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Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois’ Spider as Theoretical Object

Mieke Bal

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’ Cells fold such categorical denominations of media and genre into one another. From the series, or genre, of works called Femme Maison, which explores the relationship between body and building through the relationship between a woman and her house, to the overtly built Cells, the architectural is present in her art. Present, but never straightforward, and never alone.

Architecture is invoked, explored, and contested; critically engaged, and brought to bear on the sculpture within which it is put forward. I will also argue that the mediating term that glues experimental sculpture with contested architecture is narrative. This offers an opportunity to explore the place of narrative in Bourgeois’ work as well as in the discourse about it.

It may seem paradoxical to approach this highly architectural work through the question of narrative. Yet I contend that only by tackling this aspect, which seems the systematic counterpart of architecture, is it possible to articulate its effect beyond a rigid division of media. And, as I will argue, it is the architecturality of the work that is the primary means of overcoming the boundaries that usually delimit and confine the different arts.

Narrative is a function of Bourgeois’ architecture because, uniquely, she infuses form, including the form that informs her work’s architecturality, with memory.¹ 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, made public, are no longer uniquely bound to one person’s history. For, on the level of their theoretical import, many of the works which are so architectural that they represent, seem to be, or envelop the viewer in houses, find narrative also a trap.

And rightly so. For one thing, the culture within which art functions today is suffering from an overdose of narrativity. Tarting the cultural habit of reducing expressions in any medium to the narratives they are purported to convey, Bourgeois’ recent work is dumbfounding. 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? Bourgeois’ work of the last decade — astonishingly varied, dense in meaning and exuberantly visual, yet difficult to ‘read’ and far from ‘beautiful’ — will be examined here through this double question. 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. By analysing this work in terms of narrative, then, I also invoke Bourgeois as a cultural philosopher and art critic who offers a theoretical position on the role of narrative in the discourse on art.

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 one of Bourgeois’ most famous recent pieces, Spider, from 1997. Gigantic and fragmented, enigmatic and suggestive, this sculpture, or installation, or building, solicits, yet resists, a narrative approach. It belongs both to the Cells series and to a series of works figuring Spiders.

The former is a series of – to date – thirty large, uniquely significant works, made in the period 1986 to 1999, and perhaps best characterized as sculptural installations with a sense of habitat that makes them architectural. All different, each work is self-contained, an autonomy to which the concept, form, and even title of the series bear witness. Despite this proclaimed completeness, the concept of each work is so specific, and so consistently maintained, that their most characteristic aspect – architectural self-containment – enforces the acknowledgement that what we have here is really a series.

Most of the works have been superbly published and thoroughly discussed and analysed as a series in a recent book, which ought to be considered as background for the present essay. Here, I will consider these works as conceptually self-reflexive. Their concept makes a statement about this art that is between sculpture and architecture, which 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 the term theoretical object. As I have argued elsewhere, that term refers to works of art that deploy their own artistic and, here, visual, medium to offer and articulate thought about art.

The ensemble of works here called Spiders, less systematically studied as a 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, a Cell. Although less studied, the Spiders have produced a different kind of text, one that is more difficult to call critical (although for me criticism is one of its important functions): literary narrative. The most frequently discussed aspect of the Spiders – the mood of the past that they convey – is also its most insistently narrative aspect. It is mostly talked about in terms of quotations by the artist. The Spiders appear to resist critical analysis. The fact that the most extensive commentary on them is a literary, fictional narrative therefore seems fitting. They are intensely figurative, hair-raisingly strong in their effect on the viewer, and almost compulsorily narrative. How can you see a big spider and not go back to childhood curiosity, comfort, terror, indeed, to actively experiencing those feelings?

Unlike the Cells, the Spiders do not invoke architecture. Yet through the narrativity that inheres to their figurativity and through their appeal to mood, they invoke the home. Which is where 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 to Bourgeoisian scale, are sturdy columns, supporting the weight of the body and its descendants. Through sheer aggrandizement, they become a skeleton of the house. Thus, they join the Cells in their endeavour 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.
A theoretical object with a strong narrative appeal to create ‘home-ness’: what else can I do but try to understand, on its own terms and by way of thinking about narrative, what this work has to say and do? On its own terms, mind you; and that prior decision, however obvious it appears, 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 centre of attention, from the work of art, like so many silvery threads that run outward from the spider in her web.

When one is confronted with an oeuvre as extensive as Bourgeois’, even a study of only her recent work requires rigorous limitation. Over against the predominance of overviews, too often petering out into biographism, I wish to approach her oeuvre through a close engagement with a single work – without in the least claiming to give a comprehensive analysis of even this one work. For the duration of this writing, Spider (1997) will be my home.

