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Pillar – A Gateway Figure? On a work by Louise Bourgeois and her Relationship with Art History

ABSTRACT

Louise Bourgeois very consciously opened her *oeuvre* to biographical interpretation through comments in interviews, through her writings and, not least, through her art. It would appear to be an open and shut case – with everything neatly laid out for art historians. Her works and her career have been the object of interpretation in a multiplicity of texts. But is it really that simple? Taking a single work, *Pillar* (1949), as a starting point, my aim in this article is to illuminate Bourgeois' relationship with the writing of art history. Rather than interpret the work by itself, this approach will make it possible to both reveal and explore the ways in which the artist changed, adapted and developed her strategies in order to influence the interpretation of individual works and of her oeuvre as a whole. I show Bourgeois was well aware of her influence and that she very deliberately used the rules of the game to draw attention to recurring histories, thereby also dissuading other interpretations. Her construction of the oeuvre as a linear story, work leading to work without digressions, is hard to understand since the control she gained also implies limitations.

Introduction

> Artists are born, not made.[1]
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> All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood.[2]

By making comments of this kind, Louise Bourgeois opened her *oeuvre* to biographical interpretation. As an 'artist from birth', as Bourgeois claimed, her whole life became a potential source for art as well as interpretations. It would appear to be an open and shut case – with everything neatly laid out for art historians. Links between her biography and her art have guided critical interpretation of Bourgeois' *oeuvre* in a multiplicity of texts. But is it really that simple? Taking a single work, *Pillar* (1949), as a starting point, my aim in this article is to illuminate Bourgeois' relationship with the writing of art history. This approach makes it possible to both reveal and explore the ways in which the artist changed, adapted and developed her strategies for influencing the interpretation of individual works and of her *oeuvre* as a whole, up until her death in 2010.

Pillar is a tall, narrow wooden sculpture that is painted white. Carved in soft balsa wood in a single piece, the shape is rounded off by two indentations which create three distinct parts.[3] A number of long grooves have been filled with light blue pigment. One side is flat, suggesting that the sculpture has a back and counteracting the impression of circularity.[4] The sculpture balances on a narrow tip which is anchored in a thin sheet of metal. The title makes an association with the terminology of architecture, and the shape of the work calls to mind not

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[1] Bourgeois, 2007a.
[2] Obrist and Bernadac, 2000, p. 1.
[3] Bourgeois had the sculpture cast in bronze in a later version, but the wooden sculpture is the original one. Its surface also transmits a more immediate and gentle feeling and is less cheerful and mute.
[4] In some displays *Pillar* stands on a low platform together with other sculptures and the flat side is turned towards the wall. This makes it difficult for the visitor to walk round it while emphasising the feeling of it having both a front and back.

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only a pillar or column but also a caryatid. Its smooth, vertical form has, however, been simplified with no explicit links to architecture. Instead its design is clearly embedded in Modernist art, evoking that movement's reduction and simplification of shapes and its rounded forms containing hollows and stick-thin figures.[5]

Pillar forms part of a series of wooden sculptures, some eighty pieces, which Louise Bourgeois created between 1945 and 1955. These works are collectively called *Personages*, a title which emphasises their anthropomorphic associations.[6] The series as a whole demonstrates a simplified idiom and is made up of freestanding sculptures – which on occasion are combined into groups, or equipped with "extremities", or contain foreign components such as nails.[7] Bourgeois has spoken in great detail about these works in various interviews over the years. A further key source is an essay on the early works which Bourgeois wrote around 1965 called 'Brief Account of Career'.[8] In this short text, the *Personages* are referred to as the 'first "environmental" sculptures'; Bourgeois further stated the works expressed her interest in 'symbolic abstraction' through their association with human beings and geometry. There are few references to *Personages* in her writings around the time of their production.[9] What seemed to be important to her, and this becomes clearer from the end of the 1960s when Bourgeois was working on developing a greater complexity in her sculptures in terms of bodies and materials, and until her death in 2010, was to emphasise the existence of a powerful coherence throughout her oeuvre.[10] A decade after her 1965 article was published, in an interview with Susi Bloch in 1976, Bourgeois referred once more to 'environment' and to geometry rather than to biography. Here, although Bourgeois was clearly attempting to avoid the issue of the biographical, she does mention that a sense of loss is involved.[11] An evident turning-point in these assertions by the artist occurs following her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1982. The way Griselda Pollock sees it, this moment in time marks the beginning of the official process of canonisation, rather than Bourgeois' entry into the canon.[12] It is also the point, I will argue, when Bourgeois herself began to exert greater influence over interpretations of her works, having prepared the ground during the previous years. In a 1989 interview with Alain Kirili, for example, she clearly specifies the link between *Personages* and homesickness.[13] The titles of individual works are also commented on: '[The work titled] *Woman in the Shape of a Shuttle*. Every word is significant. Coming from Aubusson, where my mother's family were tapestry-merchants, the shuttle was the toll of my grandfather's milieu.'[14] Both loss and installation remained key themes.

