s intentions—to her own interpretations of the works and her explanations of how they happened—as it combines with the psychoanalytical slant of criticism. This is contradictory, because these two narrative models of explanation utilize a different, if not radically opposed, conception of subjectivity and agency. Biographical criticism is grounded in a rationalist, unified conception of subjectivity as effectively intentional. It makes an appeal to the artist’s intention. And in such cases as Bourgeois’, where the artist is extremely articulate and strongly committed to preventing the misunderstandings that constantly threaten her complex work, the criticism of the work tends to reiterate what the artist says it means. The result is that quotations of her statements and interviews are frequently interspersed among presentations of and responses to her work. This biographism is
blended with iconography when critics reiterate, after Bourgeois, that the figure of the spider is a metaphor for her mother’s protective and caring attitude within family life. I find this a more idyllic, sentimentalizing view than the work deserves.

But psychoanalytical criticism is by definition committed to exploring unconscious impulses alleged to flow out of the work. Strictly speaking, such criticism cannot appeal to intentionalist statements at all. The conception of the subject underlying such criticism is, or ought to be, that of a split subject, who, to use Freud’s words, is not master in his or her own house. In the case
of Bourgeois’ Cells, this Freudian phrase is particularly apt. For these works appear in both shape and content to be houses in just such a double sense. The Cells are, or represent, houses in a literal sense, in the enclosed shape and the shelter they suggest. This is their primal sense of architecture, and introduces the element of topos: place. The Cells are both building blocks and complete houses, body-houses. In this sense, they recall an earlier series of works titled Femme Maison, through which Bourgeois’ inquiry into the relation between women and their houses pivotally moved from two- to three-dimensional, and from representation through sculpture to building. Here, Cells militate against the predominant model in architecture of the spirit of building, of the house as unified, idealized, symmetrical body. And they are, represent, or rather, perform, that house where the Freudian subject whose own house it is, is not master. For figuratively, the Cells are houses of the mind, through the childhood memories they obviously house. The huge spider-house of Spider brings in its wake the small child who first saw it. That anteriority, instead of the biographical one, infuses the work with an outrageous instability of scale that turns a sculpture into a building and back again. This is the level where narrativity—not specifically narrative content—serves as the cement that builds the house.

The Freudian sensibility—rather than the content—of the Cells as houses of the mind consists, moreover, of a precise, sensitive, very subtle resonance with the famous metaphor of the creator of psychoanalysis. For, though masterful works, “mastery” is not the sense they convey. “Mystery” is more like it. Their strong affect and power of meaning-production suggest precisely the kind of subjectivity that would generate what cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin termed “ungrasped symbolism,” and what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas called “the unthought known.” The subject senses something, and acts upon it, but cannot articulate it in a fully rational discourse—the intellectual discourse of the artist’s statements, for example. The mastery of Bourgeois the artist, then, is that she is able to create that lack of mastery in such a way that it traps the viewer strongly. As an artist, she demonstrates her mastery by this creation; as a woman, who cannot even turn the word “master” into a feminine form, she adds a profoundly relevant gendered aspect to this Freudian metaphor. For, at the same time, this “unthought known” is something the subject knows, and needs to make and mold, so that it can actively—but outside of intellectual discourse—participate in the cultural process that leads to knowledge.

Boldly, then, Bourgeois’ Cell Spider (1997) engages a theoretical debate with Freud, shifting this master’s tendency to anteriority narratives back to where, according to The Interpretation of Dreams, they emerge: in the visual
This “debate” with psychoanalysis—not the subjection of her work to it—turns the metaphor of the mind’s house, whose master does not master it, into a literal, embodied, work of architecture. The “arch” of the past is provided with the roof (“tect”) that leaks mother (through the eggs) (Fig. 2) and whose key dangles uselessly inside. But then, such a characterization of Spider does look a bit like a dream. The chair inside it beckons you, as if it were the dreamer’s seat (Fig. 3).

