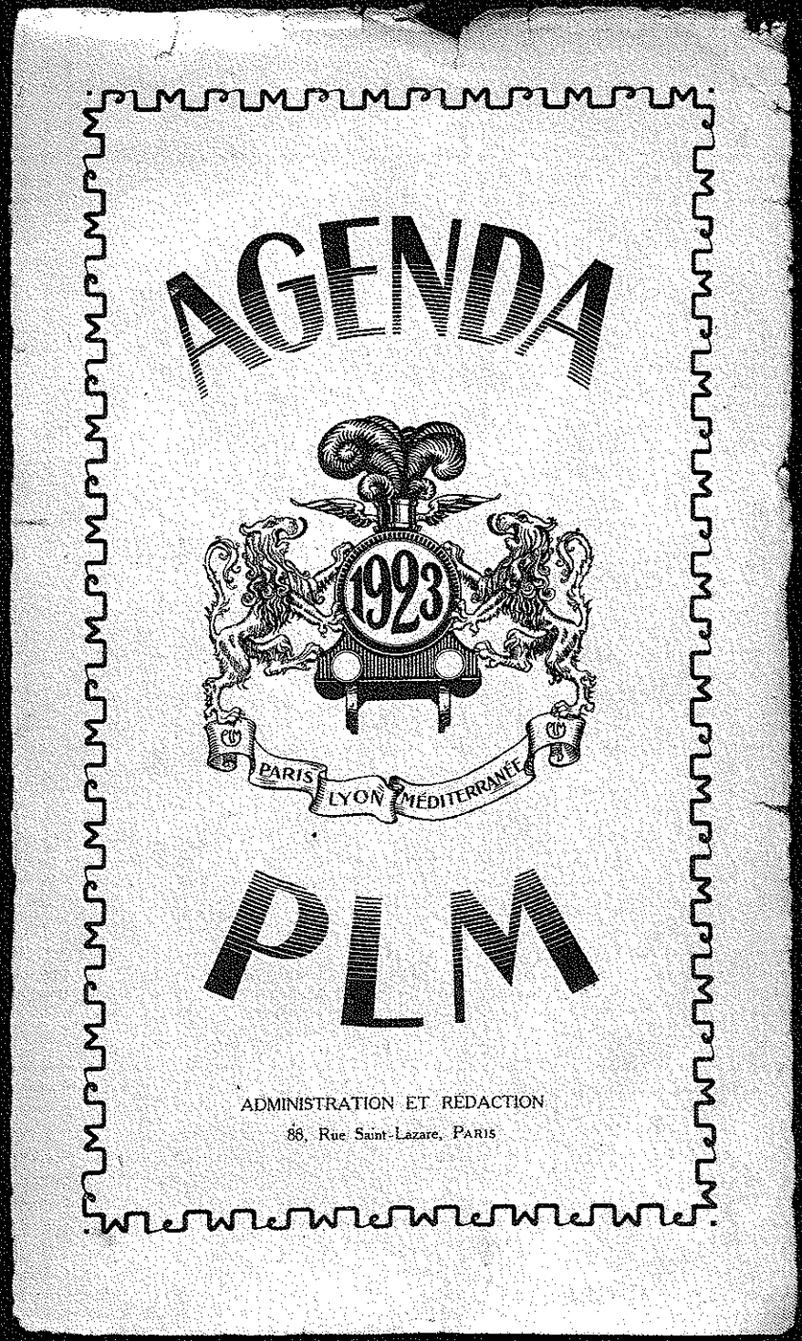

My name is Louise Josephine Bourgeois. I was born 24 December 1911, in Paris. All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood.

My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama.

Louise Bourgeois

Edited by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist

"My early work is the fear of falling. Later on it became the art of falling. How to fall without hurting yourself. Later on it is the art of hanging in there."

"I have kept diaries all my life, ever since I was a child, ever since I could look someone in the fac —and catch visual emotions and remember my own."

"Every day you have to abandon your past or accept it and then if you cannot accept it, you become a sculptor."