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[5] Mention should be made of Constantin Brancusi, in whose works the base has been abandoned or turned into a shape of its own; the thin figures of Alberto Giacometti; the rounded shapes and hollows in works by Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, and sculptures in general by contemporaries of Bourgeois in the US, such as David Hare, Louise Nevelson and David Smith.

[6] There are several sculptures entitled *Pillar*. See Strick, 1994, p. 58, for one of the variants. Many of Bourgeois' sculptures resemble one another while there are others which call *Pillar* to mind.

[7] *Quarantania I* (1947–53), *Dagger Child* (1947–49), *Observer* (1947–49) and *Portrait of C. Y.* (1947–49) provide illustrative examples.

[8] Bourgeois, 1965.

[9] A letter containing instructions to Alfred H. Barr, Jr. at MoMA, dated 1951, concerning the purchase of *Figure endormie*, is an exception. See Bourgeois, 1951, pp. 62-63.

[10] Rubin, 1969, p. 84.

[11] Bloch, 1976, p. 105.

[12] Pollock, 1999, p. 75.

[13] Kirili, 1989.

[14] Kirili, 1989, p. 178.

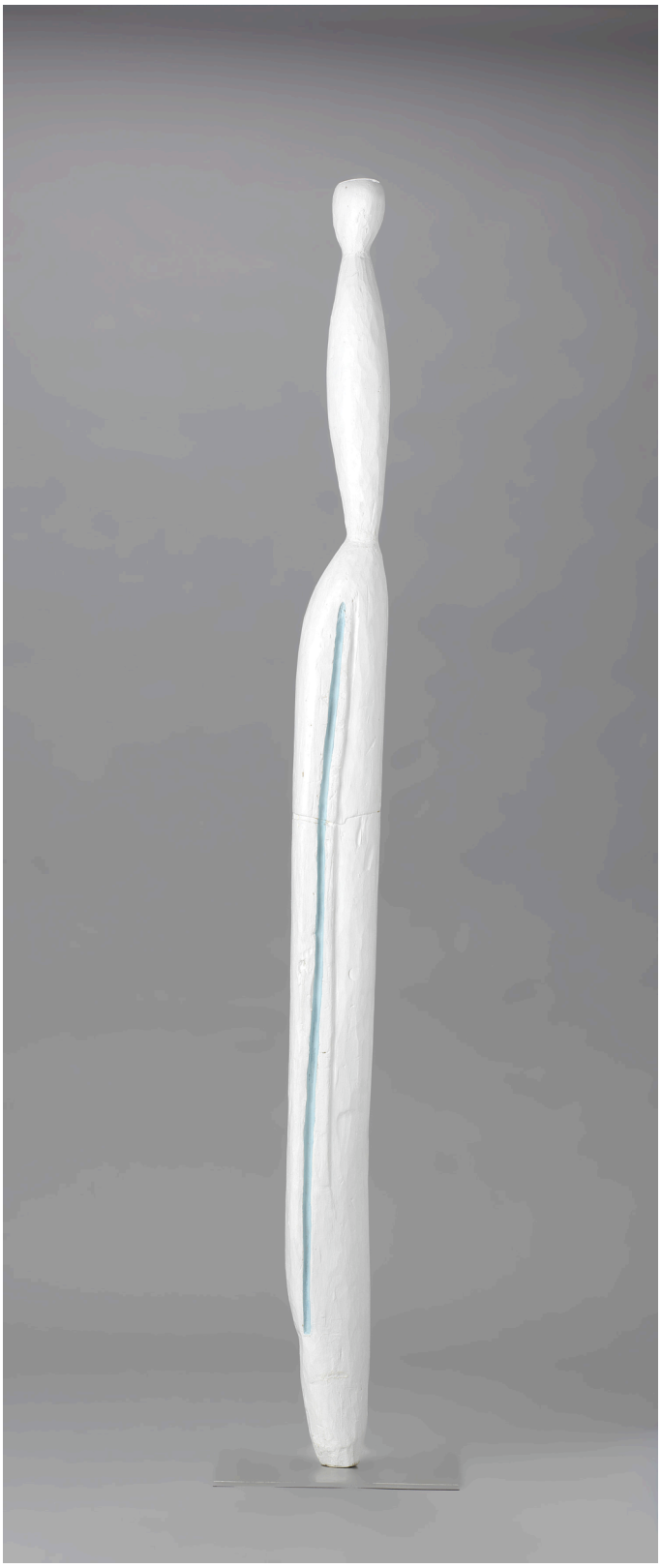

Fig. 1. Louise Bourgeois, *Pillar*, 1949. Painted wood, stainless steel, 165.5 x 30.8 x 30.8 cm, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, inv. no. MOM/2007/65. (Photography: © Moderna Museet/Åsa Lundén 2010.)

