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Trauma and Intimacy: Transcultural Bodies and Performative Memory in Louise Bourgeois' *Cells*

Abstract

A cycle of works that Louise Bourgeois titled *Cells*, created between the late eighties and the nineties and defined as environments or installations, help us define what I believe to be a fundamental aspect of the reflection on memory specifically pertaining to its transgenerational character. Within this framework, my contribution underlines a specific aspect: the memory and the trauma these works and images tell are referable not to an event within history but to a genealogy of pain or of the psychical wound as Louise Bourgeois intended them. I'll refer to these images and their function with the term "bridge image," which refers to when an image becomes a vessel, a story to be told, between individuals or situations that distantly and differently share similar elements.

i. Between memory, trauma and image

Attempting to consider the theoretical journey taking place from memories that are born or solicited from afar and in successive phases, without direct experience of the traumatic event, through information, stories, documents, imaginaries and imagination, which occur as aftereffects of the remembered fact, is part of an important reflection affecting the very rereading of art itself.

In 1993, in *Misère de la philosophie* Jean-François Lyotard affirms that "la peinture lutte, travaille au sens fort, celui de l'obstétrique et de la psychanalyse, pour donner trace ou pour faire signe, dans le visible, d'un geste qui excède le visible" (2000, 99). Talking about going beyond the visible would already offer much food for thought. In the same essay, titled *Anamnèse du visible*, Lyotard differentiates between the way in which history relates to time, from the way the so-called "anamnèse" does. While history refers to dates and facts, "anamnèse" inserts itself into the gaps, pushes into one's memory, which is an elusive substance of time without borders.

In order to infiltrate the gaps where memory resides, the work to be done, as Lyotard says, is similar to an investigation or a challenge that pushes through

historical time to locate traces and signs representing the symptoms of something that can reemerge.

“The era of memory” which Eva Hoffman speaks of, is – as we might say with more conviction after the nineties – more of a condition on which to reflect rather than a periodization (2004, XV).

The issue of memory, in the particular forms that will be addressed, is born from an observation that considers mainly two perspectives: the artistic one, or rather the ways in which artworks have investigated time and, more specifically, the forms of memory, remembrance or oblivion; and the gender perspective, in order to understand how memory can be a vehicle for identity and subjective forms connected to one’s gender and condition in relation to the social and cultural context. More specifically, I will address some works by artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) to whom I have dedicated my recent studies touching aspects connected to the issues put forth in this essay (Subrizi 2010 e 2012). I will, however, have to necessarily circumscribe a possible artist’s work analysis to really delve into the subtle fragile groove that opens up between memory, trauma and image. For this purpose, I will refer to a cycle of works (which are very relevant to what I will be trying to demonstrate) that the artist herself titled *Cells* (Crone 2008). These works may be defined as environments or installations, realized between the late eighties and the nineties (1986-1997), that help us define what I believe to be a fundamental aspect of the reflection on memory specifically attaining to its transgenerational character.

Within this framework, my contribution underlines a specific aspect: the memory and the trauma these works relate are referable not to an event within history but to a genealogy of pain or of the psychical wound in the sense that Louise Bourgeois intended. Bourgeois didn’t represent pain and didn’t create works about pain. Hers is an operation about capturing and overturning, about sedimentation and the attempt to upheave, to give form, and to make visible and face once more the traces of a historical trauma, which doesn’t only concern herself. This traumatic condition is not referable to a single event. It resides in the culture of oppression and domination that Bourgeois always witnessed within hypocrisy or the traditional family roles and the relationship between father and offspring. We do know a few facts about Bourgeois’ personal life: her governess Sadie was welcomed into the family as an English teacher, but was actually her father’s lover. This had caused Louise to experience a double emotional betrayal (by her father and Sadie herself) and the consequences of a difficult role for her mother who had passively accepted the situation in the context of a configuration of upper-class rules that could not accept such an evident betrayal. However, I

don't want to consider this situation as the cause of a particular reaction in Bourgeois. This family balance, made precarious and impossible in the complex intertwining of the hypocrisy and falsity which were naturally dominant, was addressed and investigated transversally by Bourgeois by making her own condition become an objective condition of abuse and domination both relating to the effects caused (affective and psychological) and to memory itself, resulting from a long history of wounds and pain going far beyond her individual experience. Art can be considered as an instrument to give shape and image to a story of survival from trauma: the recovery of fragments from the past that return to memory from one's own imaginary. The first perspective considered refers to a transgenerational temporal dimension.

2. Bridge Images

In this order of ideas, the body becomes a physical and psychic place of transit and dislocation, not only from one generation to the next, but between multiple generations, cultures and personal or collective histories. The transcultural body is an individual entity absorbing issues that are not part of its personal experience, but arrive from afar, from stories and affections which are transferred from a distance.