2. THE UNTHOUGHT KNOWN

The site Spider, I contend, uses the structure of the dream to turn a place of the fictional self—an autotopography—into a stage for the viewer’s dreams. The dynamic between self and other that affects the viewer by means of a fictional self is aptly theorized within psychoanalysis, that science of the self. Bollas, a theorist close to object-relation theory, begins his discussion of dreams—in the chapter “At the other’s play: to dream” in his book The

Figure 2. Detail: eggs in basket. Louise Bourgeois, “Spider,” 1997. Steel and mixed media, 175 x 262 x 204 in., 444.5 x 666.5 x 518.2 cm. Courtesy Cheim and Read, New York. Photo: Marcus Schneider.
Shadow of the Object—with a critical comment on Freud’s view as expressed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which Bollas summarizes as follows: “the dream is an emblematic arrangement of veils articulated by the unconscious, and the task of psychoanalysis is to read the discourse of the dream by translating its iconographic utterance into the word” (64). Bollas goes on to offer an alternative to Freud’s view, to which I will return in a moment. His criticism of Freud’s perspective is that despite the latter’s emphasis on the visual *Darstellbarkeit* of dream-thoughts, he privileges the word. Bollas’ criticism also suggests to me why visual art and the people who study it are resistant to such an activity of translation. For reducing visual art to its iconographic elements, and then translating these into words, is less than helpful as a way to better understanding the visual impact and affect of visual art.
It deserves pointing out that the quoted account is also an adequate rendering of the practice of iconography, that stock-in-trade of traditional art history. Iconography, too, requires the first reduction, and entails the second as its practical consequence. Bollas’ alternative view offers a helpful, clear account of how dreams can also, and more adequately, be construed—not as what they are not and stand for, but rather as what they are and do: “I regard the dream as a fiction constructed by a unique aesthetic: the transformation of the subject into his thought, specifically, the placing of the self into an allegory of desire and dread that is fashioned by the ego” (64, emphasis added). If we tentatively transpose this vision to the experience of Bourgeois’ Cells, and to Spider in particular, the elements of fiction and of a unique aesthetic constitute precisely the core argument against the use of biographism based on autobiography for understanding art. The key question is whether it is possible to accept the remainder of the statement. Accepting that art is like a dream—in the sense of “unthought known,” not of a specific dream—requires that we accept a number of ideas.

3. IN PRAISE OF THE UNKNOWING SELF

First, the equation art-dream claims that the subject—say, the maker of the artwork—is, through the aesthetic, transformed into his or her thought. Unlike traditional psychoanalytical metaphors of depth, this is instead an exteriorization, for which the term “autotopography” is more suitable than “autobiography.” This movement outwards makes the subject’s thought-yield available to the work’s viewers. Spider’s transparency, round form, and open door do this. Second, the equation suggests that the self is not the director of the play thus staged but a character—most likely, but not necessarily, the hero—in the representation. This would require Bourgeois to surrender her autobiographical voice in order to be effective as a character on the autotopographical stage.

The first assumption says that the fiction which is the work of art is a transformation of subjectivity into thought in the same way as a dream is. This idea—that subjectivity is transformed but not eliminated, and that thought, not just form or fun, is the result—is important to a feminist conception of art. The idea of thought does not imply that art-as-thought steers away from visuality. I have argued many times that images have conceptual content, that they “think” in a visual way rather than just illustrate pre-established, non-visual thought. In connection with the image-as-dream idea, thoughts are even more emphatically shielded from a linguistic construction,
since they are supposedly unconscious, unarticulated in language. Even at this very elementary level, I think it is heuristically useful to provisionally accept the equation.

But the second element in this assumption is that the thought is that of the artist-dreamer. It is more or less commonplace for art historians to think this, since to attribute whatever we see in the image to the maker’s intention is usually taken as valid—so much so that arguing against it is an exceedingly difficult task. Yet, the transformation of subjectivity into thought dissociates the maker’s intention from the result, even if the former is somehow still involved in the latter. “How” is precisely the question.

The consequence of this idea could be recognized as being similar to Leonardo’s enigmatic statement that all painters paint themselves: that all art is to some extent self-representational, just as literature is always somewhat autobiographical (see Zwijnenberg). I tend to be willing to defend this view for much of Western post-Renaissance art, even if I am a radical anti-intentionalist, and even if this view begs several questions. It fails, for example, to argue why art-as-self-representation would be relevant, to offer a specific insight, given the ubiquitous presence of the “self” in art. It also begs the question raised by Bollas’ view of what the aesthetic does to transform the subject into thought that is both hers, and not hers to master. For these two reasons, a reverse view deserves more attention. This view would say that something of the maker does reside within the image, but that the maker has only partial mastery over the result. In a discipline where the maker is indicated by the—exclusively male—word “master,” this is a crucially important revision.