It is not surprising that numerous catalogue texts have relied heavily on Bourgeois' own statements. She is often quoted extensively, and the primary focus for many such texts is the link between modernism and primitivism.[15] With reference to primitivism, there are a number of interesting interpretations from a gender perspective that demonstrate how Bourgeois manages to criticise the patriarchal system while emphasising the individual personality.[16] Although attempts are made in certain catalogue texts to detach the interpretation from the biographical – while demonstrating a clear awareness of the role played by the biographical elements for earlier interpreters – the difficulty experienced by the authors in freeing themselves entirely from the events of Bourgeois' life is evident. These elements also include an emphasis on architecture, particularly on the skyscrapers of New York.[17] In this regard, Bourgeois' entire *oeuvre* has been described as 'an architecture of memory', in which different parts are combined to create new constellations. Although this applies primarily to the works of more recent decades, it is also a fitting epithet for the group-work called *Fabric Towers* (2000), which alludes to the 1950s and her work after *Personages*.[18]

Many interpretations of *Personages* position the sculptures as surrogates or fetishes representing individuals who were missed by Louise Bourgeois once she had left Paris for New York in 1938.[19] Words which frequently recur in this context are 'exorcism', 'homesickness' and 'loss'.[20] Mignon Nixon has written about the series in detail from this angle in her study *Fantastic Reality*.[21] She interprets the works using Freudian theories, including those concerning female hysteria and grieving, and brings a new depth to those aspects which concern ritual, surrogacy and spatial location.[22] Nixon sees *Personages* as primeval sculptures centred on the depiction of the human being.[23]

Further biographical interpretations of *Personages* are also readily available.[24] Even in a politically oriented discussion of these works, such as that of Ann Gibson, a biographical explanation is presented: in a quote Bourgeois claims that her politics are influenced by her wish to confront her father.[25] And yet this series does not belong to the works she produced in

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[15] Strick, 1994. Strick's closeness to Bourgeois is evident and he allows her voice full range. What she says influences the direction he takes, to which I return on the subject of Primitivism. In the catalogue to the exhibition at MoMA in 1982, Deborah Wye writes about the link to Primitivism on the basis of Bourgeois' need for tangible connections (individuals are of key importance from Wye's perspective as well) and in order to find expression for feelings. Wye, 1982, p. 19.

[16] Jahn, 1999, p. 16f, also discusses in her dissertation attempts at criticism of the interpretation of Bourgeois based on the latter's biography. Jahn's text is couched in terms of a formalist, comparative interpretation and only touches briefly on Bourgeois' biography and her relation to spatial relationships in the work. See also p. 46f.

[17] Helfenstein, 2007, p. 207. He considers the fact that Bourgeois could work on the roof of a skyscraper as offering her a kind of tabula rasa, on which she could free herself from the burden of the past. Helfenstein is, in consequence – and despite his attempts to avoid the biographical – interpreting the works as an attempt to overcome the past. Concerning *Personages* and Bourgeois' attitude to her arrival in the US, see also Meyer-Thoss, 1992, p. 24, and Bourgeois' own statement, p. 178, where she refers to her sculptures as 'skyscrapers', but emphasises the fact that they do not touch one another.

[18] Ahrens, 1994, p. 17.

[19] Strick, p. 10: '[…] a kind of autobiography […]', which he follows up, after a brief digression, on p. 23ff where he tackles the problem of relationships.

[20] See Bernadac, 1996, pp. 49-63.

[21] Nixon, 2005, pp. 119-63 (Chapter 4: 'Personages: The Work of Mourning').

[22] Nixon, 2005, p. 132 on hysteria; p. 140ff on grieving; p. 121ff on the spatial location and the relationships between the sculptures.

[23] Nixon, 2005, p.26. 'She began the work of sculpture, in effect, from scratch, by making surrogates of people.'

[24] Morris, 2000, p. 9ff and Neri, 1997.

[25] Gibson, 1994, p. 44.

which constant reference is made to her biography and to her childhood in particular – a point I want now to emphasise.

The Breakthrough

That Louise Bourgeois was seventy years old when she was awarded a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1982, and that she remained prolific until her death in May 2010, is a persistent source of fascination.[26] By the time of the MoMA exhibition, Bourgeois was already referring to *Personages* as a mature series: 'My first mature personal work (1945–51) was direct wood-carving, executed at life-size scale.'[27] She had spent the preceding years primarily working with painting and graphics, creating now iconic works as *Femme Maison* (in various versions from 1946). Although recognition came late in her life, her art and her exhibitions did attract attention among her contemporaries. MoMA acquired her work *Sleeping Figure* (1950) as early as 1951.[28] Her exhibitions were reviewed, and feminist art history had a considerable influence on her reception, as mediated by Lucy Lippard, for example.[29] However, during this period Bourgeois published little of her own interpretations of her works.[30]

It would appear that the increasingly powerful influence exerted by Bourgeois over various interpretations has its origins in the MoMA retrospective. At the same time as it took place she published 'Child Abuse', an illustrated narrative, in the periodical *Artforum*.[31] As Anne Wagner has argued, this article, or 'core narrative', could not have been published earlier: "child abuse" as a phrase has its historical roots in the 1970s.[32] In this text Bourgeois laid the foundations for the interpretation of her work in terms of her childhood and her upbringing, insisting that, 'everything I do was inspired by my early life.'[33] Caught between her parents, with a father who took her English teacher as his mistress and a mother who remained a bystander while also using the daughter to keep the father in check, Bourgeois was exploited and made to suffer. She identified these experiences as the foundation of her art, and almost all her works were interpreted on the basis of her own life. The rest of her upbringing would appear to play no role, including all her experiences as a young person in France; instead it is this drama of the relationship between father, mother, mistress and daughter which she highlights as being foundational. Even if this episode covered several years, it only accounts for a part of her upbringing. Bourgeois was very explicit and very determined on this point,

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[26] The exhibition at MoMA opened on 3 November 1982 and continued until 8 February 1983. As Meyer-Thoss has suggested, it may not be possible to refer to an "Alterswerk"; instead she sees a single movement, and concentration rather than expansion. Meyer-Thoss, 1992, p. 33. Regarding old age, Pollock, 1999, argues convincingly on the necessity of age for the female artist in order to become part of the canon.