Having seen Spider in two recent exhibitions, it seems to me eminently suitable to question the predominant mode of discussing art, namely through narratives about it. But, although typical of Bourgeois’ work, questioning common practice is never a purpose in itself. Perhaps the strength of her art comes from a firm determination to do something with whatever she is critical of. Blowing up those cultural habits that clog down thinking from within, she merrily goes on after a decisive turn, wasting no time in sitting down with negative conclusions. Through Spider, then, narrative as the sloth of artwriting is stopped in its tracks, while at the same time the work simultaneously proposes a conception of visual narrative that counters the reductionism inherent in that common mode of artwriting.

In short, where the Cells seem to defy the notion of narrative, the Spiders appear to impose it. And whereas late recognition of the artist 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 story disturbs any comprehensive reading of her work and of those surrounding, perhaps obscuring, and at any rate distracting, narratives. In order to understand Spider, then, it seems imperative to understand narrative and its persistent presence in writing about art. For it is from underneath 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.

**Description shipwrecked**

... an image is that in which the has-been comes together in a flash with the Now to form a constellation.

Walter Benjamin

But first, the point of the question about narrative: why ask this? It seems so much more in line with visual discipline to simply describe the work. So, let me try to do that first. The following description was drawn from my notes of a first viewing. It serves here a number of purposes. First, it will have to make do as a humble supplement to the photographs, together with these proposing a poor substitute for the visual experience that readers of this text can no longer have. This basic lack, inherent in any criticism of Spider that comes after the fact of the visual experience, can only be accepted; but whereas it must be acknowledged beforehand, its theoretical inevitability will come to the fore as I proceed.

Second, the description is also a ground, or perhaps fabric, through which
the discussion of the different narrative modes presented below will gain a minimum of relief. Third, and more specifically, the very limitations of this description also offer some insight into the functioning of the narrative motor in the present of viewing that I will claim helps understand the kind of 'virtual reality' that, in my interpretation, Bourgeois' Spider, of the Cells series as a theoretical object, 'theorizes', as well as demonstrates through building it. My interventions in the description — indeed, my incapacity to confine myself to description due to narrative's overruling power — can be seen as examples of the way in which the visual machine enforces the subject's participation in the description's own undoing. For these reasons the description below is provisional and itself subject to analysis; hence, its graphic distinction.

At first sight: 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 on it. Correction: at first sight, this structure is dominated by a gigantic bronze spider, looming over it. In order to see the cage and its elements, one has to dare to confront the spider, to approach the cage between her legs.

9. While not at all claiming a naïve spontaneity of visual experience as the fabula of this account, I have not rearranged my notes, which were detached, but contented myself with shaping sentences out of them, much as the 'secondary elaboration' that Freud rightly claims to inform any narrative given in a wakened state of a dream experienced during sleep (Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, in James Strachey (ed.), Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. V (Hogarth Press: London), pp. 533–621. Whereas this elaboration — this description — is therefore inevitably secondary, it is still, to remain within the Freudian framework, pre-analytical, preceding as it does the 'free associations' that bring the work of censorship, through displacement, condensation, and visual elaboration, to the fore.
Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois’ Spider as Theoretical Object

The spider is enormous, dramatically challenging scale and the human body’s tendency to be its measure. The legs are thick yet, like a ballerina’s, they stand on fine points of needle-sharp ‘toes’. The spider’s body coincides with the inside, the very centre, of the cell. Due to the legs’ height and yet slender shape, it is not easy to determine where I, as a viewer, stand.

To one side of the exterior of the cage a fragment of tapestry is affixed, with antique architecture represented in it. This is quite emphatic: the forms in the woven trompe-l’œil 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.

From the middle of this piece of tapestry a fragmented woman looks at us (Fig. 2). Her middle body, from chin to legs, is missing a part; the missing part has an S-shape. Her legs are crossed, with one foot extended to the lower right corner of the fragment. Her left arm is extended upwards, to pull a represented fabric through an iron ring mounted on a wooden block in the ceiling, as if she is decorating the room – while she, as a woven figure in a tapestry, is herself a decoration. This decorating activity is foregrounded by another ring, which already has its measure. The legs are thick yet, like a ballerina’s, they stand on fine points of needle-sharp ‘toes’. The spider’s body coincides with the inside, the very centre, of the cell. Due to the legs’ height and yet slender shape, it is not easy to determine where I, as a viewer, stand.

Over this piece of fabric the enormous leg of the spider which is nearest to it curves back to the fabric, duplicating in three-dimensional space the S-shape of the missing part of the woman’s body. This leg is the only one that goes back to the cage. Of the seven legs, six bend away from it, in a variety of curves. All seven legs are clearly lively, contributing to the counterpoint of the ancient, woven architecture: they embody anti-regularity.

At the height of the spider’s ‘knee’ (really heel), two pieces of bone (emptied of marrow) are inserted next to each other into the spaces between the woven steel threads, just below the upper edge of the lower panel. Bone from the grave, bone from soup-making in the kitchen. Death and life in one. Bone with a hole in it, where the marrow once was; solid matter, and yet just a frame around emptiness (Fig. 3).