Bollas, who uses the terminology of theater, articulates the nature of the aesthetic involved by insisting that the ego, not the subject, “directs” the play. The validity as well as the implications of the artwork-dream equation depend on this split within the individuality of the maker. In other words, they depend on whether we can accept the fact that, on the one hand, the maker’s thought is in the image, and on the other, she does not wholly master it—neither the thought itself nor the transformation that produced it. But conversely, we must also accept that persons are not whole. This, I contend, is one of Spider’s “masterfully” embodied claims. Bollas states:

The ego is defined as somehow “other” to the subject, out of the latter’s grasp: the unconscious organizing processes determined by a mental structure that evolves from the inherited disposition of the infant and the dialectic between this intrinsic character of the child and the logic of the parental care system. (285)
The subject, including the one who is a masterful artist, is dependent on a “second person.” Similarly, Bourgeois’ installation is dependent not simply and autobiographically on the equation spider = mother, but on the viewer’s willingness to be the work’s “second person,” and conversely, to allow the work to “work” as the viewer’s “second person.” In this case, it is the subject who “has” the dream, undergoes its feeling and mood, and “sees” the images. It is also the subject who makes the images—dreams them up, so to speak.

4. MOODY ART

Bollas’ alternative view also implies that desire and dread define the “mood” of the representation. With regard to Spider’s autotopographical status, I would like to draw attention to the dynamic quality of such impulses—their “interactive” quality as well as their ambivalence and intensity. These features perhaps make “desire and dread” quite attractive as an alternative to “beauty.” Indeed, Spider, although extremely powerful and clearly a work of art, is emphatically un-beautiful. But “the placing of the self into an allegory of desire and dread that is fashioned by the ego” points to the bond between the splitting of the subject and the exteriorization of an artist’s dearest ambition into an object that is not her. The splitting necessarily entails the exteriorization, with the fictional nature of the resulting image as the inevitable consequence. The role of the viewer is not to be the “sleeper” but to stand on the stage where the dream images make their disturbing appearance. The viewer, of course, does not actually have those dreams, nor do we know if the “sleeper” does. The brief flickering of images evoked by the objects that build the fiction of the past’s present—most notably, the fragments of tapestry—results in the mood of the images, the visual coloring of the stage, which remains on the viewer’s mental retina after the disappearance of the imaginary images. In this sense, it is as the subject in whom the mood of the dream coheres and sticks that the viewer takes over the role of the disappeared “sleeper.” And it is in the way the setting manages the subject as an object undergoing the force causing these moods that the subjectivity of the maker is transformed into dramatized thought—split and willfully given over—to be shared with the viewers. This makes it doubly problematic to read Spider autobiographically, for it can no more be—iconographically—read than that its autobiographical center coheres.

As a consequence, in any deployment of narrative based on forms of autobiographical “anteriority”—based on the maker’s past instead of the work’s present—one can only face contradiction. To anticipate my conclu-
sion concerning the meaning and impact of *Spider* as a theoretical object that theorizes autotopography, I submit that Bourgeois’ work *embodies* that contradiction—indicts it, traverses it, then moves beyond it to propose a different kind of narrativity. Iconographically speaking, her work is as much non- or even anti-figurative as it is non- or anti-expressionist. At the same time, it is far from abstract. Wildly figurative in fact, it nevertheless precludes an analysis that relies on figuration. It is as bodily as it is domestic, and as such, unreadable. In this sense, it militates against an iconographic “reading off the page,” or translation according to a dictionary-based mode of reading.  

True, the spider that hovers over the cage in *Spider* is indeed a spider, a representation of one. In combination with its realistic shape, its hyperbolic size insists on that. But here the trouble begins, for this hyperbole makes it unreadable again. How do we get beyond tautology? This spider is a spider. It thus marks the futility of a figurative, realistic reading. Second, the spider’s size recalls Freud’s witty remark on the unreadability of widely printed letters on a map. This remark was taken up by Lacan in his analysis of Poe’s overzealous prefect of the Paris police. This good fellow was unable to find a compromising letter because it was not hidden but displayed before his nose, pulling on his nose, as it were. Adding “fun” to the nostalgia and sadness about lost time as a mood to be activated, *Spider* makes the case for such blindness due to scale, integrating a Freudian with a scientific argument that goes back to Leibnizian mathematics.

