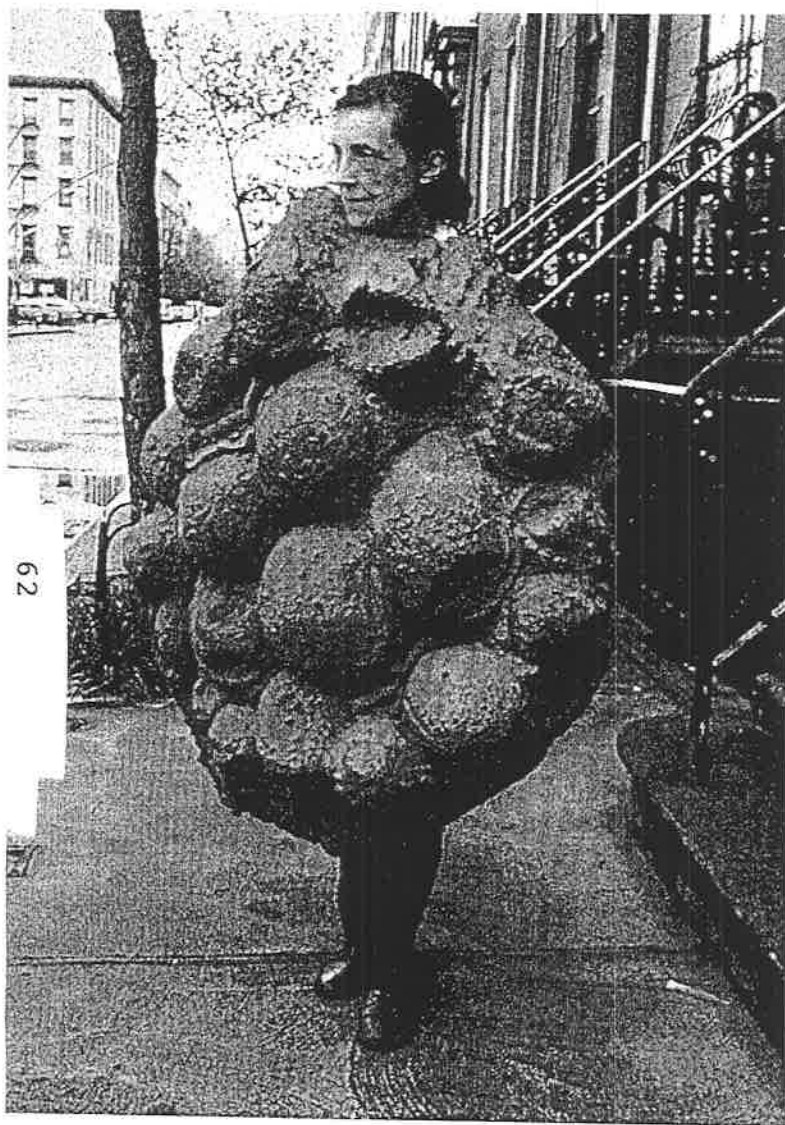




Louise Bourgeois, 1978, outside her home in New York wearing a costume from the performance *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts*.

Statements 1979

Quoted from the profile on Bourgeois written by Eleanor Munro and first published in 1979 by Simon & Schuster, New York, in Munro's book *Originals: American Women Artists*, pp. 154–9.

I would love to be articulate, because of this optimistic, way-down streak in me that believes *if* people knew me, they could not fail to love me—I do believe that! And that is why I try so hard to be articulate.

* * *

[Robert] Frost says good fences make good neighbors, but I take the exactly opposite position: good fences are obsolete! Therefore when the people next door decided to take down their old fence and build a much, much higher one to keep the local children out of their garden, and dumped the old fenceposts into my yard, I determined to make a conceptual sculpture out of them. I decided to illustrate the obsolescence of fences in the twentieth century by processing them as a work of art. Very carefully, very elegantly. I bought a strapping machine and strapped them into groups with strong iron tapes. You see the extreme deliberateness of the process. You cannot just throw things out casually. We have the means of eliminating waste in a most elegant fashion today.

Obviously, the art was in the eliminating of a fantastically painful subject—and also the *damn fence*.

* * *

Duchamp, Ozenfant, and I had met before, but we met again when we were investigated by McCarthy in 1951. We had different fates. Duchamp had powerful friends, so he was safe. Ozenfant was a very awkward person, original and independent. When he was attacked he would attack back like a child. So he was kicked out of the country. But I defended myself. I was interrogated several times after I made an application to become a citizen. My defense was that I had no connection with or knowl-

edge of what the men I was involved with were doing politically. And fortunately by this time women had come into their own to this extent: that I was not considered merely someone's wife or friend. I was Louise Bourgeois. And I always have been.

* * *

I have had a guilt complex about pushing my art, so much so that every time I was about to show I would have some sort of attack. So I decided it was better simply not to try. It was just that I had the feeling the art scene belonged to the men, and that I was in some way invading their domain. Therefore the work was done and hidden away. I felt more comfortable hiding it. On the other hand, I destroyed nothing. I kept every fragment.