[27] Bourgeois, 1965. See also Strick, 1994, p. 8.

[28] Wye, 2007, on Bourgeois' acquaintance with Barr, and Ann Coxon's text concerning *Sleeping Figure*, Coxon, 2007.

[29] Lucy Lippard, *Eccentric Abstraction*, Fischbach Gallery, New York 1966. The work by Louise Bourgeois that was shown was *Resin Eight*. Lippard also published an early interpretation of Bourgeois: Lippard, 1976. See also Pollock, 1999, on the feminist reception.

[30] A cursory survey of Obrist, Bernadac, 2000, reveals that a third of her texts concern the period prior to the retrospective at MoMA. Many of these texts are unpublished letters, diary jottings, notes and brief responses to inquiries. Some of these texts were published much later (e.g. pp. 51-55). The amount of textual material does not start to increase again to any noteworthy extent before the 1970s.

[31] Bourgeois, 1982.

[32] Wagner, 1999, p. 7.

[33] How childhood in its turn is to be interpreted is made apparent under the heading 'Childhood', Bourgeois 2007c.

not only in such titles as *The Destruction of the Father* (1974) and *Seven in Bed* (2001) but also in various texts she wrote over the years.[34] In fact, Mignon Nixon regards *The Destruction of the Father* as a 'sharp, tactical shift' in Bourgeois' oeuvre.[35] Evidently, the work was central to Bourgeois, but it only gains its full impact when read alongside the 1982 article. It prepared the ground for her narrative and would henceforth be deeply embedded in it. This has in turn led to an overwhelming focus on biography in subsequent art historical analyses of Bourgeois' practice.[36] This problem was previously addressed in 1999, when a whole issue of the *Oxford Art Journal* was dedicated to Bourgeois with the explicit aim of providing a fora for other voices to comment on the artist.[37] The articles written from a feminist perspective, by Briony Fer, Mignon Nixon, Griselda Pollock, and Anne Wagner, try to bypass biography mainly by focusing instead on style.[38] Pollock most actively engages with the problem of psychobiography, and her reading of the canonisation of Bourgeois from a historical point of view is convincing.

Pillar and Evolution

> A piece is always a consequence of the one that preceded it. It's a complete evolution, so that if somebody lost all the dates and all the documentation of my work, it would not be difficult to reconstruct the evolution purely through forms.[39]

This quotation is dated around 1990, at a time when Bourgeois had a career spanning fifty years behind her. Here she is expressing a clearly linear evolutionary concept. The emphasis on consistency means that there can be no room for deviation. Everything has to appear logically consistent and to lead forward without mistakes being made and without dead ends. This is 'a complete evolution' and is visibly evident, according to the artist, in her work.

Obviously this is an extreme, almost Hegelian, formulation which should not be taken literally. The very fact that in *Fabric Towers* at the end of the 1990s Bourgeois would re-use her own work from the beginning of the 1950s, serves to demonstrate that contexts can be wider in scope than simply one work being the development of a preceding one. To make the argument for linear progression of this kind is, of course, not as easy in practice. It is worth noting that Jeremy Strick, in commenting on Bourgeois' own statements about *Personages*, emphasises not only her factual language (unemotional, even detached) but also suggests Bourgeois' most important mission was to illuminate the evolution of her *oeuvre*. According to Strick, Bourgeois was attempting to explain how this early series of sculptures related to the themes elaborated by her entire body of work.[40]

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[34] See for example Obrist and Bernadac, 2000, pp. 127, 157, 200, 226, 240, 258. A rather vague reference to depression being linked to the father and anger to the mother can be found on p. 61.
[35] Nixon, 1999, p. 66.
[36] As was mentioned in the introduction, a few attempts have been made to break with the biographical and this makes an article by Thomas McEvilley, in which he considers the work instead from an archetypal perspective in terms of Bourgeois finding expression for fundamental cultural symbols, all the more welcome. McEvilley, 1989. In a monograph on *Spider*, Mieke Bal has also attempted to exclude Bourgeois' biography in favour of a kind of close reading of the cell and its links with architecture (Bal, 2001). The first chapters were published in Bal, 1999.
[37] Corrin, 1999, p. 1. Corrin, curator at the Serpentine Gallery in London where Bourgeois' work was shown, aimed at presenting the artist as an "object maker" rather than person.
[38] Fer, 1999; Nixon, 1999; Pollock, 1999; and Wagner, 1999.
[39] Bourgeois, 2007b.
[40] 'While the artist's pride in her early work is evident, her prime concern is with the evolution of her work, and the relationship between this early work and the themes that define her career.' Strick, 1994, p. 9.