Since the age of twelve, the internationally renowned sculptor Louise Bourgeois has been writing—writing and drawing. First a diary precisely recounting the everyday events of her family life, then notes and reflections. *Destruction of the Father*—the title comes from the name of a sculpture she made following the death of her husband in 1973—contains both formal texts and what the artist calls "pen-thoughts": drawing-texts often connected to her drawings and sculptures, with stories or poems inscribed alongside the images.

For Bourgeois, writing is a means of expression that has gained increasing importance over the years, particularly during periods of insomnia. The writing is compulsive, but it can also be perfectly controlled, informed by her intellectual background, knowledge of art history, and sense of literary form (she has frequently published articles on artists, exhibitions, and art events). Bourgeois, a private woman "without secrets," has given numerous interviews to journalists, artists, and writers, expressing her views on her oeuvre, revealing its hidden meanings, and relating the connection of certain works to the traumas of her childhood. This book collects both her writings and her spoken remarks on art, confirming the deep links between her work and her biography and offering new insights into her creative thinking and process.

Marie-Laure Bernadac is chief curator of CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux. She is the author of a monograph on Louise Bourgeois and the editor of *The Writings of Picasso*.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist is a curator at ARC Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, and at the Museum in Progress, Vienna. He has edited writings by Gerhard Richter, Leon Golub, and Gilbert & George.

Of related interest

Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation
edited by Whitney Chadwick

During the 1930s and 1940s, women artists associated with the Surrealist movement produced a significant body of self-images that have no equivalent among the works of their male colleagues. Many of the representational strategies employed by these pioneers continue to resonate in the work of contemporary women artists. This book explores specific aspects of the relationship between historic and contemporary work in the context of Surrealism. The contributors reexamine art historical assumptions about gender, identity, and intergenerational legacies within modernist and postmodernist frameworks.

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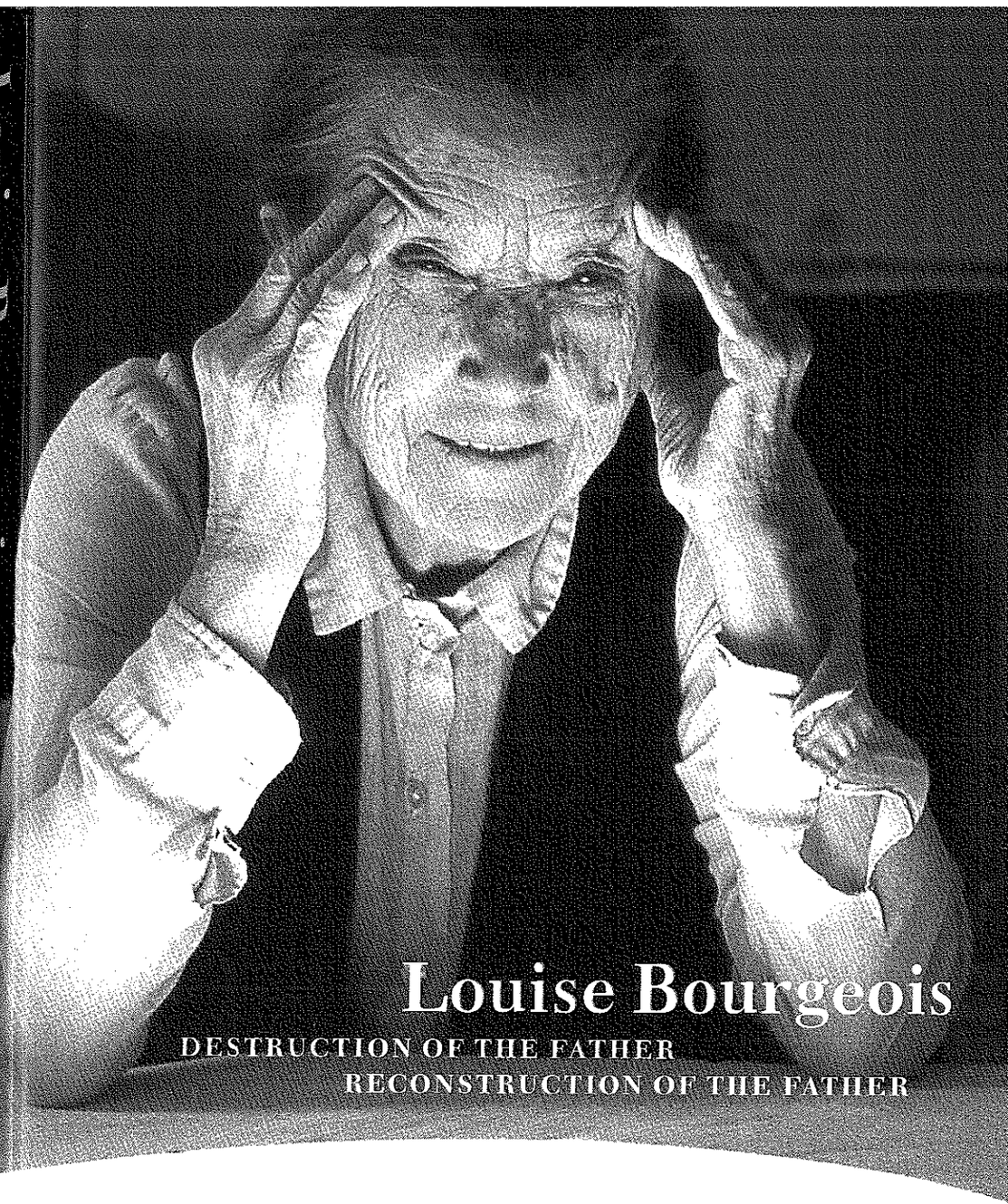
Louise Bourgeois
DESTRUCTION OF THE FATHER/RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FATHER
WRITINGS AND INTERVIEWS 1923–1997



