



Louise Bourgeois

By Ulf Küster

Art to Read

**HATJE
CANTZ**



Louise Bourgeois

By Ulf Küster

Art to Read

**HATJE
CANTZ**

Louise Bourgeois
Ulf Küster

Copyediting: Dawn Michelle d'Atri | **Translations:**
Michael Wolfson | **Production:** Christine Emter, Hatje
Cantz | **E-book implementation:** [LVD GmbH](#), Berlin | ©
2012 Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, and Ulf Küster; for the
reproduced works by Francis Bacon: The Estate of Francis
Bacon / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; by Louise Bourgeois: Louise
Bourgeois Trust, New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; by
Alberto Giacometti: Fondation Giacometti / VG Bild-Kunst,
Bonn; by Fernand Léger: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; by Barnett
Newman: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; by Pablo Picasso:
Succession Picasso / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; the artists, and
their legal successors | **Published by** Hatje Cantz Verlag,
Zeppelinstrasse 32, 73760 Ostfildern, Deutschland /
Germany, Tel. +49 711 4405-200, Fax +49 711 4405-220,
www.hatjecantz.com | **ISBN 978-3-7757-3312-0** (E-Book,
English) | **ISBN 978-3-7757-3227-7** (Print, English) |
ISBN 978-3-7757-3311-3 (E-Book, German) | **ISBN 978-
3-7757-3151-5** (Print, German) | Made in Germany |
Cover illustration: Louise Bourgeois, 1967 in Carrara,
contemplating *Germinal*, 1967 | **Frontispiece:** Alex Van
Gelder, *Louise Bourgeois*, 2009 | We cannot be held
responsible for external links; the content of external links
is the full responsibility of the operators of these sites.

Thanks to the generous support of



Louise Bourgeois

By Ulf Küster

**HATJE
CANTZ**

For A.

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my grandmothers,
Gertrud and Maria.*



1 Louise Bourgeois, 2009 (photo: Alex Van Gelder)

Encounters and Non-Encounters

The Art Basel fair in 2007, a moment of silence and concentration: Louise Bourgeois's book *Ode à la Bièvre*. I had not counted on such an impressive work, one that would move me so greatly. It is a book consisting of a sequence of textiles sewn together to form pictures. The fabrics come from clothes worn by the artist at some point over the course of her life.

The house of Louise Bourgeois's parents' family stood on the Bièvre, a small river to the south of Paris that flows into the Seine. The house was a childhood paradise for Louise and her siblings; its location direct on the water was vital for her parents who specialized in restoring tapestries. The tannic water was needed to dye and wash the wall hangings. None of this exists any longer; the Bièvre, which was already regulated by a system of dams even then, has now been completely canalized and covered over; probably only remnants of the garden still remain in existence.

Louise Bourgeois's *Ode à la Bièvre* is a moving invocation and visualization of the past along the lines of Henri Bergson: the temporal duration through which the present is founded in the past seems visible in a special way in the artist, in her memories, in the clothes she saved and turned into pictures. My enthusiasm for this work

stood at the start of a learning process about her oeuvre, about Louise Bourgeois, which ultimately led to the exhibition, on the occasion of which this book is being published.

I was able to visit Louise Bourgeois in New York in early 2008. Jerry Gorovoy, her closest assistant and confidante, received me at the entrance of the narrow row house in Chelsea where she had lived since 1962. Louise had been working all day, he told me as we crossed a narrow passageway leading to a cave-like room in the rear of the house. He pointed out a number of sheets of paper displayed all around on which the outlines of women's bodies had been painted in red watercolors. Women with large breasts, pregnant, the embryos visible in their stomachs. The act of childbirth was also depicted; everything made an oozing, dripping impression—and I would not have been surprised had I been told that they were painted in blood. It was only then that I saw the artist; she was dressed in a gray garment and wore a kind of turban on her head. She was sitting in front of the entrance to the kitchen at a small table that was illuminated by a lamp. Brushes lay in front of her as well as a round plastic bowl in which the red paint she used was mixed.

Louise Bourgeois seemed very small and very fragile to me. I sat opposite her at the table. The artist was not very talkative; she leaned on her elbows and held her hands against her forehead as if she were shielding her eyes from

the sun, straining to take a good look at me from afar. As a consequence, I was not particularly communicative myself: I found the great presence of the person sitting opposite me quite intimidating. The usual things one says when visiting artists in their studios—mostly the utmost of platitudes—did not seem at all appropriate here. The direct intimacy of the works around me caused me to fall silent rather than animated me to converse. A spade was bluntly called a spade here: the pain, the exertion, the blood, but also the delicacy and vulnerability, everything that very probably determines the start of every life. We finally spoke a little about the Fondation Beyeler; she said that she was pleased to be able to exhibit there. We also talked about Alfred Barr, the founder of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and one of her early promoters in the United States. Didn't she have a crush on him, Jerry asked, but Louise Bourgeois did not want to hear of such things right then and gruffly dismissed the remark with a wave of her hand.