A crucial aspect of the quotation by Bourgeois is the sense in which it embodies her self-understanding. The *oeuvre* is presented as a homogenous whole, which has evolved out of her and followed a particular developmental course over time. This corresponds to her experience rather than to the reality, which is both more subtle and more differentiated. It is tempting to read the *oeuvre* as a construction. The key thing here is her desire to create this image of herself, an image which she took pains to mediate. Seen in this light, the above quotation can also be read as a reaction to those art historians who have emphasised the multifarious nature of her works. Bourgeois' aim was to counter a potentially negative reading which would see her as divided and lacking in a logically consistent and coherent practice.[41] It is also worth noting that many of Bourgeois' works of the 1960s and '70s could be described as *formless*. On the one hand, this is confirmed by Briony Fer and Alex Potts, who discuss connections between Bourgeois and some of her contemporaries including Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman.[42] On the other hand, it is contrary to Bourgeois' own attitude towards form, as seen in the quote above. It is important to stress that Bourgeois' *oeuvre* is a complex whole, and that her biography is often used as a means to gather all the various threads – as if it would be impossible to fathom Bourgeois' *oeuvre* through the works alone.

What remains moot is whether it is necessary to see Bourgeois' entire body of work in terms of linear development. The fact that it is a whole, and as such more or less coherent and stable, is beyond dispute. Nevertheless, I would like to question the necessity to present a coherent *oeuvre* since the construction of the whole would be superimposed on the individual works. Moreover, to see the works as being so firmly interconnected and interdependent would appear to be a hindrance, since it would mean that alternative links and connections are not paid the attention they might merit. The artist was attempting to lead the viewer along a straight and narrow path that allowed for no diversions. While there is nothing to say that this particular path should be followed, the effort at direction nevertheless remains relatively powerful. Whatever one's attitude to Bourgeois' statements, her desire to influence and control interpretations is clear.

The statement would then appear to be both a deliberate strategy and a way of relating to her *oeuvre*. It is significant that it was presented relatively late in her career, when it became possible to look back to see which connections existed – or, which connections had to be construed. This cannot have been the intention from the very beginning; it is rare indeed that an artist decides in advance that every work should lead on to the next and that all will be inter-related.[43] The effect of this would be to limit the artist's freedom of manoeuvre and make it impossible to experiment on any scale. Bourgeois was far too multifaceted an artist for that, and far too curious about experimenting with new and different approaches. Connections do exist but they are not vital to the exploration and understanding of her work. Such series as *Personages* and *Cells* (1990s) are too powerful in themselves and too internally coherent to be dissected to the bone. It is not necessary to make distinctions between separate parts within a series when they are to be related to the *oeuvre* as a whole.

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[41] It should be pointed out that Deborah Wye writes something similar about Bourgeois, without meaning it negatively, and the following quotation feels as though it is something to which Bourgeois is responding directly in her own words: 'None of these images […], however, can be seen as a logical formal progression from the one before. Instead, they are examples of the contrariness of Bourgeois' artistic process and of the difficulty her work presents from a purely evolutionary and stylistic point of view.' Wye, 1982, p. 24.

[42] Fer, 1999, Potts, 1999.

[43] Not even in bodies of work as consistent as that of Piet Mondrian (after the manifesto) or of Agnes Martin, are there grounds for referring to a similarly developmental consistency as formulated by Bourgeois.

Moreover, the exact dating of a work such as *Personages* is difficult and the various parts should be seen as a whole – a cohesion that argues against an arbitrary reconstruction of linear chronology.

Another important aspect of Bourgeois interpretative determination is that alternate art historical links are played down in favour of internal connections. Nothing is said about other references or significant connections; they are more or less suppressed. This allows it to appear as though the works have evolved solely out of the artistic career; that the only permissible context is an internal one, and that they are detached from art history and wider society. The artist is, naturally, part of society and influenced by the contemporary world and while this may flow into the work, from Bourgeois' comments it appears as if inspiration is derived primarily from her preceding works. One consequence of this way of looking at the *oeuvre* is that Bourgeois' biography becomes central to the interpretation of the works.

Prior to her breakthrough, it is possible that she had a measure of control over the interpretation of her works and how they were seen, inasmuch as she was well-known to a small yet influential circle of friends and acquaintances. Once she gained international recognition, it was no longer possible to have the same degree of control over the written word. This should not be taken to mean that Bourgeois necessarily wanted to dominate the discussion of her work, but that she did at least want to monitor it and exert a degree of influence over it. As part of this strategy she promoted the biographical interpretation very firmly, and so consistently and exclusively that it quickly obtained tenacity in analyses of her works.