The gender perspective, on the other hand, is born from life experience and from the particular way in which the latter is investigated and confronted by an artist and a woman, profoundly connected to feminism, and feminist in the sense that Bourgeois has conducted *an intimate revolt*, as Julia Kristeva might say (1997), since her first works, *Femme Maison*, from the forties. In the mid-seventies, Bourgeois places her father's figure at the center of a reflection about power, family, and the logics of oppression and wounds, which are established within the domestic framework, through an emblematic work called *Destruction of the Father* (1974). The revolt against her father is taken on in Bourgeois not simply as the refusal of one's father, but as a profound analysis, through her works, of a condition of frustration, pain and trauma, tied to logics of power and emotional abuse, and sedimented in history. Destroying the father thus becomes the metaphor for an inner process that emerges in the form of a sought for and achieved awareness or rather in the identification of a compulsion to repeat within the relationship between father and daughter, where the *father* represents the symbol for all forms of power and, on the other hand, the stricken and shredded desire for freedom. In this condition a profound trauma is born, which

reiterates through history, gets lost within the monumentality of historical facts, and remains relegated within the gaps or the minimal spaces of thresholds between history and its marginality, or between history and absence, also considered as the failed presence of certain voices and roles.

The installations of Louise Bourgeois and the images that emerge from them can be read as symptoms of an extended and anachronistic condition, which connects distant experiences, transforming them into an emotional or psychic matter, with common and shareable characteristics. Sharing memories is thus a central aspect, even when referred to traumas. They are reiterated in time and through specific works (works like this artist's) and find new ways to be told by reactivating perceptive and affective states that emerge, like a shock, to the sensibility of the observer who feels his or her own, sometimes forgotten, condition.

I am talking about the trauma that inhabits us (Kahn 1963), which we may still not know the meaning of, but that is reactivated by the work's game of correspondence, emerging as a story that, posthumously, connects us to past events. Traumatic conditions, despite their belonging to another time or specific circumstance, can at a certain point reconnect to and echo with one another, and return to memory, notwithstanding chronological time. It's a difficult thesis that certain authors have begun studying and that I too will attempt to tackle.¹

I want to talk about Louise Bourgeois' *Cells* as works that pose the question of time and memory through images that reconnect posthumous time and faraway experiences, associated with the survival of emotional states and affections. As a consequence, the anachronistic time returns and reconnects similar perceptive universes at a distance. The Objects that we see in the works of Bourgeois let time live beyond them. Letting images of unknown time and spaces arise, the public, which moves inside or around these environments, slowly perceives that its own psychic condition can regain voice or a form through someone else's experience and distant memory. I will refer to this image function as "bridge image," which is when the image becomes a vessel, a story to be told, between individuals or situations that distantly and differently share similar elements.

¹ Hirsch 1997; 2002; 2012. See also Ettinger 2000 and 2006; Pollock 2013.

3. Intimate spaces

Clothes hung on coat hangers in the claustrophobic but intimate space of the *Cells*, containers and glass bottles on furniture or shelves, fragments of bodies such as hands or arms, shaped chairs with different styles, used beds, some of which are made of steel recalling containment: these are some of the elements building up the settings. The name itself, *Cells*, relates to human cells and prison cells: what is inside us and what imprisons us. And the home can also be a cell. Between claustrophobia and intimacy, the space is always characterized as double, real and reflected, true and false, between memory and oblivion.

Glass is a material that returns. Its transparency is important. We see it in close proximity with materials that are antique, rusty, and old. The handcrafted sculptures coexist with these found materials. Old and new, history and actuality, past and present coincide in a temporality with no beginning or end.

Entering one of the *Cells*, we have the impression of participating in an event, at once observers and voyeurs, witnesses to and creators of something that cannot be seen: we feel as if we have already been part of it, without knowing when and why. The *Cells* become the possible account of a genealogy of trauma: oppression, violence, abuse, psychic constrictions, which in the same instant connect Antigone and Electra, according to the words of Simone Weil (1953), and the thrilling rituals of ancient Pompeii and Louise Bourgeois.

Let's see more clearly why these environments relate traumatic conditions. The language is fragmented. The fragment responds to the necessity to rip those objects from the structure they belong to. Linguistic chains are presented as made up of small parts and discreet elements subtracted from the all-inclusive and self-defining structures of (any) given sense: everything, the whole, and the unit (of history, a moment in history, an identity, a condition of pain) are broken. So, in *Cells*, a bottle of perfume, an ampoule, a bedpan, a chair: all are non-symbolic presences, which don't refer to old or new iconographies. They are images that have already been seen before; however, within this game of adjacencies that the environment produces, these images overturn their conventional definition to say something new: the father's chair, the bottle of perfume, which refers to a smell or an ancestor, and the bed, where the act of love took place, become the primal scene and the representation of dynamics of exclusion, betrayal and absence. The story that is built from a distance by these objects can happen and come back to life through seeing or coming across one of the *Cells*: memory resounds in post memory, and echoes from time (without a date) are heard in a chain of experiences without a chronology that intertwine generations and

moments, which sometimes are very far from each other. The passage itself throughout these spaces, the fact that one enters inside them and crosses them left to right, or gazes through the glass and nets surrounding them, becomes a metaphor for a different transition – one that which leads into the psyche.