5. TOPOLOGICAL REASONING

But this integration is itself a good case for the kind of topological reasoning advocated here. The concept of autotopography thus links the work to a kind of reasoning that is logically coherent but not “mastering.” It fills this scientific engagement with baroque thought. It is on this level that *Spider* challenges the use of anteriority narrative as flawed reasoning. For topology destroys linearity by making not “sequence” but “embedding” a principle of narrative time. Embedding, an enfolding of one thing into another—a body into a house. Each element of *Spider* comprises both itself and the whole of which it is a part. This is not simply a move away from narrative to architecture, but the invention of an architecture that encompasses the very material out of which it also consists: sculpture, bodiliness, narrative. As a result of subjecting the spider, its cell, and its viewer to a revision of scale that precludes visibility, and to a figuration of repression—a theorizing, not an acting out of it—what emerges is, precisely, a spider that makes the point that anteriority narratives inhere in it yet remain out of reach. Thus, Bourgeois the artist “explains” here why the statements of Bourgeois the person, serious
and to-the-point as they are, cannot, must not, stand in for a critical engagement with her work. They are just additional narratives that change as they travel through time.

This third point is yet another move away from the representational bias that the spider first solicited, paradoxically figured, or configured, in its position in Spider. To put it simply, the huge spider cannot be isolated from the round cell of woven steel. The basket filled with eggs is both her body and her yield. She is not just hovering over the cage. Once we look from inside the cage—which we should but most often cannot—the ceiling is and is not the spider’s body, the part of it that lays eggs, that projects a future beyond anteriority.

Instead of an anteriority narrative, Spider both requires and “thematizes” a processual narrativity, as I will call it here. I mean a narrativity performed by the viewer as a response to the suggestions of narrativity that fail to fulfill the desire for the story, but at the same time make a non-narrative viewing impossible. Sticky, like the spider’s web, the narrativity has us caught—and caught in the act. This narrativity is more than an alternative to the anteriority-based narrative modes. It provides these modes with both a critical commentary and more “thickness”; another layer of narrative meaning that may resolve some of the conflicts burdening these modes. Spider tells a story of visual engagement which, although anchored in the past of the moment of viewing, proposes the act of viewing in the present as an active recall of this past. Thus, overruling anteriority, the installation reactivates old stories in new moments. They remain stories of the self (auto-) and they are visually written (-graphy). But they only exist, function qua stories, on the condition that the viewers, in the present not the past, activate them. This happens “on the spot,” in the here-and-now of topos.

In this context, another related aspect of visual art that Bourgeois revitalizes in highly significant ways shifts narrative even more prominently into a different temporality. This aspect is grounded in the sense-based bodiliness of the specific present that each act of viewing produces and shapes. Here, the substance of narrative is not so much the process of viewing as the work imagines and offers it in fictional form, but the actual “utterance” or “enunciation” that it performs in a temporality rigorously located in the present. This performative narrative is done by the viewer. It blurs the distinction between narrative as it is traditionally construed and drama in the Aristotelian sense of action. But it also revises the idea of narrative so that it is able to specify narrative present-ing: the making present, through narrative, of a reality that is more than fictional. Spider exploits visuality, and specifically, the domestic-architectural aspect of the Cells concept, to achieve this effect as topography.
Although fantasy-based and appealing to fantasy, this fictional reality is offered as utterly important—indeed, vital—to our need to integrate into today’s real world, which is so increasingly informed by what is called virtual reality. We can aptly call the embodied, present reality “told” by Spider “virtual,” according to the broad but culturally important definition of virtuality as “fictions of presence.” Thus, rather than letting us be overruled by a pre-established narrative that subordinates the work to convention, Spider helps us to understand its own cultural contribution by helping us to understand aspects of narrative itself. It puts forward the topographical reasoning without which narrative remains an empty skeleton.

6. GRAPHING THE AUTO-BODY

This, I insist—and here is the point of the question of narrative for visual art—Spider does by foregrounding the way its most notorious visual aspects embody the tenacious refusal of the dichotomies that rule our culture. On all levels of visuality (and that is where the “unthought known” resides), Bourgeois’ work categorically rejects these dichotomies: between mind and body, abstraction and figuration, visuality and tactility, flatness and volume, time and space. These fundamental dichotomies generate other, more directly recognized dichotomies, such as male-female and white-black, but also the ones that tend to prevent visual art from achieving its effectivity as thought. In particular, I am referring to oppositions that cast visual art as spatial, and narrative as temporal, confining each to a restricted domain of visual body and narrative mind, and hence, semiotically disabling both. Spider, like many of Bourgeois’ other works, integrates a strong and embodied visuality with a story-telling activity that does not allow one to take over the other. What holds all the poles together, so that they are no longer opposites but mates, is the architectural sense of habitat that shelters us while we contribute, in real time, to building it. The interplay of light and form is thickened with an interplay of time and space, played inside and out.