Biographical interpretation has also been specifically emphasised in relation to *Pillar*. Bourgeois provided hints as to how it was to be interpreted, primarily in terms of her biographical background and the way it is arranged in space.[44] The key aspects, as has been mentioned, relate to her move from France to the US and the significance of its placement, and do not involve her childhood. While Bourgeois may have mentioned particular aspects in earlier texts and interviews, she avoided linking them to her childhood. Opportunities were no doubt available, should she have so wished, to read into *Personages* as well a relational theme such as the one subsequently presented in 'Child Abuse'. The presence of both links to individual persons and a certain open-endedness would allow for readings of this kind. The aspects Bourgeois highlighted were deliberately chosen. Referring to them as 'environmental sculptures' elevated their status, turning them into prototypes for countless other works from the 1960s onwards. We should remember that the term 'environment' had a different meaning before Allan Kaprow used it in the late 1950s, and before Michael Fried's analysis of theatricality in minimal art focused on the relationship between viewer and object.[45] What she was actually seeking to achieve by this description was to lift them out of their contemporary context – the Modernist sculpture tradition – and make them topical. She was

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[44] It was not Bourgeois' intention originally to use these metal sheets, instead the work was to be fixed directly to the floor – but the gallery-owner refused to agree to this. See Nixon, 2005, p. 124 and footnote 9. In certain photographs of works forming part of *Personages*, they can be seen leaning against a wall. What is important nevertheless is the reduced and simplified form of the base and that the fragility of its balancing-act was emphasised.

[45] Potts, 1999, focuses on the relationship between the viewer and *Personages* in his essay. Of course this is an important theme to address, but it seems to me that the relationship between persons, implied in the title and revealed even in a superficial encounter with the sculptural forms, begs for this analysis, rather than the environment and placement – the way Bourgeois wanted to see it. These sculptures engage with their environment much in the same way as Giacometti's sculptures do.

also attempting to avoid comparisons with artists such as Giacometti. One need only think of photographs from Brancusi's studio to realise that other artists, too, were interested in creating relationships between sculptures by their arrangement.[46]

Even though Bourgeois succeeded in directing the course of interpretation, other biographical facts have not been ignored. In Paris, Bourgeois got to know the American art historian Robert Goldwater whom she subsequently married and with whom she moved to New York in 1938 – the same year he published his pioneering work *Primitivism in Modern Painting*.[47] It is quite clear that Bourgeois was familiar with the study of the links that exist between non-Western cultures and cubism and surrealism, for example, and that she must have been aware of the idiom that was appreciated and embodied in works of art.[48] The abbreviated shape of *Personages*, its links to the human body, the use of nails thrust into the head, and the simplified features are all elements that may be associated with non-European inspiration and influence. There is also a distinct element of the fetish in this series.[49] Yet at the same time Bourgeois asserts (in other quotations and as part of her endeavour to exclude elements from the story) that primitivist art had no influence on her own works. She responds, for instance, to Michael Auping's question: 'Were you interested in African sculpture?' with: 'Not at all. I was haunted by the dialogue of people.'[50] What is evident here is her attempt to defend herself from being linked with these trends, doubtless a reaction as well to having been married to an art historian working within this field. Or as Jeremy Strick writes:

> For women artists in the 1940s and '50s, there was a tremendous risk that one's achievement would be ascribed to and one's identity subsumed into that of one's mate. That risk was especially real for Bourgeois. Art critic and historian Lucy Lippard has cited one instance in which a critic, writing in 1947, opened his review of Bourgeois' work by identifying the artist as the wife of the art historian Robert Goldwater.[51]

Clearly Bourgeois was faced with not only having to deny any possible influence but also having to combat being subordinated to the interests and influence of her husband. She was, in other words, defending herself against interpretations based on her relationship with Goldwater. To the extent that her husband, moreover, had written about primitivism, this would not only have been an instance of subordination in art historical terms regarding her chosen idiom, but also to the influence of her husband, and thus a double subordination.[52] Recent feminist art history has shown the danger of conflating art and life – or of reducing art to life. Nevertheless, today it should be possible to discuss in a nuanced way how the marriage influenced both Goldwater's studies and Bourgeois' art. The way Bourgeois reacted to the notion of primitivism seems to mark a white spot that might be analysed further. And

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[46] The exhibition aesthetic of the Surrealists should be mentioned here, not because Bourgeois was influenced by it in *Personages*, but in order to highlight the contemporary currency of ideas concerning the expansion of space. See for example Kachur, 2001.
[47] Goldwater, 1938. For the significance of this study, see Rubin, 1984, p. 1.
[48] See also Pelletier, 2007. Nixon cites several contemporary reviews in which primitivism is referred to as an interpretative option. Nixon, 2005, p. 121.
[49] Cf. Nixon, 2005, p. 134ff. In Rubin, 1984, on pp. 43 and 47 sculptures from Nigeria, examples of a tall, narrow figure from Guinea can be found on p. 55. No additional comparisons are implied by this.
[50] Auping, 1996, p. 355.
[51] Strick, 1994, p. 22.
[52] Strick also draws attention to the fact that in the New York of the 1940s Primitivism was also associated with specific concepts such as archaic myths and archetypes, in which Bourgeois was not interested, while there was also a link to fetish culture on the other hand (Strick, 1994, p. 22).

how was Goldwater influenced by her art as well as her understanding of art history in general and sculpture in particular?