Let's now enter one of these environments. *Passage dangereux* is a *Cell* dating from 1997. It is the largest and, in a way, the most complex one. It measures 264 by 355 by 876 cm. The entire *passage* is constructed with a metal net on all four walls, the ceiling and the floor; even the doors, entrance and exit, are closed by nets, yet openable. On the left of the entrance door is a welded key and on the upper right is a plaster breast. In the first room, six shirt cuffs are placed on six shelves; on the lowest shelf there are a perfume bottle, a mirror for makeup and a larger mirror, and a piece of marble with two long ears; along the corridor that goes into the rooms, a long rubber object is hung and traversed by pins. In the second room, a children's swing-set with a fabric seat is hung in front of a large tapestry and besides the swing-set there is a narrow mirror placed slantwise. The third room is occupied by an electric chair and a mirror, welded on one side. In the fourth room, seventeen chairs are hung on the ceiling next to an artificial leg; on the bed structure below is a couple engaged in a sexual act and constructed out of wooden legs (the legs come out of a metal box) and plaster feet that push a small spider with a welded leg into a small metal ring; on one side of the bed there is a wooden chair covered in fabric and on the other side there is a small child's writing desk and a chair, while at the foot of the bed an armchair is placed in frontal perspective, turned towards the bed. In the fifth room there are one metal chair with a fabric pillow and several children's wooden stools placed in a circle; glass spheres are on three of the four stools, while higher up, tied to the metal wall on a steel and marble shelf, there are a small glass horse, an insect and shreds of written paper. Below the horse is a small bronze bull; the horse is reflected in an oval mirror. In the sixth room, there are several objects placed on three wooden chairs, which function as pedestals: on the first one there are two plastic spheres, one larger and one smaller, containing bone fragments; on the second chair there are a wasp's nest and a full sock; on the third, a bronze spiral with a small mirror and another glass object; hung on the metal walls are two mirrors, while a linen drape and a steel nest occupy the corners. The term "passage" clearly indicates a space to cross; the fact that it is dangerous implies that we are dealing with a sensitive space. Danger to remember, danger to find one's self in the middle of one's fears, danger of not being able to face them. It is not about a journey back in time. Although the space of memory is maze-like and discontinuous, it connects and creates interrelations. The objects inhabiting the space have been

found and accumulated, not in a casual order, but according to semantic, metonymic and sometimes allegoric associations, which take us beyond the actual object. Here, every detail is part of an ampler reflection, which is never fully expressed, but is only whispered through hints and details. If, on one side, there's accumulation (chairs, bones, glass or forms), on the other hand, some elements are individually perceived, whose message arrives without mediations. The narration is fragmented and discontinuous; while passing from room to room one crosses diverse experiences and memories.

Moving through this space, which appears as both a cage and an architectural structure, closed and transparent at the same time, visual conflicts emerge: the metal net and the doors' "overtones of a jail and its occupants, of the inescapable" (Bourgeois 1998, 231). The mechanisms through which memory functions are metaphorically identified with those allowing the movement of the net door hinges. Between the objects, mirrors overlap. "They interact, giving a multiple view of the world. The mirrors reflect the many difficult realities, one worse than the next" (231). An (imagined) scent of nostalgia spreads from the bottles. The small figures within glass spheres evoke isolation from the rest of the world: finding oneself in a bubble without interacting directly with reality.

Glass returns in the *Cell* titled *Precious Liquid*, dated 1992 and shown at *Documenta IX* that same year. Emotions become liquid: glass bottles, ampoules, empty perfume bottles are, as Bourgeois says, like memory that melts and re-emerges. There are various types of glass as there are various types of memories, which are never the same in their intensity and way of arising: perfume bottles, a horse, mirrors, spheres.

The sculptures with large hands that hold smaller hands, as stated by Bourgeois, express anxiety, fear and the request for protection, love and reassurance.