Louise Bourgeois

DESTRUCTION OF THE FATHER
RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FATHER

WRITINGS AND INTERVIEWS 1923–1997

Preface *Hans-Ulrich Obrist*

"L'espace serait au lieu ce que devient le mot quand il est parlé, c'est-à dire quand il est saisi dans l'ambiguïté d'une effectuation."
—Michel de Certeau

"In relation to place, space would be what the word becomes when it is spoken: that is, when it is caught up in the ambiguity of an effectuation."

The idea for this publication of the writings and interviews by Louise Bourgeois came during a conversation with the artist in 1994 in New York. While preparing my first interview with the artist, we researched Parisian libraries, browsing through the impressive list of Bourgeois' exhibition catalogs, artist books, and magazine articles. In reading these texts, we were again and again impressed by the intensity of Bourgeois' statements and moved by the directness of her interviews. During many subsequent discussions with Bourgeois and Jerry Gorovoy we also discovered a collection of previously unpublished notes, fragments, letters, poetical writings, and further interviews.

Bourgeois' words—spoken and written—are less about the meaning of her art than about the emotional forces behind it: namely, her autobiography, past and present experience. This book includes heterogenous examples of texts by the artist, beginning chronologically with facsimile pages of a pre-adolescent diary from 1923, recently recovered from a Paris market stall, and ending with a selection of interviews from the last twenty years, a period in which the artist has become recognized internationally as one of the most important artists of our time.

An artist's words are always to be taken cautiously. . . . The artist who discusses the so-called meaning of his work is usually describing a literary side-issue. The core of his original impulse is to be found, if at all, in the work itself. Just the same, the artist must say what he feels. . . .

I want to explain why I did the piece, I don't see why artists should say

anything because the work is supposed to speak for itself. So whatever the artist says about it is like an apology, it is not necessary. . . .

I never talk literally; you have to use analogy and interpretation and leaps of all kinds. . . .

I am suspicious of words. They do not interest me, they do not satisfy me. I suffer from the ways in which words wear themselves out. I distrust the Lacans and Bossuets because they gargle with their own words. I am a very concrete woman. The forms are everything. . . .

With words you can say anything. You can lie as long as the day, but you cannot lie in the re-creation of experience. . . .