The use of objects from her own past, which Bourgeois introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is a significant element in the architecture of a humble, non-spectacular yet intense sense of habitat. Not only do they invoke, through metonymic troping, the individual (the young girl growing up) life that encapsulated these tiny objects in a past which is narrativized into the present of viewing. Not only do these objects’ metaphoric sense of the body’s cells inscribe life within lifelessness and vice versa. The relentless coexistence of things infused with individuality and time, with mass-produced mute objects, also works at the intersection of individuality and collective existence. This in turn challenges the ideologies that have accrued to
the notion of home itself. The home built here, and through which these objects give us a guided tour, is not the cell of family life but the cutting edge that separates and binds public and private, mockingly demonstrating the futility of that indispensable illusion.

This aspect of *Spider*—its foregrounding of the body’s participation in viewing by way of its destabilization—proposes viewing in an embodied and actualizing mode that re-invigorates narrative outside of the hang-up with development, importance, heroism, and individual-masculinist mastery. In the same move, as it cements the building blocks together into an architectural work, this un-grandiose narrativity counters the seduction of monumentality. The association with memories of homeliness, unspectacular care, and unsatisfied ambition said to inhere in Bourgeois’ huge spiders acquires a polemical sense that opens up the confinement it also induces. Like Cotán’s paintings as discussed by Norman Bryson in his study of the still life—but in a different, not religious but more “intellectual” mode—as visual thought, this work aims to persuade vision “to shed its worldly education—both the eye’s enslavement to the world’s ideas of what is worthy of attention, and the eye’s sloth, the blurs and entropies of vision that screen out everything in creation except what the world presents as spectacular” (*Looking* 64). Through its work with metaphor, which “embodies” this rhetorical figure, and specifically with hyperbole, Bourgeois’ work indeed puns on the very notion of the spectacular.

Presenting a spectacularly imposing spider, she offers no spectacle, for the spider cannot be seen at the same time as the cage to which the spider draws the viewer. The perfume bottle and other objects from ordinary life are simply there, inscribing the sense of home on which the narrativity depends. Instead of spectacle, *Spider* offers only a stage on which—in which—the viewer is invited to act. Drama takes over: narrative becomes action; vision, the play’s actor. The director is not the artist but the work, in the dream of which the dreamer is just a player among many others, an indispensable actor who does not hold the strings. The plot consists of *Cells* that compel a new kind of attention after the unlearning.

7. THE SPIDER AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATOR

Earlier I suggested that whereas the *Cells* preclude any traditional sense of narrative, the figurativity of spiders promotes it. In terms of the question of autobiography, I can now qualify this: the spiders promote a nostalgia for narrative which is itself narrative. But they withhold their tales. *Spider*’s spider is exorbitant in size, its scale undercutting the illusionism of its representational mode. Yet that very scale also turns it into, say, a character in animal
fables that we read when we were small. But the compulsion to fall back into a narrativity that the spiders promote depends less on their hyperbolically figurative status—as humongous and illusionistic—than on something altogether different. They do so, not so much by a direct yet deceptive appeal to childhood memories, but rather because they embody vicissitudinous temporality. Remember this: spiders can sit still for hours in the middle of their web. Then, suddenly, they make their move. The spider on the ceiling of my bedroom showed up suddenly, without ever telling me where it came from. But it was always already there, immobile. And when I least expected it to ever move again, it went scuttering away, into another dark corner where it could frighten me. Whether one finds them frightening or comforting, spiders have an uncanny way of being in time. This is my autobiography, not Bourgeois'; and it is Spider’s performance to make it narratable.

This is also a function of the webs they weave. These webs are sticky, but visually, they shine like silver. Or, they are old cobwebs in corners, which look like balls of wool. Their look and feel are widely divergent. That is the “iconographic” source of the most strident mis-fit to the tactile eye—the contrast between the dry, rough, coarse fabric of the tapestry fragments and the glimmering look of the wire woven as cage. It also betokens that other strident mis-fit between eye and skin. Of the steel, our eyes say it is smooth, but our tactile memories of spider webs contradict that, unmasking the eye’s habit of lying. The spider that remains exterior and interior to this Cell is constantly forgotten, too huge. But, as the entrance you pass through on your way to the cage, it is also inside it, at the center or core, where its body becomes another cell enclosing the eggs. Hence, when you have most forgotten it, it shows up, suddenly, like the spider that scared you so, or its sticky web.