Nowadays, however, I am making an effort to change.

* * *

I was called Louise because Mother was a feminist and a socialist; her ideal was Louise Michel, the French Rosa Luxemburg. All the women in her family were feminists and socialists—and ferociously so!

* * *

Each of us, my sister, my brother, and I, had a garden and we tried to make the most of it, learning the art of cutting trees, espaliering pears and apples. They were formal gardens, with roses in certain areas marked off by boxwood. I was hard-working, interested in that garden. And I had a passion for rock collecting. I began with granite and moved on, through studying geology, to other kinds of rock.

But that garden had another importance for me. We had a tent at the bottom of it, and sometimes we would sleep there. Often we took our meals there, and then we had to carry all the food out from the kitchen and back. Dinner was served late, and night would surprise us as we were eating. Then you could look back and see the light of the kitchen, only far away through the trees.

And then our father would often say, "Now, I don't want to have children who are afraid, so you are going to go to the kitchen and bring the salt shaker." So my brother and I would run, terrified. We would take different ways back, and I would end at the kitchen door. There was always a man there, the man who took care of the sheep and the pig. He would say, "You are not supposed to come into the kitchen!" The reason was that he had been kissing the cook. Then both of them would say things to make me blush. It seems to me now that our father did this to test us, knowing, among other things, that we children were afraid of the dark.

There was always a moral aspect to the issue of authenticity for my father, since one of his sublimated urges was to be a moral man. A tapestry, for instance, had to be *authentic*. He was able to touch a piece of furniture and tell whether it was an authentic antique. Naturally this translated, in time, into the importance of a person finding and keeping to his or her own personal style. . . . In my mother's eyes, he could do nothing wrong. He was a sportsman then. His great love was gliding. He would glide, and she would admire him.

When my mother said something, the building shook and my father fled. She had a lot of women working for her and she had to be forceful. Even today I am still afraid of what I think of as the "Angry Mother."

* * *

I didn't have the security of any kind of religion, so in the end, that is how I became an artist—to find a mode of survival.

I learned that it was possible to study subjects where all the rules were known. Studying geometry, I learned a system in which things proceed without surprises. One is, essentially, safe. That was a revelation: that it was possible to anticipate! You could predict the position of the stars. The sun would rise where it was supposed to. It never failed you. Never betrayed you.

shoulders, chicken legs and cast them all in soft plaster. I pushed them down into it, then turned the mold over, opened it, threw away the meat and cast the forms in latex.

I built it here in my house. It is a very murderous piece, an impulse that comes when one is under too much stress and one turns against those one loves the most.

A Memoir: Louise Bourgeois and Patricia Beckett

Previously unpublished remarks from a conversation recorded in the late 1970s.

Aubusson was the town where my mother and grandmother spent their childhood. It was founded in the sixteenth century by tapestry makers who came there from the North, from Belgium and Tournais on the border, because of the special chemical qualities found in the Creuze River. Tannin poured into the water from upstream and wool washed in it was particularly receptive to dyeing agents. Originally, tapestries were moving walls to use against the cold, and tents that were taken into battle to shelter the generals—a great luxury. So their original purpose was utilitarian. The whole town of Aubusson survived on tapestry and still does today.

My grandmother had her own atelier. She got started in tapestry making simply because she was born in Aubusson. She had married a granite cutter, because that was the men's work. (Creuzemen were famous all over Europe for their stone cutting. The itinerant stonemasons built the aqueducts that carried water for the fountains; they cut the cobblestones for Saint Sulpice. All the window lintels in town were carved by hand from the granite from the countryside.) At any rate, this man had an inclination toward numbers and games of chance and gambling; it explains why my grandmother had to work so hard. She had three children. Alex, the eldest, was her favorite, and he became the *dessinateur* (draftsman) of the atelier, making the drawings from which the tapestries would be made. The second son, Emile, was fortunately interested in gliding, *vol à voile*, an interest he shared with my father. And that's why I'm here. That's how my parents met. My father and Emile went gliding. My mother tagged along with them when they rode their bicycles out to the flying fields.

My father was from Paris, born near the Gare de Lyon. His family came from Clamart, a village near Paris. He was as emotional and unreasonable as my mother was patient and reasonable. They got along very well, except that the war interfered. After the war, my father developed

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Janus (1967) is a reference to the kind of polarity we represent. . . . The polarity I experience is a drive toward extreme violence and revolt . . . and a retiring. I wouldn't say passivity . . . but a need for peace, a complete peace with the self, with others, and with the environment.