Bourgeois' texts are a testimony to her constant refusal and rejection of labels, clichés, and programs. However close she was to Surrealism and its protagonists—as her texts from the 1940s demonstrate, but which she has repeatedly denied—from very early on Bourgeois has mistrusted its ideological underpinnings. Bourgeois' broad range of texts "reveal a desire to occupy three dimensions, to gain consistency and tangibility," (Gilles Deleuze)—less to reflect on things than to create and produce movement.

Opposed to the negativism of dialectic, Bourgeois' *élan vital* is a positive *tourbillon* born out of an inner necessity: rupturing indifference, questioning certainties, experiencing myriad confrontations, maintaining the internal tension of "the explosive forces that life carries within itself. . . It is aways a case of virtuality in the process of being actualized, a simplicity in the process of differentiating, a totality in the process of dividing: Proceeding by dissociation and division, by 'dichotomy' is the essence of life." (Gilles Deleuze in *Bergsonism*)

Dichotomy between/of: the conceptual and the three-dimensional, the scientific and the romantic, the rational and the irrational, the geometric and the organic, the abstract and the figurative, the simple and the complex, the rigid and the pliable, resisting and letting go, the permanent and the ephemeral, the horizontal and the vertical, feeling/emotion and physical form, joining and cutting, construction and destruction, destruction and reconstruction, breaking and repairing, tenderness and violence, love and hate, harmony and conflict, frustration and happiness, success and failure, birth and death, youth and age, the isolated individual and the shared awareness of the group, the one and the other, the private and the public, sculpture and environment, art and life, addition and substraction, interiority and exteriority, verticality and horizontality, process and object, spontaneity and assemblage, consciousness and unconsciousness, first creative vision and the final result, *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, the passive and the active, mind and matter, repetition and difference.

Marie-Laure Bernadac and I are deeply grateful to Louise Bourgeois for the generosity of time and spirit she has shown during the intense dialog which has produced this book. We are especially grateful to Jerry Gorovoy for sharing with us his depth of knowledge and experience of the artist's work; he has encouraged and guided this publication from its very beginning. We would also like to express our thanks to Wendy Williams, of Louise Bourgeois' studio, for her tireless research and assistance; to Peter Willberg for his exceptional graphic design; to Zoe Manzi for her editorial assistance; to Roger Conover of The MIT Press; to Brigitte Cornand; and to Robert Violette, without whose enthusiasm and editorial vision this book would never have been published.

Introduction *Marie-Laure Bernadac*

Louise Bourgeois began writing her diary at the age of twelve and has never stopped since. Her cupboards are filled with dozens and dozens of private diaries, in notebooks and exercise books, on loose sheets of paper, and in engagement books; all are meticulously preserved, dated, and archived. The diaries chart her days, her encounters and appointments, and transcribe her emotions and the movements of her thoughts. Sometimes they also serve as a laboratory of writing, a starting point for her work with the written word.

The fabric of her language is woven from everyday materials. Her constant practice of writing goes hand in hand with that of drawing. Louise Bourgeois is always drawing, on any surface that comes to hand. These drawings she calls her "thought feathers." Drawn lines and written lines entwine to create the tapestry of her childhood memories, and to exorcize her fears. Although true exorcism is achieved only in sculpture, drawing is a soothing and healing activity, particularly during her long, sleepless nights.

Alongside these two forms of *journal intime*, the written and the drawn, a third form of diary exists: the spoken word. Over the last ten or more years, Louise Bourgeois has given numerous interviews to newspapers and magazines, and has also taken part in television programs and films. To her collection of notebooks she can now add her collection of audio cassettes. The rituals that accompany recording sessions in her home are a testimony to the importance she gives to the spoken word and to conversation, but they also reveal her nervousness when faced with an unknown interviewer, and with the ordeal or recounting and reliving an event from the past. She fears misunderstandings, and the difficulty of "saying the unsayable"—one of the topics to which she reverts most often. At the same time, she wants to reveal all, to be "a woman without secrets," capable of carrying introspection ever deeper in order to confront and conquer her own anxiety. Paradoxically, the freedom and confidence with

which she talks is accompanied by a deep mistrust: no sooner has she bared her soul than she pulls back. She has the greatest difficulty in relinquishing the tapes that contain not only a part of her but a part of the other person as well. Everything important that is said must be committed to memory: that is, written down or recorded, placed in store. For her, this is a way of waging war against time by recreating the past.