According to many of her public statements, Bourgeois associates the spider with her mother: protecting, comforting, diligent, repairing. Hovering over the cage, laying its eggs, it could very well be associated with such hominess. Everything possible is done to prevent unambiguous creepiness from creeping in. But here, perhaps, the conflict between the concepts of subjectivity in biographical and psychoanalytical criticism is most acutely felt. Such statements are neither true nor false. They simply fall short of the work.

Biographical criticism would be even more inherently reductive if based on autobiographical discourse. The explicit statement of the artist about her work cannot account for the spider’s most decisive contribution to the work’s affect. Whether “good” and motherly, or “bad” because scary, the spider operates through its imposition of bodily involvement that destabilizes scale. Then, in the wake of that shaking, it is free to perform its imposition
of mood within that body made vulnerable to the past, so that narrative can take its course. The spider *is* a home as well as stands over one; at the same time, she is inside it. Thus, she is the incarnation of Bourgeois’ sculptural architecture. The best term for this specific sense of architecture is the title of Anthony Vidler’s study, *The Architectural Uncanny*. *Spider* is both uncanny and motherly. Or rather, the uncanny, as is well known, is strange, frightening, and motherly all at once. For it recalls the home the mother’s body once was, when we had no mastery whatsoever.

Psychoanalytic criticism would ask how the weight of unconscious memories can remain, once insight has replaced them. I am not questioning the artist’s insistence on a positive mother image, where ambivalence seems to be inevitable. Rather, the relevance of the artist’s biography must yield to the presentness in which the viewer performs the work—Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*—the dynamic power the work imposes. The relevance of her psyche, even those aspects of it that remain unconscious, must yield to the mood where the viewer’s unconscious meets the work’s power, in a pastness of each viewer’s memories that comes after, not before, the encounter.

In other words, anteriority falls apart: the work is greater than the subject who made it. For some viewers, the spider may represent the deadly threat associated—in the vulgarization of surrealism—with the Black Widow, who eats her mate. For others, she may simply stand for disgust, where memories of sticky webs predominate the sight of her, despite the cleanliness accorded spiders in natural history books. If you have ever been threatened by a spider—or by your mother, for that matter—no amount of reassurance will help.

Of course, I am not going to tell you what mood this spider ought to instill in you—or absorb you in. The point is, precisely, that this must remain undecided, for each event of viewing, each act of looking and experiencing this spider-cell, catches the moment in its sticky web, so that the *Jetztzeit* is drawn out into long threads. Like the ribs of spider webs, these threads are centrifugal; they go in different directions. We all have different memories/cells that coalesce into a new organism. But, whereas the specific mood, the particular narrative of each reactivation of memory cannot be determined, the narrativity that the spider emanates through its mood—its virtual viscosity—is unavoidable. There, in that viscosity, not in the specific plot, lies the paradoxical power of the work to impose free, individual tales of the past on each of us. This is how, at the end of the day, it is *Spider*, not the spider, that tells the stories and lays the eggs that breed spiders. In this sense only, there is a mother busying about in this work, building the rooms in which spiders can sit.
The fragments of tapestry covering the walls of the cell primarily spin the tales. Sitting at the border of the cell, these fabrics stand guard against exteriority. This is one reason why they cannot be expected to cover the entire surface of the wall. If they did, they would, paradoxically, ward off the viewer’s gaze. But part of the work’s point is, precisely, to inscribe, inside the viewer’s body, the tension between being shut out of and let into the cage. However, even when this paradox is absorbed, the work keeps us suspended in confusion yet again, for these scraps of pastness remain stubbornly fragmented. They do not ask for restoration, even if they did so in the workshop from whence they came. Not only are they emphatically not-whole; they have holes in them that point to the hand that made them. Made them as such: full of holes.

8. AUTOTOPOGRAPHY MADE OF HOLES

One such hole is famous for binding biographism and psychoanalytic hermeneutic so tightly that it may be considered an allegory of the problem at hand. It was made by the artist’s mother. She cut out the genitals of a putto in one of her tapestries to accommodate rather prudish customers. Or so the story goes (Fig. 4). The gesture of literal castration for the good of the family business is just one example of the extreme and daring ambivalence that pervades Bourgeois’ work when it makes explicit reference to her mother. This is the same mother who mended and healed, comforted and protected, in her remembered state of spider. But since this work’s theoretical tenet is to counter the reductive psychoanalytical practice that such an interpretation requires, the notion of castration as a specific psychoanalytic concept must cautiously be kept at bay, at arm’s length, although not out of sight. Instead, making holes is offered here as something that cannot be read “off the page.” For regardless of why the hole was made—when, and by whom, and for whatever overt or unconscious purpose—its signifying effect is to multiply the layers of pastness as an effect, and hence a posterior moment, of the work.