More to the left another fragment of fabric is mounted, facing the chair’s back. In this fragment are crowns, an owl flying upwards, curls, a blue sky. To the left at the opening of the door that is ajar, a bit lower than the previous fragment, another showing what might be the back of a church dignitary and bits of other figures. The costume displays a powerful position but the figures have no heads, no faces. The only face is that of the owl (Fig. 4).

My gaze wavers from these fragments on the outside wall of the cage to inside the cage, where the chair stands so alone (Fig. 5). The chair in the cage is quite ordinary, like a director’s chair; but it is made to look historical, almost like a throne, by the fabric thrown over it. Not really: the historicizing look is theatrical, overtly presented as fake, just a layer. The part hanging down has tassels. Or does it? The tassels are not real, only flat representations of tassels, poking fun at the body whose ambition it is to sit there and direct this multiply fictitious play.

From here to the left, still inside the cage, a tapestry panel leans against the wall. Here we can see a sandalled foot, a calf, lower leg, walking. Some thin grass, flowers (Fig. 6). The scene is set outside, although inside the cage. It faces inwards, representing the outdoor as inwardly as in a dream. Across from it another fragment mounted on a plant looks back. 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.

The door, behind the chair, is covered, for about two thirds of its width and from top to bottom, with a tapestry representing a wooded landscape: trees, leaves, plants, birds. It looks idyllic, but at the bottom a swan is turning its head to face a monstrous snake with a gaping mouth. Looking back, the peacefully flying birds seem to be in flight, escaping the primal danger of the millennial snake (Fig. 7). Since this scene is affixed to the cell’s door, which is open, the holes in the fabric seem to facilitate the transmission of this danger, facing outward, to the inside of the cell.

This moment is crucial. The door is ajar; the cell no longer closes off. Threat is no longer just outside the cell. The spider’s legs cannot protect: already, the walls are only bars, imprisoning but not protecting; the door is already opened to the outside, to the snake who is looking at me. And then I see the key, hanging there for everyone to grab. Or just to see?

Next to the door on the lower panel is a small bone, not stuck between the bars but hung on a thread to balance inside, against the steel but detached from it. Why hanging? At the dividing line between this panel and the next panel, three small glass cupping jars, upside down as if drying, stand on short pins (Fig. 8). A bit higher, above the middle of the upper panel, a key hangs inside the cage. A bit to the right of it, still higher up, another bone, a bit larger, sewn to the steel. Here and there I now see more of those small bones.

The panel of fabric stands inside, on the cell’s floor, has a bit of tapestry on its outside, a
Pompeian still-life with a black background, a bit of architectural trompe-l’oeil. On the left, behind the chair, is a curly architectural decoration, a bird sitting on a ring, with a small fragment on top of it. On the bottom, inside, a small piece mounted on a steel plate. A hole has deliberately been pierced through both fabric and steel. The steel plate is leaning on the ground. On its inside a putto, leaves, and fruit recall the idyllic-yet-threatening outside.

Where the panels meet, inside on a hook is a black rubber body, with a shape similar to the pink one in ‘In Respite’ exhibited in the same show, in the Serpentine Gallery in London, sharing its space. The black body has big needles stuck into it, brooches, a bunch of medals (Figs 9 and 10).

The spider covers the top of the cell. But once you get used to it, the scale makes the legs turn into columns whose function as protective guards you don’t respect any longer. The smallness of some of the objects entices you to come closer, so close that the spider looses its wholeness. The scale changes: the cell becomes a large, almost empty room, the spider’s legs outside recede into a background, behind my back. Don’t turn around.

Inside hang chains with perfume bottles, a medal, a watch. Especially the perfume bottle

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**Fig. 2.** Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 × 262 × 204 in.
(Photograph: Marcus Schneider.)

11. Even though this insight has not prevented the space/time opposition between image/word to continue to flourish. On Duchamp’s *Optical Machines*, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1993).

Description, as many specialists of narrative have pointed out, is challenged, dominated, if not ruined, by narrative, whose handmaiden it is. Ever since Homer insisted that Achilles’ shield could only be described during its making in Vulcan’s foundry, description for its own sake has been an embarrassment to narrative. And even when description was foregrounded as the sole purpose of writing, its bond with the subject that is speaking about, perceiving, or acting upon the described object has been more, rather than less, insistently narrated. It is due to the participation of the viewing subject that any description, therefore, melts into the narration of the process that makes it possible. But precisely how does narrative intervene in my attempt at describing *Spider*?