This book attempts to take account of the multiplicity of her written and spoken statements, and of their diversity of levels: a diversity which matches that of her artistic work, reflecting the fundamental dichotomy between professional control and spontaneity, between the conscious and the unconscious, between the expression that is structured, assembled, and thought through, and the expression that is presented raw, as the product of an urgent impulse.

How is it possible to select from such a daunting and diverse mass of texts? We began with all Louise Bourgeois' published texts: poetic texts accompanying prints, magazine articles on art and artists, letters to editors, commentaries on works in exhibition catalogs, interviews (many of them revised before publication), public statements at conferences and award ceremonies, and extracts from the most important films on her work.

As for the hitherto unpublished material, this includes a selection of the notes written in the margins or on the backs of drawings, together with some particularly interesting examples of letter writing and some extracts from the diaries. This last element has been kept to a minimum, and is included here as a counterpoint to the writings on art; it offers revealing glimpses of the artist's mental processes and methods of writing. To do justice to the diaries of Louise Bourgeois would require a separate book, and a specialized editorial process, because they were never written with publication in mind. Similarly, the texts attached to drawings would need to be accompanied by reproductions both of the drawings themselves and of the works to which they gave rise.

Together, all these texts display a precise and penetrating intelligence, alert to the complexities of human emotion. Louise Bourgeois

often talks in proverbs and aphorisms, expressing profound observations on art and life in very simple terms. Her writing also reveals a passionate interest in words: their sounds, their colors, and their evocative power. We encounter a free and audacious mind, and a powerful personality in constant pursuit of a form of authenticity.

In her writing, Louise Bourgeois alternates between English and French. Her memories of childhood and of places in her life are written in French; all of her published texts are in English. In recent years, her writing has often taken the form of rhymed texts, litanies, lists, and jingles, which use alliteration, rhyme, and repetition. She enjoys word play, and much of her writing is characterized by the same formidable element of irony and humor that permeates her work as an artist.

By painting a faithful portrait of her many-faceted personality, Louise Bourgeois' writings both complement and adjust our perception of her work. The form and spirit of her writing, and the very individual tone of her voice, afford a glimpse of deep uncertainties, latent suffering, and the violence that she battles constantly to keep in check. We become aware that her whole being is straining to control the inner chaos through words, images, and forms. In order to summon up the past, she rehearses every aspect of time.

Translated from the French by Caroline Beamish and David Britt

50 years old be kept in the dark—result rage
result—frustration from knowing

10 years old unsatisfied curiosity—rage outrage
result rage
kept out

1 year old—abandoned—why do they leave me
where are they

3 month old—famished and forgotten

1 month old—fear of death

An Artist's Words

First published in 1954 by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in *Design Quarterly*, no. 30, p. 18.

An artist's words are always to be taken cautiously. The finished work is often a stranger to, and sometimes very much at odds with what the artist felt or wished to express when he began. At best the artist does what he can, rather than what he wants to do. After the battle is over and the damage faced up to, the result may be surprisingly dull—but sometimes it is surprisingly interesting. The mountain brought forth a mouse, but the bee will create a miracle of beauty and order. Asked to enlighten us on their creative process, both would be embarrassed, and probably uninterested. The artist who discusses the so-called meaning of his work is usually describing a literary side-issue. The core of his original impulse is to be found, if at all, in the work itself.

Just the same, the artist must say what he feels: My work grows from the duel between the isolated individual and the shared awareness of the group. At first I made single figures without any freedom at all; blind houses without any openings, any relation to the outside world. Later, tiny windows started to appear. And then I began to develop an interest in the relationship between two figures. The figures of this phase are turned in on themselves, but they try to be together even though they may not succeed in reaching each other.