4. The action of memory

Within this *Cell*, the fragmentation of the space decenters vision; the accumulation of objects creates false sight perspectives (as the eye appears to be caught by multiple focus points in different directions); the smaller objects hide behind those that are more easily visible; however, within that smallness, details constructing other narrations can be found: the bone fragments caught within the spheres, the scent that we imagine to be contained in the perfume bottle – that are, for Bourgeois, a symbol for nostalgia –, the insect inside the little glass

horse. What is small or contained within other objects is often an image of childhood. The chairs are many and different: an electric chair, children's chairs, office chairs, large chairs located where one imagines the seated authority. This way of positioning the objects is extremely important. The construction of places, through objects, determines security but also fear of moving forward. Fear and reassurance, certainty and uncertainty of the next visual finish line articulate a discussion which invites us – those who tread the space – to search in all directions: below, on the side, beyond the walls, underneath, outside and inside one's self. Through images that work as activators of other images, Bourgeois puts the observer in the situation of searching for a story, of becoming the body, the physical entity that is missing in these environments, but has left traces and visual journeys, which can be followed. The fragments, the present figures, and the objects are all part of an ampler discussion.

Sex, eroticism, the female body, the fear of becoming something unexpected, the relationship with one's childhood, morals and the ambiguities of the upper class world, construct a narration which persuades the viewer, given that, for example, no images or imaginaries of Bourgeois herself are reflected in the mirror (another recurring object), but instead in the mirror are reflected only our own images and those of an entire culture and its stereotypes. The mirrors, in these works, don't reflect; they deform the images and move the objects reflected into another space by playing a game of inclinations and projections of sight. Because of this, Bourgeois' works are stories with no end: it is necessary for something to happen on the observers' side. The narration is thus inter-subjective: it is built on the relationship between histories and memories.

Why and how is this process of narration activated by such a work installation and the objects, elements, and spaces it presents? What these works activate is a relation between trauma and the reactivation or memory of a distant trauma. The specific memory these works relate to is the one of pain and subjective emptiness that trauma leaves. While trauma is defined as a psychic wound, as the consequence of a shock or a specific event that bursts on a psychic level producing pain and its crystallizations, it is less and less evident on a physical level: its definition and the reason for its being a trauma, which violates and causes pain, remain inaccessible to all – including those who have felt it.

What seems to be happening in these works by Bourgeois is important for two aspects: first, the artist's memory, acts as a dynamic element, which takes form by choosing the objects and the system of adjacencies which constructs the environment from an individual traumatic condition; second, despite this, the works never tell specific facts nor directly refer to events from the artist's personal

life. Instead, they deal with emotional dynamics which meld into archetypal figures of pain and trauma. The genealogy of memory that one is able to build is made of reflections, references, and sensations which solicit each other and dialogue with each other from a distance. The dynamics and tensions become spiral-like images, multiplications of the same elements, fragmentation of bodies, and dissemination of objects. The specific elements of this language activate tensions and different meeting points. Traumatic is also the experience of these works; the work itself becomes witness to an event that has happened and is told in order for others, even from far away generations, to understand and hear.

Through these aspects, actions of movement and bouncing, focusing and remittal, coagulation of memories and their transmission are realized. What I called a “bridge image” is active in the *Cells*. Bourgeois says: “The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering [...] The existence of pain cannot be denied. I propose no remedies or excuses” (205).

If Bourgeois starts from the consideration that suffering is not eliminated, and that pain is the present state of her works, in what way does this emotional component of the work emerge and how does it reemerge every time in different moments and circumstances? What persists in time? Do we have memory of this pain? How does the work tell this state of mind and how does it transmit it in time to those looking and to those who will look in the future? In what way did the artist shape these emotional contexts making her personal individual experience not a private fact but an element that connects to many other stories?

The artist says “art is the experiencing – or rather the re-experiencing – of a trauma” (Bernadac 1996, 8), but in what way does this happen? What did Louise Bourgeois mean with trauma: is it the consequence of facts belonging to one’s history, the relations of this history with a more extended history, the survival not only of a fact but of a *relationship* that generated and continues to generate forms of oppression, marginalization, erasure? The story at stake is not one which someone tells another person, relegating memory in a post-dimension that makes the story an experience of distance.

I am not considering the relationship between art and memory as the possible subject of an artwork, but memory itself as being activated by the work. If the object of Bourgeois activates perceptive states and memory, we can talk about a performative characteristic of the work that solicits, moves and affects acts such as remembrance and the removal of traumatic subconscious states deriving from personal or collective experience.

These objects are “theoretical objects,” as stated by Mieke Bal who introduced the concept of “preposterous history” (2001). This theoretical component resides in the fact that the objects making up such installations are presented as small fragments of unrelated texts that await to be grabbed and recomposed through an act that requires seeing, feeling and understanding. They are theoretical objects and also emotional objects as they solicit a connection to mental moods that move “forgotten” sensations and psychic states. The object that we see, the relationship between the object and our gaze, determines a dynamic situation that I called bridge: the *bridge image* is the image that bounces from our perceptual apparatus towards other times and histories, towards unknown geographies.

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