The first answer is simple and short. The account can only be an account of viewing the work. This is not, or not only, due to the undeniable fact that viewing is by definition a process. Ever since Marcel Duchamp’s *Optical Machines* of the 1920s, we know that the rapid glance is a myth, or at least a mistake. This work, instead, foregrounds, in many ways represents, that obvious fact – obvious, but massively repressed in the discourse on art. As is
true of all works of visual art, but clearly not obviously enough, here the
viewer cannot – can simply not at all – see the entire work in one Augenblick.
Many aspects of the work enforce a viewing that takes time, imposing an
awareness of that temporality.

The narrative of viewing rivals the narrative of memory whose presence one
senses yet cannot grasp. For the memories here are not narrated; they are just
put there, like the found objects they, in fact, are. Memories are found objects
that we routinely integrate into narrative frames derived from the cultural
stock available to us. Unless, that is, they resist such integration because the
place where they are found – the past of the recalling person – does not
provide such ground for integration. This would be the case with events so
horrific that the one to whom they happen lacks the necessary framework to
experience them. This characterizes trauma.2 By presenting memories as
found objects, Bourgeois makes them appear as scraps or bits of a past that
hover on the undecidable yet profound divide between memory and trauma.
Through the need to experience the temporality of looking, the narratives that
turn this Cell into a house also slam the door on the viewer trying to read the
stories. Her stories of the past glue to our stories of looking, but remain
opaque.

Old bits of narrative stick to the cage’s wall. The very surfaces which
constitute it – the fragments of tapestry – also constitute visual barriers that
make peeking inside the cage an effort, steps taken one by one. The spider
which names and claims this work also enforces an approach that precludes
simultaneous viewing of its body and the Cell it hides, protects, and is. The
tapestries are the walls they also decorate. It is precisely in this double function
that they become indexes of architecture.

Enforcing a narrative awareness of the hiccuping temporality of viewing, the
work at the same time destroys its own narrativity. Its overall shape already
does that. The round form deploys time, since you have to walk around it, yet
prevents any attempt at gauging the length of its span. Roundness offers no
beginning, no end. And once you have walked around the cage, avoiding collision with the hard bronze legs of the spider, the chair with its fragment of tapestry is still sitting there, mute and full of narrative, of tales broached but not revealed by the fragments encountered on my round.

More persistently perhaps, more obviously at any rate, the narratives whispered by the fragments of tapestry intervene, teasing my account, daring it to claim description and objectivity by means of irresistible tales from the past that threaten to take over in the 'third-person' voice where the tales pre-exist my reading of them. Here, tales of renaissance or represented renaissance, always-already citations of and from ancient times, stopping the walk around the cage, holding the viewer back with their beckoning once-upon-a-time-ness, like tar sticking to her shoes. *Fabulas* of walkers and women, details of nature and ancient architectural settings capturing the acts of

Fig. 5. Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 × 262 × 204 in. (Photograph: Marcus Schneider.)
decorating in a temporality whose multiple layers can no longer be disentangled, stop that feminine figure about to insert fabric into a ring, suspending her movement. They also stop me. Trying to understand what is going on, I already participate in the restoration of the ancient narrative of decoration. The restoration which, in the present, is an act of building. Narrativity can no longer be disentangled from architecture. Without the former, the latter would fall apart. Without the latter, narrative would have nowhere to go.

Most decisively, the attempt to describe flounders in the entanglement between object and process that this work, in the present of viewing, seems to utter. In the very act of describing, I am compelled to tell the story of what happens to me as I try. While the object does not remain still, the relation it imposes on my eye, no, on my entire body — since I have to walk in order to see, and avoid [the spider’s legs] in order to approach [the cage] — that relation is subjected to a movement in the time of now — a *Jetz-zeit* according to Walter Benjamin — in which the sculpture tells itself through me. My bodily participation in this now-act tears and claws at the category of sculpture. With each step, the *Cell* gains momentum as a building.

Here, the distinction between narrative and description flounders; narrative emerges victorious, and must be reckoned with. Rock-hard, like a cliff beneath the seas, narrative remains. Its predominance, then, is not the problem, for why consider an inevitability problematic? Its modes, the ways it insinuates itself in what I set out to perform against it — visual description — militate against the illusion of visual purity that underlies the medium-essentialism inherited from modernism. This is a first way in which *Spider* positions itself, Bourgeois’ art, and contemporary visual experience within a messy realm of existence that admits no boundaries — either of space, or of time. It becomes the habitat of the present. Narrative, in this now-time, has a corollary in art criticism, a discourse that might do well to heed this work’s discursive revisionism.
13. This was Schroedinger’s answer to the question posed to him in 1944 while he was in exile from Germany: ‘What is the characteristic of life? When is a piece of matter said to be alive?’, cited by Evelyn Fox Keller, *Refiguring Life: Metaphors of Twentieth-Century Biology* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1995), pp. 66–7. In the same paragraph, Keller refers to Schroedinger as ‘the father of quantum mechanics’.

**Narrative and Its Discontents**

[Life is when it goes on ‘doing something’, moving, exchanging material with its environment, and so forth, and that for a much longer period than we would expect an inanimate piece of matter to ‘keep going’ under similar circumstances.]