Bourgeois' relation to the modernist sculptural tradition and other artists such as Alberto Giacometti has also been the subject of debate. Links with primitivism have indeed been found, and – in relation to the early series – there is ample reason to discuss the influence of Giacometti.[53] Locating Bourgeois within a modernist tradition need not in itself present a problem. The problem only arises when she is reduced to a mere imitator. That risk was considerably greater in the period of the early works – when she was yet to establish a strong independent reputation – than it was during the final three decades. In these early works Bourgeois cannot be said to have been following an established direction but was instead seeking to develop a language of her own, which would only develop gradually. While she may have made considerable progress with *Personages*, these works do not feel as autonomous as *Cells*, for example. Whatever the truth, the key thing here is Bourgeois' rejection of Giacometti as a source of inspiration (and he may serve as an example of such sources) when her possible debt to him as an artist is mentioned. Bourgeois was categorical in maintaining that Giacometti was not important in this regard:

> I did not know Giacometti at the time. You have to be very careful about that. The work is very different if you really look. His works are not so fragile. […] His bases – the feet of his sculptures are massive. They get thinner and thinner from the base. The *Personages* go the opposite way. […] They are not monuments.[54]

It is clear that Bourgeois had reflected on this matter previously. She contradicts herself, moreover, since she admits in a different interview that she knew of Giacometti.[55] It is understandable that Bourgeois should have so obviously wished to disassociate herself from colleagues she is compared with, irrespective of whether or not there is any apparent evidence to support the comparison. This is an important means of asserting oneself and one's integrity, of particular importance for female artists who are frequently overshadowed by a male tradition. What is at issue, however, is the privileging of interpretation.

Bourgeois received more and more opportunities to speak about her own art as part of the increased attention paid to her after 1982. It is also interesting to note that she was rather vague on the subject of what the work was about in her limited statements concerning *Personages* in earlier years. She maintained that it dealt with the inter-relationships between the different sculptures, as couples or in groups. As she noted:

> But it wasn't just about individuals, it was about relations between people. For that first show, I made a social gathering of people. I tried to make them relate to each other, so that they would have a dialog in their different forms and personalities.[56]

In other statements, Bourgeois focuses on the relationship between the sculptures and to the space they inhabit, thereby warding off biographical interpretations which go beyond the notion that the works deal with individuals she missed.[57] The vagueness of the interpretation

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[53] See for example, Nixon, 2005, p. 129, and Jahn, 1999, p. 55ff.
[54] Auping, 1996, p. 353.
[55] Kirili, 1989, p. 179: '[…] I knew him well.'
[56] Auping, 1996, p. 352.
[57] Bloch, 1976, p. 104.

in relation to *Personages* contrasts with the intense focus on the relationships which existed in her childhood home and which become ubiquitous in post-1982 criticism. Louise Bourgeois had been a player in the art world for several decades by then, and it seems as if, knowing the game inside out, she deliberately chose to wield influence over it, exerting all the power and control of which she was capable. She played the game, making up her own rules, while asserting the coherency of her *oeuvre* – with the interpretation already part of the package. This is why it was so important for her to assert the interconnections, the internal logic, and the idea that the works arose from within her and out of the entirety of her *oeuvre*. The idea of consistency is fully in keeping with the personal biography she diligently constructed and put forward.

Evolution for Better or Worse

What attitude should we adopt to Louise Bourgeois and to the construction and assertion of her biography? While on the one hand this involves receiving and relating to her narrative, on the other a form of critical detachment is essential, particularly with regard to the prominent position of the biography. The multifarious interpretive possibilities offered by works such as *Pillar* and *Personages* are obvious. She lays the foundation for her entire sculptural output in these works, indicating the direction she will henceforward follow throughout her career. Although she abandons painting, she remains faithful to her earlier themes such as masculinity/femininity, relationships and sexuality. Based on the factual circumstances and without having to become enmeshed in a wealth of familiar details, conclusions may be drawn about her interests, about external influences, about autonomy and selection. Integrating elements run like filaments throughout her *oeuvre,* marking its development. It is a rich body of work and it would be odd not to find links between the different periods of her life. The difference between asserting the existence of a linear development and any kind of development at all, is that Bourgeois' approach closes off other interpretative avenues. It excludes, rather than includes, possible modalities of a different development. The linear allows for no digressions.[58]

Even though *Pillar* was a seminal project for Bourgeois, this does not mean that all her subsequent works follow automatically from these first sculptures. Adopting such an attitude would lead in part to a reduction of multiplicity, and a cancellation of the possibilities inherent to the work; such possibilities are obscured when her career is conceived of as a consistent evolution. It is nevertheless interesting to reflect on the precise means Bourgeois adopted in attempting to mediate this impression of a coherent whole. Why was it, in fact, that she wanted to make the viewer understand her *oeuvre* as a whole, to observe the singularity of the artist's production? In order perhaps to encompass as many varied possibilities of expression? If so, then the means (already championed in the masculine art world) would have involved following a consistent developmental direction, while creating an homogenous work constructed according to an inner logic. It would appear as though Bourgeois took this lesson on board in order to assert her independence against male dominance. She complies with the rules of the game while nevertheless being careful to remain in control of the strings pulling at her. It is for this very reason that she weaves a network of interconnected meanings so as to link and direct the attention of others while ensuring that they toe her line.