But it was especially Louise Bourgeois's age that has remained in my memory: when I visited her, I of course knew that she was quite elderly, but I then had the sense of encountering someone who was quite ancient. That is not to say that I had any negative feelings about her age. No, here was someone who was profoundly old. Her hands, her face, her glance; all of them gave me the impression I was sitting opposite an immensely experienced person, a truly

wise woman of the type one has come to believe exists only in fairy tales.

Another quite amazing encounter followed in October 2010—post mortem. Jerry Gorovoy told me that a large number of handwritten sheets of paper had been found in her house, shortly before the artist's death on May 31, 2010. It appears that they are notes she had jotted down while undergoing psychiatric treatment. It was known that she had been in psychoanalysis, and since a first cache of notes had already been discovered in 2004, it was also known that she ardently intensified her treatment and processed her emotions through such notes. What was not known, however, was that she had apparently been in therapy for a much longer time than had previously been assumed, namely, during a very intense phase from 1952 to 1966 and, with irregularity, from 1966 through 1982. The large number of notes was also surprising, involving hundreds of sheets of paper. Before her death, the artist took pleasure in having them read to her out loud.

Over the course of a few very intense days, I was permitted to try to gain an overview of this material and also to read her diaries. The impression they left on me was quite shocking: in her notes—at times written in a wild jumble of English and French—one encounters a woman shaken by panic attacks, suffering from traumas, and having difficulties in keeping her aggressions under control. The spiraling cycle of her reproaches and self-

reproaches, her entreaties and self-entreaties, her agonizing suspicions and envies, her revenge fantasies, her hate and self-hate are hard for the reader to bear. Like the heroes of ancient mythology, she seems to have been pursued by the Furies and other terrible deities:

*The beast in me which wakes me up at night, it is hate.*¹

In the process, however, one must admire the courage with which she could open up to herself. And the confessional frankness and precision with which she bares her psychological abysses in these notes—and makes emotions tangible in words, in writing—seems to stand at the start of a very deliberate process which resulted in an oeuvre whose roots lay in the unconscious. While reading her notes it becomes increasingly clear that such written statements had a specific function in the creative process, and that this creative process was part of a strategy to overcome her own traumas. And it is not as if her notes were not subject to a strong will for order; aphorisms and even poems were often the result, as for instance the note from September 16, 1994:

Art is the
acceptance
of solitude
You express your
solitude

by being
an artist
if you can
if you have it in
you.²

The diaries written in printed calendars with space for personal entries largely reference daily occurrences and are accompanied by reflective comments. This is already the case in her earliest known diary dating from the year 1923, when Louise Bourgeois was eleven years old. She must have been a remarkable child, quite precocious, and she was certainly well-aware of the fact that she was different. She wrote about her depressive “black” thoughts, her “*idées noires*.” On December 23, shortly before her twelfth birthday, she saw a “*light descending the stairs*” and alarmed the whole house.³

Particularly revealing is the entry dated December 14, 1923. She was suffering from influenza and wrote, probably under the influence of a high fever:

*I despair but can't find
the strength to think things through
and yet I have quite a lot of things to think about
The people who will read
this diary will certainly think
that this child is too nervous*

*she has nothing else to do
but sleep play eat, but
not at all I have things to think about
to reflect upon mysteries to dig up
all these worries are not important
to you but for me it isn't the same.*⁴

While I was reading in the Louise Bourgeois Archive, Jerry Gorovoy took me to see her house again, which largely remained in the state it had been at the time of her death. She seldom left the house during the decade prior to her passing. She rarely entered the room of her husband, the renowned art historian Robert Goldwater, after his death in 1973; she had thus turned herself into a prisoner in her own home. Her bed appeared tiny to me and seemed as if it had been built into a wall of books, primarily nineteenth-century editions of French literature, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, and others. The small washstand on a thin mount reminded me of her sculptural group *Maisons fragiles* from 1978. And Jerry pointed out to me that the house itself is in fact also a “primordial cell,” the model on which she based the spatial installations she characterized as “cells,” with which she was particularly occupying herself in the nineteen-nineties.

I saw remnants of a further “primordial cell” in Paris the following December. It was one of those mysterious places that one frequently chances upon in this city.⁵ After