Erwin Schroedinger

A number of different deployments of narrative predominate in talk about art. All of these are both solicited and questioned by Bourgeois’ work in general and by Spider specifically. But the work does not stop at questioning. It offers a revision of each deployment, proposing new ways of thinking this age-old mode of communicating through stories, so that, in the end, narrative can come forward again, but in a new guise. What distinguishes the old narrative from the one that Spider articulates and activates is temporality. By the

*Fig. 7. Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 x 262 x 204 in. (Photograph: Marcus Schneider.)*
imposition and foregrounding of the messy temporality involving *Jetz-zeit*, Bourgeois' narrativity binds sculpture to architecture. But narrative as cement is no longer what it used to be.

The most common narrative modes can be characterized by the position of *anterior* stories. In the sharpest formulation, the visual work is then considered an *illustration* of a narrative that precedes it and to which it is subordinated, its success being measured in terms of adequacy. Under the heading of anteriority, I wish to confront a variety of approaches together, although proponents of these approaches will tend to consider them fundamentally different. But *Spider* challenges them all under the same heading, under the roof of the spider’s eggs.

![Image of Louise Bourgeois: Spider](image-url)

*Fig. 8. Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 × 262 × 204 in.*

(Photograph: Attilio Maranzano.)
Various practices of iconography exemplify the problems this narrative mode of anteriority poses. For example, iconographic analysis is often a search for antecedent works of art, other images in which motifs, poses, compositional schemata, conceptualizations or allegories were already used, so that the latter is affiliated with visual predecessors. In other cases, iconographical analysis explains pictorial elements with reference to textual sources. Representations of mythical stories are referred back, for example, to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. I know of no writing on Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* from 1622–1625, at the Borghese Gallery in Rome, for example, that does not ‘explain’ or ‘describe’ the sculpture in terms of Ovid’s story. Specific inflections and details are explained as visual interpretations of textual features of the story. Or, to give another example, Caravaggio’s paintings are explained with reference to Counter-Reformation dogma and the discussion of fine points thereof.

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14. For an example of this, but also, for extensive visuals, see the detailed study edited by Kristina Hermann Fiore, *Apollo e Dafne del Bernini nella Galleria Borghese* (Silvana Editoriale: Milan, 1997).  
Whether iconography seeks to pinpoint the antecedent story as a source for a perfect match or significant deviation, or whether it construes the antecedent as a sounding board against which the posterior visual work can stand out in its difference, the narrative of anteriority uses the prior text or image as a measuring stick. This is what iconography does to Bourgeois’ work: the spiders are metaphors for the artist’s mother; the tapestries come from the parents’ workshop. Why, then, can we not ‘own’ those stories, read them off the page so that they replace the mute objects we see?

Regardless of whether this corresponds to the avowed wish of the writer, the major thrust of such anteriority narratives consists of diminishing the studied work’s ‘originality’, in a justified impulse to cast off romantic notions of art. Thus, where Caravaggio or Rembrandt used to be considered geniuses, now they have become craftsmen doing a job for patrons who, it must

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**Fig. 10.** Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 × 262 × 204 in. (Photograph: Marcus Schneider.)
A striking example, up to its subtitle 'genius under commission', is Bert Treffers' study of a few paintings by Caravaggio, *Caravaggio: genie in opdracht. Een kunstenaar en zijn opdrachtgever in het Rome van rond 1600* (SUN: Nijmegen, 1991).

For this argument, see my book *Quoting Caravaggio.*

Therefore be deduced, really 'invented' the work. Artists have cannily led the way to this much-needed revision of romantic preconceptions of art. And a work that integrates discarded perfume bottles, pieces of bone, and old fabric, a work where nothing in itself bears the artist’s signature as 'hand', must certainly agree with such a rejection of the idolatry of originality. It has, in fact, proposed that very rejection.

However welcome this anti-romantic attitude may have been in its time, though, it has now become a paradoxical tool to undermine the very art it is alleged to serve. For it defeats the point of visual art which is not to reiterate but to innovate, to offer experiences and insights, sights and sites that we did not as yet possess. This has nothing to do with romantic originality, but a lot to do with art's efficacy (rather than 'essence'); with an understanding of art as process; with cultural life at the crossroads of significant events. Thus, by

Fig. 11. Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 x 262 x 204 in. (Photograph: Marcus Schneider.)
specifically ignoring the visuality of the particular work, a narrative of anteriority bypasses what the work of art as a theoretical object has to say. This, I contend, is one of Spider’s theoretical propositions. It effectuates that proposition — ‘enunciates’ it — through its imposition of a bodily participation by the viewer who, caught up between narrativity and sculpturality, ‘builds’ a home for old stories in the now.