[58] Bal in her turn, would stress the process character of her work and she has also addressed the danger of limiting the understanding to just one interpretation, arguing that Bourgeois doesn't only belong to one time, but to several at once (Bal, 1999, p. 119).

The key aspect of her words on the subject of art history therefore is not whether it is even true or whether it is possible to reconstruct Bourgeois' art on the basis of the form of the works, but why Bourgeois should formulate her idea in this way. Nor is the question of whether there is a development or not relevant either; it is more or less obvious that some form of development exists and that she has succeeded in taking her career forwards in an effective way, towards what interests her. The salient feature is that she asserts a linear notion of development while neglecting so much else. According to Pollock, the necessity to present one story lies in the (male) canonisation process; it would not have allowed several parallel stories.[59] Seen this way, it could be argued that Bourgeois' sole goal was to become part of the Western canon. Not only the canon is important, but also the possibility of easy classification of a work as made by the acclaimed artist. The art market benefits and triggers this simplifying development.[60]

The major challenge confronting further research into Bourgeois and her work would therefore seem to be to find a means of relating to her biography in a new way. To circumvent it, not only through a discussion of style, but also to move forward and make new discoveries. This would permit increased mediation between the interests of the artist and her knowledge about her own work and other interpretative and historical factors. Andrea Jahn notes that although Bourgeois' earlier works were discussed in terms of their formal qualities, her later works – after the 1960s – are often assessed without comparisons to other artists or styles.[61] Jahn considers this to be evidence that the earlier works may be readily evaluated alongside modernist tendencies, while the later ones cannot be compared in terms of the shared idiom which characterises art during the 1960s. After the 1970s, interpretation shifted towards the biographical on the basis of Bourgeois' own statements, and her artistic idiom became associated with feminist interpretations of her work.

There is some justification, no doubt, for Jahn's observation but I would maintain nevertheless that the shift in attention has to be linked to Bourgeois herself. Jahn clearly sees, it is true, that Bourgeois actively facilitated these interpretations and paved the way for them, but she fails to interpret this either as a reaction to the earlier interpretations or as the deliberate strategy outlined here.[62] Bourgeois instead is presented as a very powerful and influential artist who proved competent at directing the interpretation of her work. The outcome in this regard could also be interpreted as an attempt on the artist's part to escape from a comparative art-historical interpretation of her works, in order to construct worlds of her own. What is of prime importance in that case would not be the reference to the autobiographical events, but that it is in precisely this way that Bourgeois succeeded in turning the attention inwards. It is here the link to her notion of evolution is to be found: the aim was to exclude external references and to assert her own development as an artist while controlling the reception of her art. It is particularly noteworthy in this context that much recent feminist art-historical writing has considered the biographical detail of artists' lives as a major problem for art historical analysis, and has sought to avoid interpreting artists' works on the basis of events in their lives.[63] The fact that Bourgeois (who was both aware of this

[59] Pollock, 1999, p. 87.
[60] The influence of the art market on the Bourgeois' narrative would constitute another line worth pursuing, not least since older works such as *Pillar* have been cast in bronze, and have resurfaced in the discussion. Recognition needs to be immediate and the trademark "Bourgeois" cannot be too diverse.
[61] Jahn, 1999, p. 13ff.
[62] Jahn, 1999, p. 15.
[63] Cf. Bal, 1999, Pollock, 1999, and Wagner, 1999.

and found herself in the same bind when *Personages* was linked to Robert Goldwater's interest in primitivism), chose to emphasise the biographical aspect then seems somewhat peculiar. Her assertion of links to her childhood, however, and to her individual background as someone newly arrived in New York, suggests that she chose this narrow and unbending path so as to avoid any further comparisons or references other than the ones she herself sanctioned. The link to her childhood risks at the same time becoming emptied of meaning in that it is so often repeated and quoted as to lose all value as explanation. A single aspect of an individual life cannot underpin such a rich and varied *oeuvre* as that of Louise Bourgeois. Childhood was transformed into an edifice behind which she concealed selected portions of her life. This was a deliberate strategy: the construction of an identity which Bourgeois devoted herself to in order to assert and secure her position in the art world.

Pillar has gained prominence in Bourgeois' art as the entry to a web of meanings which will henceforward be continually expanded. With all its expressive power, the sculpture encompasses a great range of interpretative possibilities. It is freestanding, a solitary figure surrounded by other works from *Personages.* The work associates freely with the human body and to individuals, without any one person being identified. It exists in a context, as part of an *oeuvre*. When compared with works such as *Cells* which date from a later period, it appears to be firmly entrenched within the modernist tradition to which it relates. It has, moreover, been executed without the controlling devices to be found in the later works: the walls and mirrors of *Cells* and *Red Rooms* in particular, which not only exclude the viewer but serve in a real sense to specifically direct the gaze – exactly in accordance with the artist's wishes.[64] Bourgeois took total control in these works, steering both the viewer's gaze and their interpretation by means of her accompanying texts and interviews. It is freedom that would seem to have been lost, and the question that remains is what Bourgeois gained from this.[65]

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[64] See e.g., *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)* (1989–93), *Cell (You better grow up)* (1993), *Red Room (Parents)* and *Red Room (Child)*, dated 1994.

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