That particularly notorious hole also indicates that fragmentation is not simply a state of the ancient tapestry. It is also an activity, subjectively informed, subjectively co-produced. If the artist took up where her mother left off, so the viewers take up where the artist left off. The act of fragmentation partakes of the complex and multifarious act of involved vision that Spider requires. Rather than reading the hole “off the page” as castration, it must be read as an integrated element in the visual discourse and its foregrounded rhetoric that beckons the viewer in. Rhetorical reading, therefore, seems more suitable here.
Metonymically related to a past that it projects within the present of looking, the hole is also a synecdoche of the fragmentation of all these shreds and scraps. As synecdoche, it articulates fragmentation’s defining function in the irresistible narrativity of *Spider*. But its operation is more complex than the sheer mention of such rhetorical figures might suggest. Instead of conjuring up terms used mostly for the analysis of language, I propose calling upon this hole to flesh out these terms in their visual specificity. For, whatever else the tapestry fragments are, they are real, material leftovers of a past which—through their doing—is here, with us, in the *Jetztzeit* of this work. Materiality, then, is the language that builds the fictional site called autotopography.

Metonymy binds the hole’s materiality to another materiality which coexists with it, in time, space, or logic; or, as the case may be, in all three. In time, the hole is bound to the artist’s past, childhood, mother, work, even if any specific reference is bracketed. It frames that past and displays its framing. The edges of this hole are different, more recent, than the edges of the
other pieces’ boundaries. As such, they are emphasized by the repetition of piercing in the steel plate on which the fragment is mounted. In space, it lets our gaze into the cage, through that particular, disturbing hole. And if you are inside, you can look out through it. Do you really want to look through this figure’s genitals? But can you resist doing so? Well, you didn’t, did you, when boldly approaching the cage from between the spider’s legs? Just look back, after looking in. And then, if you go inside, bodily or only visually, the hole attracts and forces you to look out again. But across the hole runs a cross, of the woven steel of the cage, a symptom-sign of censorship. And in logic, finally, when we peep through it, our look is facilitated, caused by an act—of making an artwork, or holes—of fragmentation. From the abstraction of an exterior, disembodied logic, the hole, while only being negatively defined as absence, moves logic and its major player, causality, into concreteness. Given the extreme bodily mode of looking that this work solicits, primarily through its work with scale, the fragmentation is then contagious.

It suddenly shifts our rhetoric from metonymy to synecdoche. If the hole stands for the whole of which it is a part, as the figure of synecdoche has it, then this hole represents wholeness as hole, caused by and resulting in fragmentation. The emptiness at the center of the subject’s body, here signified in this small hole, refers us back to the empty chair in which the director of the play did not sit, so that we can sit there, virtually. But before the work extends the discussion to other aspects of fragmentation, a third figure of rhetoric beckons from the wing. Metaphor, the mother of rhetoric, must relieve the anxiety that this web of implications might arouse. For, whereas metonymy and synecdoche are grounded in material contiguity, metaphor allows escape into a flight of the imagination. It takes us out of the sticky concreteness of metonymy and synecdoche. One thing stands for another, which is absent. Or so it seems.

Metaphor is the figure that establishes partial similarity—hence similarity-in-difference—between the present sign and its absent counterpart. But here, too, Bourgeois does not allow convention to dictate her concepts. It has been pointed out that Bourgeois’ Cells are “the very embodiment of metaphorical thinking” (Crone and Graf Schaesberg 90). But that’s a very paradoxical, if not metaphorical, way of speaking. The Cells offer not so much metaphors as particles that can be isolated and interpreted, such as the metaphor of “cell” for life, disease, the infinitely small, confinement, protection, what have you. When the Cells embody metaphors, they are such figures. This sounds precisely right to me.

The literal sense of metaphor is to transfer onto the viewer what the object is, says, and does. In the case of the fragments of tapestry that char-
acterize *Spider*, these mediators between inside and outside that contaminate the viewer are not conceptual as opposed to material, but conceptual in their very materiality. With their frayed edges bearing witness to their ancient history and to the pastness this history carries with it—metaphorizing—into the present, they conceptualize metaphor in a hyperbolic materiality. From the present in which they exist, the fragments, like the bodies they activate, beckon to the past, to become part of the virtual present of a fictional autotopography in which they, and it, matter.

**NOTES**

1. *Spider* has been exhibited prominently in various sites, including the Tate Modern in London. Pictures of *Spider* have been widely published, and it is arguably the best known of her *Cells* series.