Anteriority is also the backdrop of historicizing accounts that avoid iconography while remaining committed to a view of the history of art as an ongoing probing of issues of form. The anteriority, here, is entangled with the notion that each artist cannot but be embedded in, or ‘framed’ by, the art of

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Fig. 12. Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 × 262 × 204 in. (Photograph: Attilio Maranzano.)
his or her time. This, of course, is true. But not all artists work within a single
time. Bourgeois’ work would obviously resist definition in terms of such
periodizing gestures. Yet, even a sophisticated critic such as Krauss lapses into
this anteriority when she claims: ‘But Louise Bourgeois is an artist of the
immediate postwar period — of the late 1940s and the 1950s — not of the
generation of the seventies.’18 Against such assignation to the past, the messiness
of Spider’s temporarily is Bourgeois’ mighty means to assert it firmly as
belonging to the Jetzt-zeit, to the now that her work is, at this very moment,
and with your help, building.

To be fair, the context in which Krauss proffered this statement makes
sense — an interpretation of Fillette, from 1968, or rather, of Mapplethorpe’s
1982 photograph of Bourgeois with Fillette, which already complicated the
periodization. Yet 1968 is not the immediate postwar period. Indeed, it was
the year of the most radical break with that period, and the break concerned,
precisely, the destructive effect of a reliance on anteriority that lacked
engagement with the present. Both that significant year and Bourgeois’ almost
performance-art-like work on and in the present makes the periodization in
Krauss’ remark not quite adequate. And yet, the subsequent argument that
Bourgeois’ work — not only Fillette — is best considered through Brancusi’s

Fig. 13. Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 x 262 x 204 in.
(Photograph: Marcus Schneider.)
reduction of form, posits the anteriority narrative clearly and emphatically as a frame within which to articulate the specific effects of the art. Unlike most, Krauss does not superpose this narrative with obedience to influence but instead argues for Bourgeois’ polemic with her predecessors. Krauss’ inevitable subtext is a binary opposition: this rather than that; Brancusi rather than later ‘scandal’ art.

As a result of this subtext, Krauss ends up with a double argument. On the one hand, Bourgeois is distinctive in her deployment of what the critic calls part-objects, a Lacan-informed view of the relation to the object of desire, rather than a (formal) identification with fragmentation of self. This is a highly relevant interpretation. On the other hand, this specificity is referred back to ‘the surrealist background from which it springs’.19 Here, anteriority becomes a prison. The fixation on chronology that anteriority narratives espouse makes

Fig. 14. Louise Bourgeois: Spider (detail), 1997, steel and mixed media, 175 × 262 × 204 in. (Photograph: Marcus Schneider.)

20. ‘Primal’ as in Freud’s concept of the primal scene, that 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 that is strong in its impact even if the precise nature of that impact cannot be pinned down. See for a definition of primal scene, J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (Norton: New York, 1973).

it impossible to endorse a logic which would allow Bourgeois to prefigure, rather than follow.

Anteriority is also the ground against which biographical or psychoanalytical accounts of art place the work. Here, the timeline spans not the history of mythology and art but the life of the artist. This life as a narrative allegedly inhabits the work it yields, shaping it and informing its affective and aesthetic power. And when biographical criticism explains motifs with reference to the artist’s life, biography blends with iconography. This happens when, for example, Bourgeois’ use of fragments of tapestry is explained by the biographical fact of her parents’ work in tapestry restoration rather than by focusing on the possible meanings and effects of – to mention one of this use’s most obvious features – the segmentation of the old fabrics.

Do not misunderstand me; I too find Bourgeois’ background important. I imagine the young girl working in the workshop whose smell alone must have infused her body with all the moods that historicity, time gone, produce in one growing up and dreaming. I imagine Emma Bovary’s dreams killing her as an after-effect of growing up. But Bourgeois did not drown there. She grew up and out of that workshop, and what she does with the fragments of this past is, in a precise sense, build the walls that stand between her and old times, in the habitat of now-time. As an antidote to the smell of dust, the young girl’s perfume bottles are refreshing.

Within biographism, another blending occurs, although it should be impossible. Here I am referring to the appeal to the artist’s intentions, her own interpretations of the works and explanations of how they happened, as it combines with the psychoanalytical slant of criticism. This is contradictory. For the two latter 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 appeals to the artist’s intentions. And in cases such as Bourgeois’, where the artist is extremely articulate and strongly committed to preventing the misunderstandings that constantly threaten her complex work so as to present her work according to her intentions, the criticism of the work tends to reiterate simply what the artist says it means. The result is the frequent quotations from her statements and interviews that intersperse presentations of 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.

