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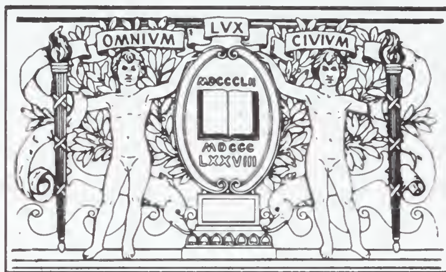

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INTRODUCTION

Louise Bourgeois's art conveys an extraordinary sense of the uncanny. Her works, in whatever medium, seem to have generic unconscious import, as though instantly transporting us to a universal subjective realm. Whatever her art's source in her own personal history and memory—and she has spoken much about her childhood and the subtleties of the relationship between her parents, to which she was attuned as only a brilliant child can be—its subjective logic is not particular to her. Her work has been celebrated for its basic emotional power, its way of revitalizing and freshly objectifying universal symbolic forms, making them seem to speak urgently in the present. Her art offers us life from the inside, as it were, by reason of her ability to make her materials evocative and provocative, as though they had depths that had never been plumbed until Bourgeois worked with them. At once full of subliminal innuendo and outspoken meaning, her sculptures resonate powerfully.

Bourgeois's recognition took a long time coming, partly because she was a loner, partly because her work seemed marginal to the apparent stylistic mainstream, and partly because the horizon of expectation on which it could be properly received was a long time in developing. It was only in the late seventies, when, as has been said, a pluralistic atmosphere developed in the art world, along with a dissatisfaction with formalist art—so-called self-referential art, exemplifying the ideal of purity of medium, of doing little else but to declare its conventions and material—that the

way was open to an appreciative awareness of Bourgeois's work. Her stylistic innovation in sculpture is inseparable from her use of it to articulate and concentrate meanings not ordinarily available on the everyday surface of life. Also, a new sociopolitical context —feminism—provided an important framework for the understanding of Bourgeois's art.

In general, Bourgeois's art answered the call for a renewed and strong interest in the autobiographical, a new acceptance of stylistic diversity and intricacy, and a new sense of expressive possibilities and complexity. Bourgeois was already the master of seemingly contradictory styles, from symbolic representation to abstraction, which she had anticipated in a manner that came to be recognized as postmodernist. She was in fact a postmodernist pioneer, with her strong sense of self, and her sense of the psychodynamic dimension of art. She was able to effect the kind of complex synthesis of styles—in the very act of acknowledging stylistic diversity—demanded in the postmodernist situation. She is certainly central to what has been called the "new subjectivism" of the eighties. Intuitively in possession of her ideations, she knew every nuance of their existence within her being, every ambiguous move they might make. One might say that she was in full possession of her ambivalence, which she articulates with a rare stylistic complexity and a self-possessed, exploratory, risk-taking restlessness.

As Deborah Wye, the author of the major study of Bourgeois's art, wrote in the fine catalogue essay accompanying the retrospec-

tive at the Museum of Modern Art in 1982/83—an exhibition that brought Bourgeois, born in 1911, long overdue recognition—"Encompassing abrupt changes in medium and form, [Bourgeois's work] moves unexpectedly from rigid wood poles to amorphous plaster nests; from pliable fusions to stiff protrusions in rubber and plastic; from bulbous bronze configurations hanging on hooks or cords to their reappearance in solid marble on sturdy bases; from a tiny four-inch [self-portrait] pincushion to a room-size environment."[1] Along with this amazing variety of modes of work is Bourgeois's use of an impressive variety of materials, correlated with an unusually varied and complex iconography. Especially in the sixties—when Bourgeois was already in her fifties—did this extraordinary fertility and brilliant inventiveness declare itself. As Wye says, after making drawings, prints, and sculptures of wood, Bourgeois "experimented with plaster, cement, rubber latex, and plastics, as well as marble and bronze." Her themes, which have a masochistic dimension, include: "woman and self-image; pregnant woman; human body shaped as a weapon; human body in relation to nature; body parts as isolated shapes; weapons, skeins, tapestry shuttles, nests; fecundity, nurturing, food; landscape, earth, topography; growth, seeds, sprouting; the terrain of the unconscious; hiding, protection, inner sanctums; mystery, fear, pain, anger; the human world in relation to the animal world; individuals, groups, families; balance and harmony; formlessness and loss of control."[2] Bourgeois can be alternately humorous and serious, coy and direct,

uncompromising and ironic, whimsical and austere—sometimes both extremes at once. She has almost always pursued the elusive unity of opposites, which in part generates the uncanny effect of her works. Her work is like a private encounter with contradiction and self-contradiction, in which each pole wrestles the other, seeking for its blessing as Jacob did when he wrestled the angel, not knowing if it was an angel of death or of life, whether it was merciless or compassionate.

Louise Bourgeois was born in France. Her parents found and restored tapestries in Paris. This idea of finding and restoring in effect became the method of Bourgeois's work. Art was a self-evident part of her environment. It was acceptable to study art. When she was a teenager and in her twenties, Surrealism was the dominant stylistic mode and intellectual orientation in Paris. While her art is far from conventionally Surrealistic, it was inevitable that Bourgeois assimilate Surrealistic ideas. There was always the independence that kept her loyal to herself. Her relationship to Surrealism is complex, as is her relationship to abstract art, the other, more obviously formal, pole of her work. Suffice it to say that it justified her obsession, self-exploration, and self-articulation. Also, it legitimatized her curiosity about materials, and the inherent poetic quality of materials, however late in her life that interest explicitly emerged. Much of her work can be understood—although it is ultimately uncategorizable—under the auspices of the Surrealist conception of the poetic object, based on

the notion of the found object. In the interview here, and in interviews elsewhere, Bourgeois has acknowledged her use of found objects. Marcel Jean has said that "the found object is always a rediscovered object. Rediscovered in its symbolic—original or acquired—meaning, which endows it with a fullness that a 'created' object rarely reaches. Bricks, molten glass, root, pipe, star-shaped wafer, tabernacle for who knows what demented games: found objects reveal our multifaceted irrational life."[3] The found object is the basis for many of Bourgeois's creations, and she wants to give us the sense of finding what later artists oriented to Surrealism called "enigmatic objects." Moreover, her great variety of materials —her tendency to search out always new materials, both traditional art materials and materials that only modern technological invention permits the use of—has an affinity with Jean's list of found-object materials. Jean celebrated "the *expectant* air that emanates from surrealist objects,"[4] and it is this expectant air that Bourgeois achieves in her art, to greater effect than many Surrealist poetic objects, in my opinion, because she combines the idea of the found object with the created object, to greater artistic potency. The key difference between Bourgeois and the Surrealists is that she works with raw materials, which she transforms by a deliberate art process, while the Surrealists tended to use already "refined" objects, which were left untransformed, or were minimally transformed, by being juxtaposed with one another.