Gradually the relations between the figures I made became freer and more subtle, and now I see my works as groups of objects relating to each other. Although ultimately each can and does stand alone, the figures can be grouped in various ways and fashions, and each time the tension of their relations makes for a different formal arrangement. For this reason the figures are placed in the ground the way people would place themselves in the street to talk to each other. And this is why they grow from a single point—a minimum base of immobility which suggests an always possible change.

In my most recent work these relations become clearer and more intimate. Now the single work has its own complex of parts, each of which is similar, yet different from the others. But there is still the feeling with which I began—the drama of one among many.

The look of my figures is abstract, and to the spectator they may not appear to be figures at all. They are the expression, in abstract terms, of emotions and states of awareness. Eighteenth-century painters made "conversation pieces"; my sculptures might be called "confrontation pieces."

Autobiographical Notes

Previously unpublished notes from the early 1960s relating to an application for graduate studies in fine art at New York University towards securing a teaching degree.

I was born in Paris, France, and lived there until my marriage in 1938. My husband being an American teacher, I have since then lived in New York.

Both my parents were French and made their living as restorers of antique tapestries, and I grew up deeply interested in art and the history of art. They were successful in a moderate way, and we—my parents, my sister, my brother and myself—lived in a spacious house outside of Paris. The choice of our residence was dictated by the chemical qualities of the Bièvre River, which were useful and even necessary for the dyeing of the wools we used in our tapestries. (For the same reason the Gobelins' factories had been built nearer Paris on the same river.)

I went to school at the Lycée Fénelon in Paris from kindergarten until, after getting my degree, I entered the Sorbonne—that is, twelve years in a school of long tradition and high scholastic standing.

My mother was of delicate health and she considered that I ought to become established in her profession as soon as possible. Very early she acquainted me with the problems of drawing and color and the various historical styles of old tapestries. There were also the chemical problems

of finding unfading dyes that my mother thought I should work on further.

For these reasons my parents took me out of school when I was fifteen (two years before the "*Bachot*" degree) even though I was the honor student of the year. They decided I needed more intensive professional training, so I left the Lycée and worked both at home in the restoring and weaving ateliers, and in classes in Paris preparing for matriculation at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

My *Baccalauréat* degree was in philosophy, and the courses leading to it were divided among ethics, logic and psychology. An empirical approach was employed in both logic and psychology. Logic was concerned with the methods through which knowledge is acquired rather than with abstract theory. Psychology emphasized the history of experimental psychology and the study of sensations from the point of the American pragmatists.

I decided to expand my previous interest in the history of practice of art.

On the one hand I continued at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (which is a graduate professional school) and was received there and worked in the atelier of Monsieur d'Espagnat. On the other I also studied the history of art at the Ecole du Louvre, which prepares for jobs at the Louvre Museum. After completion of this course I became a docent at the Louvre and was working there in 1938 when I met my future husband, who was then preparing his doctorate in the history of art. He is now associate professor of art at Queens College. I came to live in New York in September 1938.

In New York I found a flourishing artistic milieu. In this environment I became anxious to establish a reputation as an artist.

I have had five one-man [*sic*] shows in New York and one in Chicago, my work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art and in several private collections and has been published in books on contemporary art. I mention all this because with my family it has been the core of interest until now, and because it is partly on the basis of my experience and position as an artist that I now wish to orient my studies. In recent

years, thinking about my own problems as an artist, and discussing them with other artists, I have become more and more interested in understanding the psychology of art, and it is in this direction that I now wish to resume my formal academic training.

* * *

I have been led from an understanding of creative work derived from an observation of the processes of my own work and from discussion with my fellow artists to a wider interest in the psychological and sociological basis of the arts.

In the last two years I have done considerable reading in the psychology of the arts. I would now like to add a formal training in psychology to the insight into the interpretation of visual forms given me by my personal experience of the last fifteen years.

My purpose in undertaking these courses is therefore a double one:

1. To enrich and deepen my own future artistic production.

2. To acquire the necessary theoretical and experimental foundations so that I will be able to find a useful position in the field of diagnostic testing and remedial care of children.

On the Creative Process

Previously unpublished notes, mid 1960s.