But if we want to dream about a non-reductive engagement with visual art, this reason-based subjectivity must be allowed to go to sleep. In its dreams, then, it will encounter its counterpart. For psychoanalytical criticism, on the other hand, is by definition committed to exploring unconscious impulses alleged to pour forth from 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 shape as well as 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 shelter they suggest. This is their primal sense of architecture. They are both building blocks and complete houses, body-houses. In this sense, they recall an earlier series of works called Femme Maison, through which Bourgeois’ work moved pivotally from two- to three-dimensional. Here, Cells militate against the predominant model in
that art of the spirit of building, of the house as unified, idealized, symmetrical body. And they are, represent, or rather, perform the house where the Freudian subject whose own house it is, is not master. For, figuratively, the Cells are houses of the mind, in the childhood memories they obviously house. The huge 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 specific 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, masterful works of art as they are, ‘mastery’ is not the sense they convey. Instead, ‘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 phrased as ‘ungrasped symbolism’ and what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas termed ‘the unthought known’. Something the subject senses, and upon which it acts, but which it cannot articulate in a fully rational discourse — the intellectual discourse of artist’s statements, for example. If the subject could just say it, what would the point be of making art, of saying it through art? Yet, at the same time, this ‘unthought known’ is something the subject knows, and needs to make and mould, so that it can actively, but outside of intellectual discourse, participate in the cultural process that leads to knowledge.21

Boldly, then, Bourgeois’ Spider 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 present.22 This ‘debate’ with psychoanalysis, not a 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) and whose key dangles uselessly inside.

The strong sense of mood, memory and mystery that all the Cells emanate, partakes of this realm of the unthought known. Accounting for them through the words of the artist (alone), then, would do them a profound injustice. If Bourgeois is such a strong spokeswoman for her own work, it is because thought, reason, is so very important for her art. The Cells are the work of Descartes’ daughter,23 grudgingly taking up Vitruvius’ legacy in a revisionist conception of architecture that does not allow reduction to reason. But on the roof of the Femme Maison stands a woman; or, in other cases, on the top of a woman’s body stands a house. If she makes works so replete with childhood memories, fragmented, allusive, but powerfully present narratives, it is because she is also Freud’s friend. She knows, even if many of her critics do not, that listening to her is fine, but repeating her words (only) reduces her work to one side of a multifarious, multilayered complexity.

These two narratives forms of criticism — biographical and psychoanalytical — are different in principle, yet similar in their deployment of anteriority. In the former, artist’s statements are a most welcome source of information, from which the story preceding the work is then constructed — or, as the claim goes, reconstructed. In the latter, the search is for facts not statements, even if the factfinder will often need to ‘forget’ the taboo on too explicit, hence, conscious, pronouncements by the artist.24

But the similarity is even more devastating when we consider the mode of


22. Freud’s work on visual art (infamously) 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 Hubert Damisch’s essay on Piero della Francesca in Un souvenir d’enfance par Piero della Francesca (Editions du Seuil: Paris, 1997, to be published in English by Stanford University Press).


26. The major impact of Krauss’ proposal to read Bourgeois’ work in terms of part-object is to suspend the opposition between abstract and figurative. See esp. Krauss, Bachelors, pp. 54–5.


reasoning that underlies anteriority in each. As has been argued often enough, the relation between facts and works can only be alleged if it is unavowedly based on a deterministic fallacy which fails to account for the logic of framing inherent in such reasonings. Hence, even on the terms of explicit, rational logic, anteriority narratives fail to achieve an account of the work.25

As a consequence, in any deployment of anteriority based on such forms of anteriority, one can only face contradiction. To anticipate my conclusion concerning the meaning and impact of Spider as a theoretical object, I submit that Bourgeois’ work embodies that contradiction, indicting it, then traverses it, to move beyond it and propose a different kind of narrativity. Iconographically speaking, her work is non- or even anti-figurative. 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, and as such it is unreadable. In this sense, it militates against iconographic ‘reading off the page’ or translation according to a dictionary-based mode of reading.26

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 figurative, realistic reading. Secondly, 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 — but by Edgar Allen Poe before him — in his analysis of the over-zealous 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 his nose, as it were.27 Spider makes the case for such blindness due to scale, integrating a Freudian with a scientific argument that goes back to Leibnizian mathematics.28

But this integration is itself a good case for the kind of topological reasoning that 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 embedding, not sequence, a principle of narrative time. Embedding, an enfolding of one thing within another, a body within a body within 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 and 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, which change as they travel through time.

This third point is a fourth move away from the representational bias the spider first solicited, paradoxically figured, or configured, in the spider’s 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, but 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.

Countering as they do the translation of elements into words, works like
the Cells in particular, with their dense self-enclosure and complexly structured unity, insist on the failure of element-by-element translation for rendering or explaining the work as a whole. Elements that solicit biographical commentary — such as the spider, whose obsessive presence compels viewers to wonder what it means — become particularly troublesome for such translation when they loom over a richly inhabited Cell of which they are an inherent part even if they do not constitute it entirely.