There are many other relationships that can be made between

the Surrealist orientation and Bourgeois's works. Jean's notion of creating objects that imply "a *potential* motion of a great poetic violence: an expectation, as in the common object waiting to be used for some vital need" seems useful for an understanding of her work.[5] Salvador Dalí's notions of "psycho-atmospheric-anamorphic objects" and of "the 'dialectical process' of the 'surrealist object' " seem tailor-made for many of Bourgeois's sculptures, however unlike Dalí's pictures they are.[6] Bourgeois has extended these concepts into unexpected realms of production. Even the black humor of many of her works can be regarded as Surrealistic in connotation, if hardly Surrealistic in any programmatic sense.

In 1938, Bourgeois married an American professor and moved to the United States, where she has lived ever since. It was in the security of her new life and country that she was able to begin to explore and articulate her feelings about her childhood and life as her parents' daughter. This became her art's basic—but far from ultimate—subject matter. It was as though Bourgeois had deliberately set out to articulate her deepest memories and feelings—those of her formative years (in my opinion in part responsible for the sense of her art as always "in formation," in primordial process, in effect forever unfinished)—in a seemingly systematic way. Out of her extraordinary awareness of her own psychic process and of her emotional "position" in her childhood—her incredible ability to regress in the service of her contemporary artistic ego, to recover the sense and perspective of childhood—she developed a more

general, and equally profound, awareness of the psychophysical basis of life, especially of sex and death. She has finally come to articulate both the life force and the death wish with startling directness, sacrificing nothing of her art's formal subtlety. She is clearly the major woman artist working today, her art touching a range of issues in art making and life beyond the reach of much contemporary art.

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1 Deborah Wye, "Louise Bourgeois: 'One and Others,' " in *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), p. 13.
2 Ibid., p. 23.
3 Marcel Jean, "The Coming of Beautiful Days," in *The Autobiography of Surrealism,* edited by Marcel Jean (New York: Viking Press, 1980; Documents of 20th-Century Art), p. 304.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Salvador Dalí, "Psycho-atmospheric-anamorphic Objects," in *The Autobiography of Surrealism,* p. 296.

COLOR PLATES

UNTITLED, 1947–49.
Painted wood; 75½" high.
Collection of the artist.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.

THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND, c. 1947–49.
Painted wood; 67⅛" x 64⅜" x 16¼".
Private collection, London.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Peter Moore.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE FATHER (detail), 1974.
Latex, plaster and mixed media; c. 108" x 132" x 108".
Collection of the artist.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Peter Moore.

EYES, 1982.
Marble; 73" x 65" x 45".
Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Peter Bellamy.

THE INTERVIEW

DK: I know you have told the story of your familial situation, the story of your upbringing, over and over again, and you have told how it was such a great influence in your art—that it is the emotional substance of your art. You have said that your art originated in response to your familial situation. Could you tell the story once again?

LB: You must understand that I am completely at ease with my art and that I like it. I am not afraid of my art at all because at the beginning, when I first became an artist, it was through my family situation. I was introduced to art as a useful thing. You could never understand this here in America. I was about ten or twelve, and completely involved in school. And one Saturday morning, when the whole family was there, when my father was there—one Saturday morning my mother said we would have to deal with this matter having to do with art.

But my mother was repairing a tapestry which was very large. It was maybe twenty feet by ten feet. It was one of those typical allegorical subjects. And she needed a draftsman. Monsieur Genault, the draftsman who worked at Gobelin, was a prima donna, and once in a while he simply did not show up when he was needed. There was no telephone to call him. The whole operation needed him. It could not be done without a draftsman. So my mother turned to me and said, "Louise, since you make drawings all the time, why don't you help me make a drawing on the tapestry so that we can go on. We can proceed if you can help us."

So I did that; I made the drawing. That was very important, because it meant I could draw and be valuable. It was very simple.

My father was not terribly interested in repairing the tapestries; he was interested in finding. He and my mother complemented each other, but they were very, very different. They had different gifts, and they appreciated each other. I was told by my father, "You cannot work for us, you are a pain in the neck, you are a useless mouth"—as Simone de Beauvoir put it, *la bouche inutile*—so I am very much a feminist.

The tapestries were always torn at the bottom. They were originally used as moving walls. The rooms they were used in were not very clean, and the tapestries always got torn at the bottom. Their lower parts were actually lost; the feet on the figures were often missing. I drew one foot for my mother. I became an expert at drawing feet. I still do it; I still do lots of feet. I was very satisfied with them, very satisfied with the feet I drew for my mother. It was a great victory. And it also taught me that art is interesting, and that it can be useful, which is completely unknown today. It can restore. So it gave me great pleasure. Everybody thought my feet were wonderful, the feet I restored. I didn't think so, but they did. That is how my art got started.

DK: That is certainly very interesting. But it is not the usual story you tell, the story you have told in the past. It does explain the family connection to some extent, but I was really asking you about your personal psychological history, the history you have spoken about before, the history of the complexity of your relationship with your mother and father and his mistress. You have told that story before, and I wanted you to tell it again, if it's no trouble for you to do so.