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Confrontation (1978) represents a long table surrounded by an oval of wooden boxes, which are really caskets. The table is a stretcher for transporting someone wounded or dead. So, there is one personage on one side, and one on the other. One creature is old, and as you can see by the shape, they are crinkled, they are definitely wrinkled and old. The other is absolutely fresh representing youth. Now, we are used to having stories and romanticism about the obsession of age with youth. That is to say, the falling in love of an old person with a young person. And when this happens, since love is never fulfilled, it always ends in death. Usually, we have the state of affairs where someone dies of passion for someone younger than himself, passion that is never achieved, never consummated. However, I assume and want to prove that the opposite is equally true, that a lot of young people are obsessed with the past, or with age, or with an older person, and they die of it. It's the young who just lose themselves. So there is an element of madness. It is the young who ask to be stricken by madness because they refuse to leave the past.

Each of these boxes represents one of us. We have to stop running and take our places in the circle and face ourselves in front of each other. That is to say, to face how limited and uninteresting we are. Every one of us has to do this in front of everybody else. At that point, we have grown up. Nothing can let us escape this confrontation.

We have to come to terms with ourselves, with how bad we are, how limited we are, how short our life is.

[From an unpublished interview with Laura Tennen, 1982]

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I need my memories. They are my documents. I keep watch over them. They are my privacy and I am intensely jealous of them. Cézanne said, "I am jealous of my little sensations." To reminisce and woolgather is negative. You have to differentiate between memories. Are you going to them or are they coming to you. If you are going to them, you are wasting time. Nostalgia is not productive. If they come to you, they are the seeds for sculpture.

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There was a *grenier*, an attic with exposed beams. It was very large and very beautiful. My father had a passion for fine furniture. All the *sièges de bois* were hanging up there. It was very pure. No tapestries, just the wood itself. You would look up and see these armchairs hanging in very good order. The floor was bare. It was quite impressive. This is the origin of a lot of hanging pieces.

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A daughter is a disappointment. If you bring a daughter into this world, you have to be forgiven, the way my mother was forgiven because I was the spitting image of my father. That was my first piece of luck. It may be why he treated me like the son he always wanted. I was gifted enough to satisfy my father. This was my second piece of luck.

All daughters hate their mothers. In Freudian terms the daughter blames the mother for the loss of the penis. They blame the castration on the mother. I am deeply grateful not to have gone through this ordeal. I would have been totally unable to deal with the criticism of a daughter. Sons are always partial to their mother unless their mother was unfair to them. That is to say asked too much from them so they collapse. A lot of parents make a career out of having children. They live through the child and destroy him. It is better to have parents who use their children as unpaid labor.

past. It was fear that kept me from understanding. Fear is the pits. It paralyzes you.

My sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it a physicality so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality. Sculpture allows me to re-experience the past, to see the past in its objective, realistic proportion.

Fear is a passive state. The goal is to be active and take control. The move is from the passive to the active. If the past is not negated in the present, you do not live. You go through the emotions like a zombie, and life passes you by.

Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.

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The life of the artist is the denial of sex. Art comes from the inability to seduce. I am unable to make myself be loved. The equation is really sex and murder, sex and death.

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The fear of sex and death is the same. Attraction and fear move back and forth. Which is the cause and which is the effect? It's important to know.

Turenne was standing on his horse ready to go to battle. He said to his horse, which was really his unconscious, "You tremble, carcass, but you would tremble even more if you knew where I am going to take you."

It is at this moment, the thrill of danger, that the erotic impulse is activated. The thrill is an erotic presence, that all-or-nothing feeling. You either resist or let go. If it terrorizes you, it means the resistance is too much. There is the refusal to go to battle with the unconscious. I become paralyzed by the fear.

In a woman, sex comes when she loses control. In a man, it comes from asserting his control. In sex you lose control and it can be terrifying. By extension, the relationship of Turenne to his horse is an S & M image.

Turenne was the artist. The artist is a sadist and afraid of his own sadism, of inflicting death. Is it murder or suicide? It depends on how you feel. Think of the bird ensnared by the snake. Nobody has ever proved that the bird suffers from his fear. Who says that the bird doesn't enjoy it, that there's not a sexual thrill? That there's not ecstasy in death? That the bird dies fulfilled, as he's gobbled up. One way or the other, the ransom of fear is death.

Don't forget the masochist loves a sadist and the sadist loves a masochist, and the prisoner is so helpless and desperate that all he has left is to fall in love with the jailer.

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The intensity of Francis Bacon's works moves me deeply. I react positively. I sympathize. His suffering communicates. The definition of beauty is a kind of intimacy in the visual. I feel for Bacon even though his emotions are not mine.

The physical reality of his works is transformed and transcended. His room does not obey the laws of perspective. To look at his pictures makes me alive. I want to share it. It's almost the expression of love..

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Charcot was modest. He was only a scientist and not a theorist. Lacan was a *guérisseur*, through charm and through the verbal. He was not a scientist. He was a con man. Freud and Lacan did nothing for the artist. They were barking up the wrong tree. They don't help any. I simply can't use them.

Breton's teacher was really Boussette. Boussette was interested in the grandiose style and social connections—that search for the grandiose and the religious. Breton, Lacan, and Freud disappointed me. They promised the truth and just came up with theory. They were like my father: to promise so much and deliver so little.