There is a long lapse between the first creative vision and the final result; often it is a matter of years. For instance, hollow forms appeared first in my work as details, and then grew in importance until their consciousness was crystallized by a visit to the Lascaux caves with their visible manifestation of an enveloping negative form, produced by the torrent of water that has left its waves upon the ceiling: my underlying preoccupation had been constant, but it had taken me seven years to develop and give it final shape.

There has been a similar gradual development from rigidity to pliability. When I was asked to give a fourth side to the flat back of a statue called *Spring*, which had been conceived as a stiff caryatid, I found it impossible to do: rigidity then seemed essential. Today it seems futile and has vanished. In the past my work fought, sustained and challenged; my new work, in which modeling and building up has replaced hacking away, can roll and wear out, and settle down to a peaceful existence.

Though the titles of many of my pieces refer to nature or the human figure, they are not abstractions in the usual sense. Rather they arise out of a state of awareness provoked by a revealed and fleeting vision of nature. Its very elusiveness gave me the desire to fix it, for fear of not finding it again. If the work holds any magic I consider it successful. This personal vision which some people say the artist wants to impose on others, in fact only becomes clear to the artist himself from the finished work. When he sees it, he knows he has finished his work.

Form

Previously unpublished notes for a lecture, late 1960s.

Restif de la Bretonne
Colette, Willy
Apollinaire, Guillaume
Breton, André
Céline
Artaud, Antonin
Mailer, Norman

Form: *la vie des hommes*, the visual abstract, the language of forms, or "the style is the man," "the style is of today."

Abstracted, the forms if correct should have a direct impact even unconscious.

The work has to stand by itself and it is the form that will guarantee its survival.

Vocabulary is how we communicate, find ways to stimulate through signs and symbols, directed at our five senses.

The forms have a language understood by a few. You cannot understand erotic forms if you are completely innocent and a symbol is a symbol only if what it stands for is known. The standing for is almost an equating but rather an analogy. Symbols can be literal and literary as in Surrealism or they can be suggestive as in abstract art. The rhythm then will be suggestive: slow, rapid, sudden, repetitious, with different intervals and intensities. To understand the language or vocabulary of a given artist, in a non-descriptive mode, there must be on the part of the spectator an attentive and receptive attitude with deference, endurance, and patience, and if I am not readily understood I do not mind—as time goes by people will see new things in the work—things that the artist did not put there or did not know he had put there—the successive analogies or associations of subjects to symbols will be read and reinterpreted—e.g. the oozing out of milk

(mother) water (spring in mother earth)—saliva in snails—lava in volcano—creates an ambivalence of feelings that goes from pleasure to fear.

The work should stand by itself—without explanation after it leaves the studio the piece begins a life of its own for better or for worse—the intention of the maker does not matter anymore—the "message" may not be understood or forgotten. The artist may be long dead and the work goes on along its way.

As time goes by people will see in it things that we did not put there, did not intend to put there or did not know we put there and yet are there (that is the problem of the degree of planning an artist controls).

For instance those four sculptures shown on the screen are shown as "erotic" art—I respect what classification they have given (put in) but I do not think of them as such. I do not plan to be erotic and doubt if I am but if when you come in their presence the esthetic shoe is an erotic one—who am I to tell you it was not so?

Content is a concern with the human body, its aspect, its changes, transformations, what it needs, wants and feels—its functions.

What it perceives and undergoes passively, what it performs.

What it feels and what protects it—its habitat.

All these states of being, perceiving, and doing are expressed by processes that are familiar to us and that have to do with the treatment of materials, pouring, flowing, dripping, oozing out, setting, hardening, coagulating, thawing, expanding, contracting, and the voluntary aspects such as slipping away, advancing, collecting, letting go—

Pornography has the same content as eroticism: without being art it is completely literal and over-explicit—if not obvious it leaves nothing to be discovered.

The content is today the erotic message—everything that takes place as a result of the presence of two people. Pleasure, pain, survival, in public or in private, in a real or imaginary world.

Brief Account of Career

Previously unpublished, c. 1965.