You have many works that have been interpreted as aggressive against the male figure, including the father. You have let such interpretations stand, even seemed to encourage them. One of them is a very famous piece, The Destruction of the Father, *the very important environmental sculpture you made in 1974. In explanation of it, you offered, according to Deborah Wye, "a long and fantastic tale" about your "childhood dinner table." You talked about your "burdensome and*

self-important father holding forth to his captive family night after night." Finally you fantasized, in response to the situation, the family dismembering and devouring him. As you said, you wanted to make "other people relive that experience."

From what kind of personal, familial situation did these very intimate works of art emerge? By your own past testimony, they do not simply seem to have happened. I remember that in your last interview you said that all art came from the unconscious, was about the unconscious. You said this very explicitly.

LB: Definitely. It does, it is.

DK: I would like to know more about your unconscious situation, so to speak.

LB: Let us take an example. *The Destruction of the Father* deals with fear—ordinary, garden-variety fear, the actual, physical fear that I still feel today. What interests me is the conquering of the fear, the hiding, the running away from it, facing it, exorcising it, being ashamed of it, and finally, being afraid of being afraid. This is the subject.

I'm not an expert, but I know what fear is; I know what fear will make you do. The fear—garden-variety fear—what do you do about it? Do you run away? There is a long, long list of what you can do. The way immature people can conquer—they don't conquer it, but they feel that they make the fear disappear—is by falling in love. Right? You deceive yourself, you pretend to yourself that you love in order not to feel that pang of the fear. You "fall in love" with somebody that you are afraid of, and it short-circuits the fear; you do not feel the fear. If you take a snake and a bird—the bird is fascinated, right? It's exactly the same. It's mesmerized. He doesn't suffer, he's not afraid—in fact he's thrilled—and the snake gobbles him up. That's it! All my thinking is in terms of images. This is my trouble. But the difference from real love is that it does not come to sex; there is no real desire. I think that the test of being in love—real love—is that you want to give.

But you cannot "love" everybody to obscure the fear—it is completely time-consuming and unproductive. You'd never grow up! So you go from puppy love to puppy love, and you don't feel afraid; you feel that you have conquered something. But you have conquered nothing! And the years pass, you have not experienced love—since that kind of love usually does not materialize—and you have wasted your time. And that waste of time is expressed by a great anger, because you feel that you have not lived, that life has passed you by. This is what *The Destruction of the Father* is about.

Obviously there was denial in this fear, and I deny this denial. I am a tease in my art; I tease with the unconscious. I was terribly afraid of them and I could not face it. And I still have that fear today. I am ashamed of my fear.

DK: Are you talking about your fear of your parents, which still continues, after all these years?

LB: Yes. But the important thing is that I am afraid of my fears. If you were not my friend I would never have said that I was afraid of you. I am ashamed of it, but I could say it. In my art, I can say it. It is a terrible thing to say you are afraid, but a necessary thing. There is the constant image that comes from Turenne saying to his horse: "You are a trembling carcass under me but you would tremble much more if you knew where I am leading you."

DK: You speak of yourself as an underling. You have this top-dog, underdog way of thinking.

LB: Yes, right.

DK: Is it a repetition of your family situation? When you were a little girl, were you an underling, so to speak? Were you made to feel like an underling in your family?

LB: They didn't try to make me feel like one.

DK: They didn't try.

LB: They didn't try to make me feel that way, they just did.

DK: And you articulate this situation in your art?

LB: To date I do.

DK: Only to date? Can it still change, after all these years?

LB: Yes.

DK: How do you do so?

LB: I do so in my art because I have denied it all my life.

DK: What exactly do you deny?

LB: I deny that I was so afraid because I was an underling.

DK: But in your art you can acknowledge you are afraid.

LB: Yes, because I am fearless in my art. I am not interested in anybody when I make my art. I am completely independent and fearless.

DK: But you have also said your art reflects back or in some way relates to the situation of intense childhood fear that made you feel like an underling.

LB: Yes, definitely. But it is because I am absolutely fearless when I am in my art that I can make the connection with my fear.

Now, the purpose of *The Destruction of the Father* was to exorcise the fear. And after it was shown—there it is—I felt like a different person. Now, I don't want to use the word *thérapeutique,* but an exorcism *is* a therapeutic venture. So the reason for making

BLIND MAN'S BUFF, 1984.
Marble; 36½″ x 35″ x 25″.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.

the piece was catharsis. What frightened me was that at the dinner table, my father would go on and on, showing off, aggrandizing himself. And the more he showed off, the smaller we felt. Suddenly there was a terrific tension, and we grabbed him—my brother, my sister, my mother—the three of us grabbed him and pulled him onto the table and pulled his legs and arms apart—dismembered him, right? And we were so successful in beating him up that we ate him up. Finished. It is a fantasy, but sometimes the fantasy is *lived.* I have seen the sudden onslaught of a victim, when —if you remember—two or three years ago when Khadaffi teased us and pushed us, and suddenly it was enough and he was bombed out of his mind. Never heard about him again! With *The Destruction of the Father,* the recall was so strong, and it was such a lot of work, that I felt like a different person. I felt as if it had existed. It really changed me. That is the reason artists go on—it's not that they get better and better, but they are able to stand more. So when I talk about success it is not a material success that I'm talking about, it is about the successful outcome of the making of a work of art.

(Shows painting.) This is the story of an erotic attraction. It has to do with a man of whose presence I am intensely aware—physically, erotically. And when he is gone, as an exorcism, I visualize —not visualize, I *concretize*—his *columne vertébrale,* his spine. This is the spine of somebody I love. Suppose you—in French one says, *avoir le begat*—you have the hots for someone. Now, for reasons of your own—maybe the guy's married, he has somebody else in mind —you have to forget about him. It's very, very painful. I can do that by actualizing, by visualizing—by rendering concrete the feelings that I have. It works. But this is not to seduce somebody; it's the opposite, to get rid of somebody, to destroy the spell. I render the spine because it's very important, it's the gait, it's the way somebody walks—the main attraction of this guy is his gait. The main attraction—that's why I do so many eyes, and so on—the spell is usually (not with me, since I don't dare to look at anyone) in the eye contact. The spell doesn't go away suddenly, but this exorcism makes it more manageable. I talk in analogy. That used

to drive my husband crazy; it threw him off balance. I never made him out, and he never made me out. He felt that he had found a diamond that he loved—rough, very rough—and I felt that he was really a catch. But we didn't understand each other, so that each of us remained forever, forever, mysterious to the other.