2. See Crone and Graf Schaesberg for the most extensive study of the *Cells* and their reproductions. The catalogue of a recent exhibition at Reina Sofía in Madrid is entirely devoted to the architectural in Bourgeois’ work (Bernadac et al.). Elements in the present essay draw on, and further develop, ideas in my recent short book *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*.

3. This is why I have titled my collection of essays on acts of looking *Looking In*. The term “non-indifference” echoes Giovanni Careri’s deployment of Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of montage to explicate Bernini’s chapels in Rome.

4. I thank Richard Meyer (UCLA) for drawing my attention to the importance of domesticity in Bourgeois’ work. This paper has benefited from in-depth discussions with him at the Getty Research Institute.

5. This felicitous term was coined by Jennifer A. González to characterize Amalia Mesa-Bains’ autobiographical and autohistorical object installations. Whereas Mesa-Bains’ work focuses on cultural memory, longing, and nostalgia, Bourgeois’ installations cannot be interpreted so easily along these lines.

6. A few recent examples are Bernadac et al., Gorovoy et al., and Kotik. The papers collected in a recent issue of the *Oxford Art Journal* (22.2, 1999) form an exception to this tendency.

7. “Primal,” as in Freud’s concept of the primal scene, which occurs when the child witnesses parental intercourse and fails to understand it. This primal visual experience is formative and can be traumatic in the sense explained above. Within the short duration of the experience with a *Cell*, the subliminal sense of *house* is just such a formative experience—strong in its impact, even if the precise nature of that impact cannot be pinned down. For a definition of *primal scene*, see Laplanche and Pontalis.

8. On the works titled *Femme Maison*, see my paper “Ecstatic Aesthetics.”

9. This last sentence evokes Parker and Pollock’s decisive intervention in art history from a feminist point of view.

10. Both Benjamin and Bollas use their respective concepts to develop a notion of “visual thought” as a richer, thicker substitute for narrative. On Benjamin’s development of his
concept of thought-images and the ungrasped symbolism, see Weigel, especially 80–83. Bollas’ account of the multiply split subjectivity in dreams is eminently helpful in rethinking psychoanalytical criticism of visual art; see my article “Dreaming Art.”

11. Freud’s work on visual art (in)famously falls short of the visual impact of his theory. See, for example, his essay on Leonardo. The argument I am making here is at the core of Damisch’s essay on Piero della Francesca.

12. Most commonly known through Erwin Panofsky. For a critical and historical study that offers a much more complex image than the practice of iconography suggests, see Holly (1988).

13. For a fundamental critique of the hermeneutic use of psychoanalysis, see Laplanche.

14. In particular, see my “Semiotics and Art History,” and Quoting Caravaggio.

15. On this topic, see my article “Abandoning Authority.”

16. For my discussion of the theory of social, psychological, and linguistic dependency involved in this term, see chapter 5 of Double Exposures; see also Code.

17. On the flawed logic of anteriority-based “contextualism,” see Norman Bryson’s “Art in Context,” which draws on Jonathan Culler’s justly famous author’s preface to his book Framing the Sign.

18. The major impact of Krauss’ proposal that Bourgeois’ work be read in terms of part-object (54–55) is to suspend the opposition between the abstract and the figurative.

19. Lacan’s analysis triggered an impassioned debate, now available in a volume edited by Muller and Richardson. See also Lowenthal, and especially Grootenboer’s superb discussion of trompe l’œil painting.

20. See Deleuze’s updating of Leibniz’s ideas on perception; see also Serres on Leibnizian mathematics. For the relevance of baroque mathematics and especially baroque scale for contemporary art, see my Quoting Caravaggio.

21. For an extensive deployment of baroque thought for contemporary art, see my Quoting Caravaggio.

22. See Morse, especially 3–35.

23. For a tenacious recurrence of these dichotomies in discussions of visual art, see Mitchell.

24. On nostalgia, see Roth, and my Quoting Caravaggio 64–75.

25. She points in that direction in the quotations throughout Gorovoy et al.; see also Kotik.

26. A symptom is an involuntary, unintentional sign. When a tree’s leaves turn yellow, the color change is a sign of the changing season. But no one designs that sign. The term has no medical connotations, but obviously lends itself for use in medical diagnosis, where the doctor reads the signs of disease that no one intends. Similarly, Bourgeois’ use of the castrated putto is a sign, but the accidental visibility of the x behind it is an accident that can receive meaning in the context of the work; hence, it is a symptom.

WORKS CITED