My first mature personal work (1945–51) was direct wood-carving, executed at life-size scale. The forms were severe and simple, slender and upright, and were painted (mostly black and white), not to get coloristic effects, but just the opposite—to increase the visual unity of each and to avoid any romanticism of materials. These extremely reduced forms, although apparently abstract because they were uncomplicated, were conceived of and functioned as figures, each given a personality by its shape and articulation, and responding to one another. They were life-size in a real space and made to be seen in groups, and they were exhibited in this way in two shows at the Peridot Gallery, 1950 and 1951. These works were among the first "environmental" sculptures (although the word was not used at the time), and their considerable influence upon others has since been written about. This theme of symbolic abstraction through the creation of forms that suggest both the structure of geometry and human individuality has been a consistent preoccupation of my work.

The sculpture of the 1950s continued to be in wood. It too was concerned with the symbolic relation of simple forms, but these forms were now smoother and gentler in their outlines and were brought close together in huddled assemblages anchored to a common base. At that time I wrote of a piece called *One and Others* (1955, Whitney Museum) that its title might be the title of many of them, that I was concerned with the relation of the individual to his surroundings and the wish to translate this concern into simple, elemental compositions and visual structures, always the very opposite of sentimental.

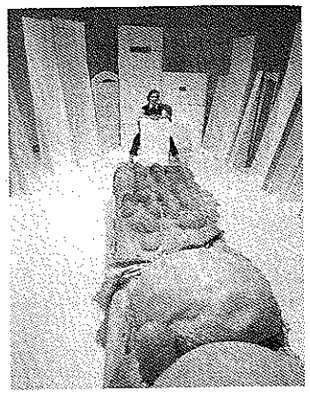
During the last few years, while continuing to work in wood, I have concentrated on plaster, bronze, and now more recently marble. I have continued to make works of fused units and also assemblages. If anything, my forms have become even simpler, but their relationships more complex. There also has been a gradual change from rigidity to pliability, and a

Symbolic Architecture

Statement by the artist transcribed from an audio recording of an unpublished interview with Deborah Wye, 11 July 1981, with a handwritten addition by the artist.

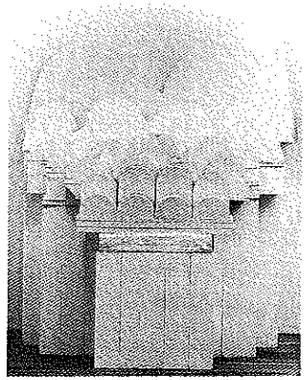
Confrontation / Destruction of the Father / Partial Recall

Confrontation, with the subject of death as the price of unfulfilled passion, is very close in subject matter to *The Destruction of the Father* in the sense that they both come from emotional aggression, dislocation, disintegration, explosion, and total destruction or murder. Now at the opposite pole there are pieces that are peaceful. After so much emotion, they represent a search for, if not peace, actually forgiveness or forgetfulness. They are a plea for a peace and that is all . . . peace with oneself.



Confrontation, 1978, mixed media, 1128 cm long × 609.5 cm wide. Collection: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

* * *



In *Partial Recall* the pieces have fallen into place—things are as they should be, *les comptes sont réglés*—vengeance has taken its toll and justice appears.

Pardon & forgiveness are fine but they are a refinement.

Partial Recall, 1979, wood, 228.5 × 274.3 × 167.6 cm. Private Collection, New York.

On Fulfillment

First published in May 1985 by *New Age Journal* in "In Search of Fulfillment: Six Meaningful Lives" by Norman Boucher and Laura Tennen, p. 32.

Fulfillment is what in the eighteenth century was called inspiration. It is impossible to understand the logic of a person who is in a state of inspiration. The processes are neither predictable nor scientific. It's a matter of associations . . . but in a positive way. You can work in sculpture only if you are in a state of controlled high. I believe in my instincts . . . As I grow older the problems I see are not only more intricate but more interesting. Fulfillment comes from the solution of a problem. The problems that I'm interested in are more directed toward other people than toward ideas or objects. The final achievement is really communication with a person. And I fail to get there.