DK: So your art is useful to you in your life, as you have suggested in other interviews. On the basis of what you have said before, it seems possible to say that it helps you live, it helps you endure. We all have our ways of coping with our history and emotions and memories, and you have suggested that your art helps you cope. This is certainly a well-known, even traditional function of art. It helps us deal with our inner life. It has been acknowledged, in one way or another, ever since Aristotle wrote of catharsis, the pity and terror aroused in us by tragedy. Certainly your work has a heroic, tragic dimension, in the classical sense.

In any case, can you tell me how, specifically, in your imagery and form, and perhaps in your techniques, your childhood fears manifest themselves?

LB: For instance, there is a piece called *The Blind Leading the Blind* in the Australian National Gallery. It represents an army of legs, two by two, that holds together. Eight pairs of legs. The reason this blind army of legs does not fall, even though the legs are always afraid of falling, since they come to a point, is that they hold on to each other. This is exactly what I felt when I was a child, when I was hiding under the table. My brother was following me like a shadow; I was blind with fear and so was he. My brother was a little younger than I and I used to protect him—I still feel protective toward men. I feel compelled to take care of them, whether I want to or not. I don't like it too much sometimes. But there we were under the table and we would look. I don't know what we were looking at. But I was watching the feet of my father and mother from under the table, while they were preparing the meal. And I thought to myself, What are they doing? What is their game? What is their purpose? How do I relate to them? And

in the end I considered that they were not friendly. I decided that the outside was not friendly. And I was afraid, simply afraid. I couldn't understand their purpose, which was to prepare lunch. I didn't understand why they were walking around the table. Why would one pair of legs interfere with the other visually, physically? There were their legs and the table's legs. It really just made me wonder where I fitted in. Where did I fit in? I couldn't manipulate anybody since I didn't know what the issue was. I remedied the bewilderment by trying to understand how you could manipulate people—the end being how you could manipulate people to have them like you. I had to make an object of, physicalize this problem.

DK: So what is the relationship between manipulating material to make art and manipulating people?

LB: It's training—I get better and better every time. I realize the problem, I solve the problem at this physical level, and it gives me an insight into somebody else.

DK: The idea of the childlike aspect of many works of modern art, the idea that they are informed by a childhood vision, that a child's sense of things is especially compelling in them, is of course a well-known one. It is part of the so-called "return to origins" involved in much modern art, and it correlates with abstract art's return to elementary form. Certainly your art seems involved in this general—perhaps generic—modern idea, which goes back at least to Baudelaire, who writes about the child's point of view in his essay "A Philosophy of Toys." Is it worth acknowledging that there is an affinity between the legs you drew for your mother's tapestry, the missing legs, and the legs in The Blind Leading the Blind? *In the tapestry the feet were missing; in the sculpture you found feet, as it were. You have an interest in legs in general.*

LB: Yes, there is a connection. There are also the recent hanging rubber legs, hanging bronze leg, the imprints of legs in the recent stone pieces. There are many, many legs.

DK: Then your works with legs come out of the association of the tapestry legs and the legs of your parents that you saw from under the table?

LB: It is a coincidence, a very big coincidence, that their legs and the legs of the tapestry were the same.

DK: No doubt it's a coincidence, a very pointed one. Perhaps it articulates your feeling of being little and looking at the legs of the adults, which confirmed your feeling of being little. Perhaps you thought they would kick you, and you kicked them back with your art.

LB: Absolutely. I was looking up, which confirmed that I was small.

DK: You were looking up as a little girl, but in your art you don't look up. Is it fair to say that you looked down?

LB: Certainly in my art it is the opposite situation. I am impudent, manipulative, I do what I want to do. I do not hide under the table. And I succeed, too.

DK: You certainly succeed. What does it mean to succeed?

LB: First, you have to conceptualize what you want to do; you have to have an idea. The idea, as I said before, comes from a failure somewhere, a failure of power somewhere. For instance, if you have had a disagreement with the people you work with, if you have a problem to solve—with your children, for instance —you have to deal with it and show no criticism and no tension, and it is a terrific strain. There are many kinds of tension, but the one I am trying to deal with, to alleviate, is a social tension. My trouble is that it is absolutely impossible for me to put them together in a sequence, to organize my material so that it comes to a certain . . . I'm not trying to convince you of anything—and I *couldn't* convince you of anything. All I can do is to have these

flashes of intense experience that are represented by this, and this, and this, and this. And all these entities have no connection with each other. This is one of the bases of my repeated work—that I have to make a whole out of all these parts, and it is not possible for me because every time I take a position, it shakes me so much that the thinking process does not take place.

It is by thinking about what is missing there, thinking about it little by little, in the night or when I travel, and so on—"What is wrong? What is wrong?"—that I find a way of repairing the difficulty by making a piece. This is a conception at a certain level; it is a way of thinking. The problem is purely one of organization. It has to do with survival at the everyday level—art is about life. So in order to put through what I have to put through, I have to prove to myself that I can organize and I am going to make the piece. That is at the very beginning. It is not deductive, it is intuitive—you have to read Pascal!

I have to admit something terrible: for breakfast I have tea with sugar, and I am extremely sensitive to sugar. That carries me until around eleven, and at eleven I become worried. At about eight-thirty I go by car to Brooklyn, to my studio. I spend all day there, until five or six. I have to be completely alone.