Moreover, the history of twentieth-century sculpture that Bourgeois’ work is often said to encompass does not allow us to box this art into any of its main currents. Here, it is not the active anti-figurative thrust performed by means of figuration, but the active dialogic attitude in the work that precludes a narrative of art history in terms of ‘influence’. Indeed, it is possible, and has been done effectively, to analyse Bourgeois’ work in relation to all successive phases of modern sculpture from Rodin through Brancusi, Picasso, and Abstract Expressionism to postmodernism.

Rodin’s unfinished surfaces, Brancusi’s excessively polished ones, Picasso’s refusal of perspective, Abstract Expressionism’s insistence on bypassing figuration in self-expression, Postmodernism’s refusal of the latter and its recycling, instead, of the exterior past in non-autographic modes: Spider speaks of it all. But it cannot be reduced to any one of these ideas. The relations between Spider and these predecessors can be pinpointed as meaningful; but it is harder to define what kind of relations they are. For, as soon as one takes a closer look at the nature of these relations, they turn out to be ambivalent. Far from being ‘influenced’ by it, the artist ‘discusses’ her visual and artistic environment, past or present; she does not step in for the ride but ‘explains’ why she does not.

As one recent critic has it, ‘if Bourgeois’s work has become canonical, its specific position within the canon remains indeterminate […].’ However, I would prefer to consider the way the art itself engages, criticizes, and leaves behind the major trends of twentieth-century sculpture as what most sharply defines her work. For, in this domain as well, the work not only undermines (art-historical) narratives of anteriority, but also offers alternatives for them. Thus it re-articulates the notion of ‘influence’ itself, its passivity, its grounding in anteriority that mortifies the later artist and locks him or her up in an oedipally tinted rivalry. More productive than the idea of influence allows, it lays the past’s eggs.

Moreover, attempts to position Bourgeois within the art of the century that her work is so frequently said to span, lose their appeal as articulations of what defines her work as soon as one becomes aware of other art-historical relationships, such as, most notoriously, with the Baroque. In sculpture after Picasso and Brancusi, such connections break the timeline that informs the ideology of evolution. And once the homogenous timeline of development is broken by such relationships to older art, these, too, become dialogic rather than of influence. As I argued elsewhere, it is precisely through Bourgeois’ relationship to baroque sculpture that she offers a radically innovative exploration of sculptural narrativity — in dialogue with both modernism and the Baroque. And the form of this exploration is architectural: in three dimensions, a topologically structured spatiality turned paradoxical by flipping of scale; she builds a baroque chapel, but one in which the body is inside and outside at the same time. By the same token, this relationship itself, as a revision of the way we tend to look at art, rethinks historicism and its narrative compulsions.

In addition, then, to such dialogical engagements with past art, or through
them, narrative in or with Spider shifts its focus from anteriority to the work’s present, to its jetz-zeit. This more promising but also more complex strand of narrative reasoning concerns the relationship between sculpture and the viewer, or more precisely, the act of viewing. If viewing is an act, deployed in a process of interaction, then the account of that process takes a narrative form. For, if narrative is an account deployed in time of a series of related events which, in turn, occur in time, then the process in which the viewer stands before, or where sculpture is concerned, walks around the object and is infused by the effects and affects it emanates, can only be reconstructed, analysed, and criticized in a form that renders that movement through time.

Spider both requires and ‘thematizes’ this processual narrativity, as I will call it here. This narrativity is more than an alternative to the anteriority-based narrative modes. It provides these modes with a critical commentary as well as with more ‘thickness’; another layer of narrative meaning that may resolve some of the conflicts that burden these modes. The sculptures, and Spider specifically, tell 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 sculptures reanimate old stories in new moments.

In this context, another related aspect of narrative 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. Unlike the second narrative, the processual one staged by the artist, and unlike the first, the anteriority narrative imagined by the critic, this third, 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 in such a way that it is able to specify narrative present-ing, the making present through narrative, of a reality that is more than fictional.

Although fantasy-based and appealing to fantasy, this reality is offered as utterly important, indeed, vital for our need to integrate into today’s real world that is so increasingly informed by what is called virtual reality. We can aptly call the embodied present reality ‘told’ by Spider as ‘virtual’ according to the broad but culturally important definition of virtuality as ‘fictions of presence’. Thus, rather than being overruled by a pre-established narrative that subordinates it to convention, Spider helps us to understand its own cultural contribution by helping us to understand aspects of narrative itself.

And this, I insist – here is the point of the question of narrative – Spider does by foregrounding its most notorious visual aspects, in the way these embody the tenacious refusal of the dichotomies that rule our culture. On all levels of Bourgeois’ work’s visuality – and that is where the ‘unthought known’ resides – it categorically rejects those 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: oppositions that cast visual art as spatial, and narrative as temporal, confining each to a restricted domain of visual body and narrative mind, hence, semiotically disabling both. Spider, like many of Bourgeois’ other works,
Mieke Bal 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.