I do my thinking in the morning; the physical work I do in the afternoon. I think, and I do my sketches, and I do the conceptualizing. But I cannot conceptualize if I am afraid, if I am under stress. It is not possible to conceptualize if you are afraid. That's why some children do not learn—they're petrified. These strange—how would you describe these?—these are what I call my "nests." It is a form of apology, for not thinking completely straight. I am attacked by so many images when I think that I do not think straight. I see images next to each other, or overlapping each other—the whole thing is visual; I think visually. So these nests are an establishment of priorities, priorities in different subjects. There is no sequence here; there is a priority in size—obviously this is more important than that. Here is a list, but it doesn't move me; it doesn't mean anything to me. I'm trying to be a Descartes—it's terribly difficult for me. It is my way of dealing with a problem.

Personal problems—everything I am interested in is a personal problem. And I have to see my problems in physical shape before I can deal with them. So this is a first attempt at physicalizing them, of differentiating values, of putting them in order. The work in the afternoon is to make realizations of them—three-dimensional models of them.

DK: Can every problem be attacked that way?

LB: For me, yes. Every problem. Absolutely.

All afternoon I really work on the pieces. And then I come back on the subway from Brooklyn. This is the most intense social encounter that I have, seeing the people on the subway. For me, that is a fantastic experience. I notice people's faces, and even if they are strange, they are not hostile; I do not feel hostility anywhere. I am in admiration of the differences between them. This is what really gets me—how people are separated, and this is expressed in their faces—that people are all alone, that they live in a world of their own is written on their faces. I love that. I am very sensitive to the way people look at me, and I have noticed that the way people look at you is a reflection of the way you look at them. If I have friendly eyes, they're reflected immediately. I want very much for them to like me; I'm very sensitive to that. It is not fifty-fifty; it's seventy-five–seventy-five—you have to give a lot.

So after the trip in the subway I get back here and I have to unwind in two ways. I have to unwind physically, so I start cleaning, and I have to unwind from the stress. I do that by reading a boring book—not a boring book, but a book that does not present problems, that does not stimulate me, that doesn't make demands on me.

So, when the working time is over for me, I have sometimes managed to make a tangible thing of what I wanted to express. Usually, usually, usually I do succeed. There is a mounting tension, arising from my physical encounter with the physical material. There is always this mounting tension, and out of it grows what I

want to say. Suddenly in this mounting tension you get it, you express what you want. Suddenly there is total release; it is like waking up and you are hungry. So this is a sign. When you are hungry you have succeeded.

DK: That's a very interesting account of your sensations when you work. What about the work itself, about the history of your work? Haven't you been associated with the Surrealists?

LB: No—with the people outside, on the fringes of Surrealism.

DK: Do you regard yourself as a Surrealist?

LB: No, even though I knew the Surrealists socially. They were my elders. Marcel Duchamp could have been my father. The Surrealists had a gallery called Gradiva, which was near the building where I lived. I saw them every day after lunch, when I was a student. They were of course famous artists. They were father figures.

DK: Do you feel an affinity with their ideas, with their notion of the work of art as a kind of manufactured dream? Wye, whom I know you admire, writes that Surrealism encouraged you "to tap the complex texture" of your personal life. She says that where the Abstract Expressionists utilized Surrealist automatism, you "moved toward a greater psychological literalness through representational work of a symbolic nature." Can't we say that such symbolic representations are in effect dreams?

LB: I have never mentioned the word *dream* in discussing my art, while they talked about the dream all the time. I don't dream. You might say I work under a spell, I truly value the spell. I have the privilege of being able to enter the spell, to enter this very arid land where you are likely to find your birthright. To express yourself is your birthright. In the spell I can express myself.

DK: Isn't being in a spell also a Surrealist idea?

LB: The spell and the dream are not the same. The spell is more friendly than the dream. The "spell" is acted out on a physical level; it's not a passive state, like a dream. The dream blinds you; the spell does not. It is a friendly process.

DK: In this friendly spell, what do you have in mind? When you were making your sculptures, what did you have in mind? What were you trying to achieve stylistically?

LB: Stylistically the background is always the extraordinary tapestries with which I grew up. I lived with them since I was born. It has to do with the stories. I am telling the same stories as the tapestries told, but with different means. For example, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. This is a favorite story of mine.

DK: Does it have something to do with the relationship of your mother and father?

LB: Yes, to an extent, I suppose, but they were not really like the figures in the tapestry stories. And there were other subjects, antique subjects, and subjects from the Old and New Testaments. They were stories about pleasure and reason. All these were really everyday subjects, which is why they had a great reality. They were part of my education. I am an American artist; I am not even shown in France very much. I am shown much more in Germany and Scandinavia and so on. But I am French way back—all the formation, and the ideas, the values and all—are solid French. La Fontaine was my street education. La Fontaine is simply the *sagesse de nation*—how to defend yourself, how to keep alive. *Le loup et l'agneau* was most important to me—the *loup* comes and pontificates to the *agneau,* in order to eat him—that was my father! And *Le corbeau et le renard*—it's very real—you just have to flatter people; that's where everything starts. I'm still carrying those images, of taming birds. . . . But the French, being very sure of themselves, have a recipe for everything. My father would say, if

you want poetry, take the classics; if you want truth—downright horrible truth—you take the Old Testament. And the *sagesse de nation* really comes more from the Old Testament.

But Pyramus and Thisbe is not a *sagesse de nation*. It is a classical theme, from the Greek. It especially interested me because it was a story of love and death. Very early in life I associated lovemaking with death. In the story, the lovers tell each other that if one of them should happen to die first, the other would not wish to survive, as a sign of their love for each other. My parents would say the same thing to each other. They would play Pyramus and Thisbe. This is their story, not my story. They would coo their love to each other. This was a very strange thing, because my father was promiscuous and betrayed my mother every chance he had, and she knew it. This is one of the peculiar things about my father—that this man who was promiscuous and slept with just about everybody had as his ideal Pyramus and Thisbe. He expected his wife to die if he passed away—I'm not so sure it worked the other way around! My mother was not given to foolishness, but he would say things like that—"I love you so much that I would want to die if you passed away!" The day before, he had lipstick on his face—my father always had lipstick on his face. So much for protestations of love. They always lead to death. They conceived of love as distinct from sex.

DK: But your parents kept the act going, the pretense of devoted love. They played Pyramus and Thisbe very well.

LB: Love is eternal; it's sex that leads to death. This is a child's vision. They lived with a kind of elegance that we can no longer live with. They tried to believe their love story. I know my mother believed it, and my father tried to believe it. They believed their roles.

DK: Their marital roles.

LB: Yes. The French have a saying that you love your wife and you simply love everybody else you can and yet you still love your

wife. Divorce is never considered, is never the word. My father was given to proverbs—he had proverbs for everything. He had to glorify everyone that he victimized.

DK: How does this affect your art? You have mentioned classical themes, Old Testament themes, New Testament themes. But now you are talking about your real theme, the betrayal of love, and the taking of revenge for it, the revenge that was never taken in life.

LB: Maybe. That is too easy. I will explain what my art is about by talking about my first sculpture. Here is a life-size model of it, a work of 1945 or 1946. It is made of milk containers folded and notched together. These are models for plaster and wax molds.

DK: What does it mean, if you want to talk about that.

LB: It is a kind of attempt to create order out of chaos. Every artist would say that. It is a cliché. But it is true. In the desolation of human relationships, their chaos, my way of making order is to group them and to see to it that they touch each other and are close together. The same problem exists now, forty years later. The problem is to put everybody in place, to give them a place, and especially to be sure they are together.

DK: As they are not really in life? It seems to be an abstract fantasy of the way things should be. It seems to be an abstract analogue for an ideal family intimacy and unity that rarely exists. You once said you are always dealing with the problem of the one and the many, the individual and the group, separateness and togetherness.

You are showing me cylinder-shaped elements, each of a different thickness. All belong to the same family of form. Each is in effect a surrogate for a person. Wye has said that "for Bourgeois a plank of wood can, on some level, be identified as a replacement for a specific person rather than as a symbol of that person." The problem is to bring them harmoniously together, to make them touch in an emotionally good way. Is that correct?

LB: Yes. They do in fact belong together, even though they may not know how to stay together.

DK: You want them to have a harmonious relationship they do not have in life.

LB: Yes.

DK: All the elements are piled up. There is an accumulation of elements which don't quite add up but which you make hang together.

LB: Right. The whole of them together is more than the sum of the parts.

DK: They neatly come together, even though they are different in size and shape.

LB: Yes. I was guilty about making them come together, but they had to. It was a privilege for me to make art; I felt guilty about it.

DK: Why should you feel guilty about your sculpture?

LB: It is because of the symbolic quality of the thing. I worked with found objects, and I found a magic overtone in them.

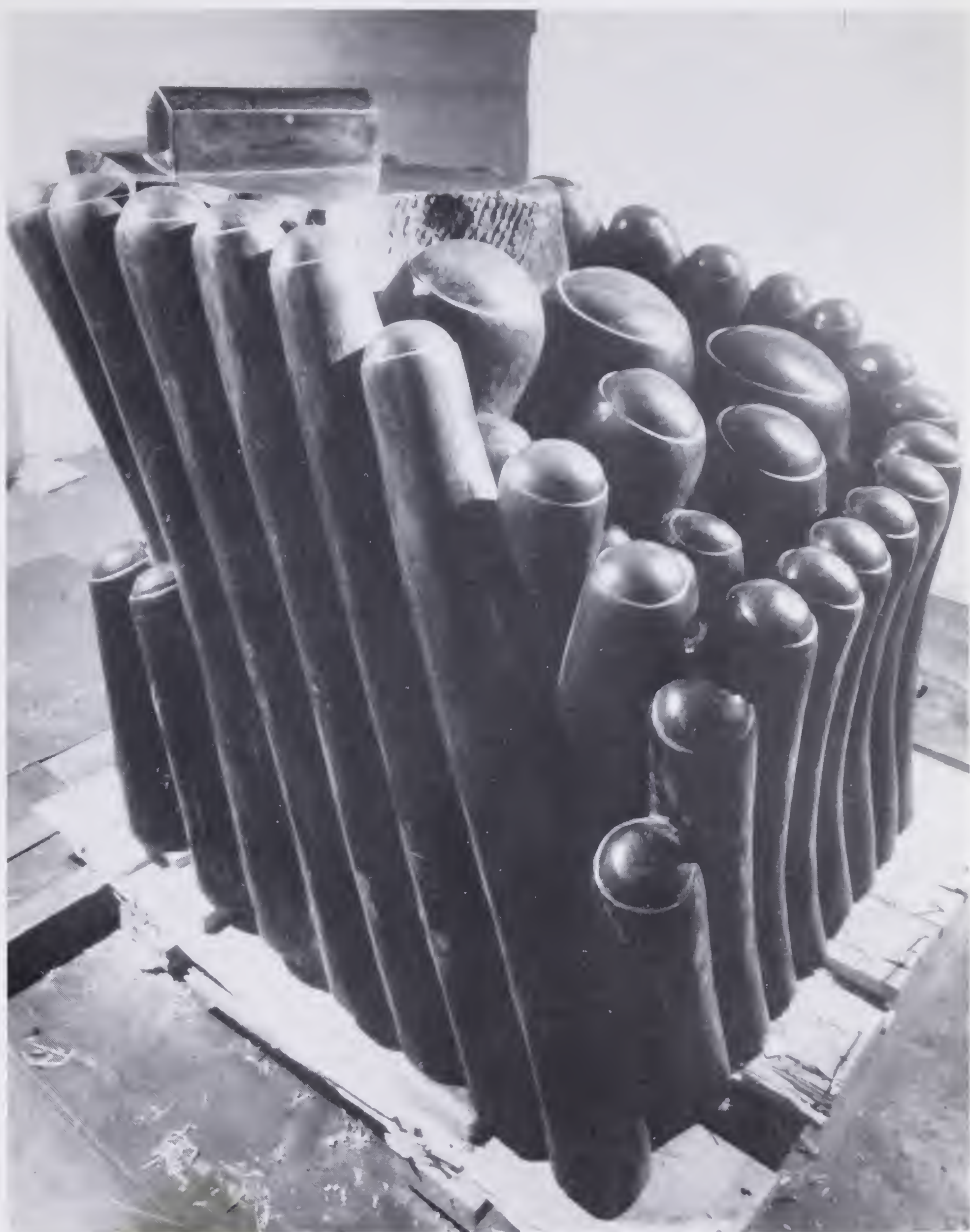
DK: The breast is the moral background of the milk bottle.

LB: It is the opposite; the milk bottle is the symbol for the feeding breast. It was once important that the objects I used be found in the house.

DK: Why is that?

LB: Because such objects are rejected objects, are lowly objects. They are used daily and are indispensable. This is why the milk container was for me the principal object of that time.

Femme Maison, 1983.
Marble; 25″ x 19½″ x 23″.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.



FEMME MAISON, 1981.
Marble; 48⅛″ x 47″ x 49⅞″.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.

DK: The milk containers here look old, used.

LB: Yes, it is important that they show their age.

You might mention as a general characteristic, to understand the tenor of my work, that I am a masochist. Whether that is the general attitude of women, I do not know. The masochism expressed itself at the time of the *Femmes Maisons* in the feeling that I didn't have the right to have children, and that I didn't have the right to be an artist. This was a privilege. So if you consider art as a privilege, then, by definition, you feel that you do not deserve it. You are continually denying yourself something—denying your sex, denying yourself the tools that an artist needs—because to be a sculptor costs you money. If you consider art a privilege instead of something that society will use, you have to save and suffer for your art, for what you love; you have to deny yourself in the cause of the art. I felt I had to save my husband's money rather than do sculpture that cost money. So the materials I used in the beginning were discarded objects. This was given a poetic meaning by saying that the discarded object has a value. That's true as well, but certain artists—for instance in black neighborhoods you will see that people will make sculpture with refuse because they don't have the money to buy new wood. The Surrealist object, on the other hand, was in the direction of *preciousness,* of rarity—rarity in time, in that there are very few left, and rarity in space, in that you don't find it so much. Rarity, preciousness, "beauty of material" . . . Joseph Cornell. But this is not me at all.

Here is a discarded object, *Shredder*—but certainly nothing to do with the Surrealists. It is an eight-foot wheel, a spindle for cable. It is typically American; it is a part of the discarded landscape here. And today, they are not made of wood, they are made of metal, so this represents a certain period—maybe twenty years—in American industrial history. Another discarded object was *The Fallen Woman*—but that was not *objet trouvé* at all. *The Fallen Woman* is a discarded object, but it is not made from discarded objects; it had to be made of clay.

Look at this.

DK: It is a photograph of yourself with your two children and with a bottle of milk.

LB: It is a gallon bottle.

DK: And your two children are in front of a chess board. The game is set up. It is a very beautiful photograph. I suppose you know that the big bottle of milk is a symbol of nourishment.

LB: Absolutely. It is important.

DK: So you knew what you were doing all the time? It was not just a blind unconscious expression?

LB: Yes, because it reflected our everyday life. The children lived on milk; we had big containers of milk everywhere.

DK: Is it farfetched to say that some of your work—some of your most important sculptural objects—signifies the good breast, the nurturing breast, both yours and your mother's? Are those big stone sculptures, which you open up, whose hardness you penetrate, surrogate breasts, capable of giving milk, the way it is said water can miraculously come from a stone? Is it silly to say that?

LB: I wouldn't know. I wouldn't know if they are breasts.

DK: The arrangement of the figures in the photograph is interesting. The one boy is holding your hand with both his hands; the other doesn't seem to want to hold your hand.

LB: He is the master of his fate, he has an ego. You can see that; he doesn't want to touch.

DK: So the point is again the intimacy. When was this photograph taken?

SHREDDER, 1983.
Wood and metal; 83″ x 59″ x 83″.
Private Collection.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.

LB: In 1950, the same year as the sculpture.

DK: So it is the background of the sculpture; it is information about the sculpture. It is about the situation of intimacy you are always dealing with.

LB: Yes. Here is another photograph, of a sculpture. It is from 1968.

DK: What is it called?

LB: *Cumul.* It was exhibited in a show of works that could be understood by the blind. It is a very tactile sculpture. Again there are these elements hanging together. They are emerging from the drapery. The drapery falls away and they come to light. All this around is drapery. This sense of something completely covered and then emerging—that is important to me. There is one element isolated from the others.

DK: Tell me more about the work. Tell me its story.

LB: Well, this represents the coastline, and this the open sea, and this element is about to go off alone and be herself.

DK: So you are picturing the family.

LB: Right. It is like a family that is too comfortable, too tight.

DK: Too constrictive.

LB: Right.

DK: This continues the problem of the milk-bottle work.

LB: Well, I don't know. Other people see different things in them.

DK: What do you see in them?

LB: I really see things as mother figures.

DK: All these things in the sculpture?

LB: Yes. Even these tight, little ones here.

DK: So it's a kind of personal allegory for you?

LB: Right. And a kind of personal vortex.

DK: It's like a landscape.

LB: Definitely.

DK: It is a self-contained landscape.

LB: Right.

DK: You've made other kinds of works like this one, works with the elements tightly grouped together, in a variety of media. Does the medium make a difference to you?

LB: A great difference. For instance, this sculpture is supposed to be filled with water.

DK: Again, there is the implication of a life-giving liquid, as in the case of the milk bottles.

LB: Yes. You see this flowing drapery underwater. It has all kinds of elements that change shape.

DK: What kind of stone is this?

LB: It is marble, like the other ones, but the idea is not the same in it.

DK: Why is that?

LB: Because I work in series, especially when I am intensely concerned with a subject. I will start small, in a certain material, and then change material, and the change will change the subject. You get different things from different materials. Eventually, after going through many changes of material, I will get the subject that interests me most, and the most resistant material. The fact of resistance is challenging, perhaps the most challenging fact about sculpture for me. It is overcoming resistance.

DK: Does that have something to do with subject?

LB: Right. I go over the material and the subject as something I have to deal with and fight to the finish. What the piece finally is depends of course on the material I work with, but I usually work with hard material. I am attracted to it.

DK: Is there a psychological reason for this? You spoke in psychological terms of the waves and forms and the way they are grouped together.

LB: Oh, definitely. The picking of the challenge is altogether psychological. It has to do with my sense of myself. That perhaps sounds ridiculous.

DK: It doesn't sound ridiculous. Tell me more about it. Wye has remarked that the sense of self is fundamental to your art, inseparable from it. How does your sense of yourself relate to your using what might be described as a stubborn material? Are you deliberately setting yourself a difficult, almost impossible, task? Are you taking yourself to task, as it were, setting yourself a hard task as a kind of penance?

LB: No. I deserve the privilege of my self-expression. But my self-expression is very aggressive, and this causes me a certain tension. When students come to me, I tell them I don't want to be bothered, or that they know more than I do, anything to push them away, so that they don't experience my aggression. It is very bad.

DK: Pushing people away?

LB: Yes.

DK: Does the hard material represent these people you are pushing away?

LB: Yes. Right. It is also a way to prove to myself that I am a very strong person.

DK: Meaning isolated. Meaning that you can be yourself, stand on your own.

LB: Yes. I can take care of myself. I am not dependent.

DK: You want to demonstrate that you are not dependent by overcoming the material on which you are dependent?

LB: Right.

DK: But you articulate situations of dependence.

LB: The fear of dependence is crucial for me, and is partly what my art is about. The challenge is to show that I am independent. It is a constant challenge. I have to prove it.

DK: Yet you show in these forms identifying with a nurturing mother figure, on whom others are dependent.

LB: Exactly.

DK: But it is also an isolated figure, to show its independence of those dependent on it.

LB: Yes, it also wants to have fun and forget everybody and not nourish anybody. *(Laughs.)*

DK: It wants to remain high on itself, on its own.

LB: Very true.

DK: What about when you work in softer materials? I know you've used wood as well.

LB: First I work on a drawing, then I will translate the concept into cardboard and then into corrugated cardboard. Here, let me show you. I get hooked on a subject and I make sketches and drawings. It means the obsession is going to last for several months. Then it will disappear, and reappear several years later. I am involved in a kind of spiral, a spiral motion of motivation. The material itself, stone or wood, does not interest me as such. It is a means; it is not the end. You do not make sculpture because you like wood. That is absurd. You make sculpture because the wood allows you to express something that another material does not allow you to.

DK: You seem to move from sketch to cardboard model to corrugated cardboard model to wood to stone. And you apparently feel free to stop at any one point in the process and dig into that material, to linger with it and work with it. Is that correct?

LB: Yes.

DK: In other words, sometimes the sculpture ends at the wood stage, and sometimes at the stone stage.

Noir Veine, 1968.
Marble; 23″ x 24″ x 27″.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Peter Moore.

LB: That is true. But at each stage it is sculpture. Every part of the series belongs to it, from the smallest sketch to the marble.

DK: But you seem to prefer the marble. You seem to prefer the hardest material, the material with the most resistance.

LB: Yes, I would say that. I think I do express myself best in marble. It permits one to say certain things that cannot obviously be said in other materials.

DK: What kind of things?

LB: Persistence, repetition, the things that drive you toward tenacity, that force you to be tenacious. I am a tenacious person.

DK: I'm aware of that.

LB: Art comes from life. Art comes from the problem you have in seducing birds, men, snakes—anything you want. It is like a Corneille tragedy, where everybody is pursuing somebody else. You like A, and A likes D, and D likes. . . . Being a daughter of Voltaire and having an education in the eighteenth-century rationalists, I believe that if you work enough, the world is going to get better. If I work like a dog on all these . . . contraptions, I am going to get the bird I want.

DK: Does that sometimes happen?

LB: Very little. The end result is rather negative. That's why I keep going. The resolution never appears; it's like a mirage. I do not get the satisfaction—otherwise I would stop and be happy. There is no resolution, but you are very pleased with yourself because you have done everything you could and you have been efficient. You have understood the problem, and the understanding of a problem is a very high objective. Lots of people remain at the level of collecting—collecting objects, or collecting women, if

it's a man—which is a lower activity than understanding. Of course, there are lots of artists, and most of them are completely uninteresting, because self-expression is not an end in itself—or rather, self-expression *is* an end in itself, but it is not interesting. Millions of people have breakfast in the morning; it's very difficult to make breakfast interesting, from an objective point of view.

I work very hard and I never—never!—get people to understand what I mean. I want them to understand tenacity as a virtue, an end in itself. More than that, they must understand that I had to equate sex and murder, sex and death. They could never understand the problem of this equation. I should be softer on myself, I should not pursue such a mystery, but it is still a mystery, and I still pursue it.

DK: Are you talking about the relationship between sex and death?

LB: The mystery is why I can't trust sex as a good thing, why I am afraid of it, why this destroys its thrill, why this makes it like death. It reaches a point where you do not know if it is pleasurable or repulsive. You do not know if death is pleasurable or repulsive.

DK: Painful.

LB: Painful. You lose your sense of where the edge is. You lose the thrill of the poor guy who bets on the horses and doesn't know if he is going to win, become rich, or end up dying under a bridge. The fear of death destroys your sense of the edge in sex. It is this same moment, when death and sex are one, that I want to get in my work.

DK: I am reminded, by your talk about the peculiar, paradoxical relationship of those seeming opposites, sex, the life force, and death, its exhaustion, about what Marius Bewley has written about the intentions in the symbolic imagery that appeared in the prints published in He Disappeared into Complete Silence, *which you produced at Atelier 17 in 1947. Bewley wrote: "They are all tiny tragedies of human*

frustration: at the outset someone is happy in anticipation of an event or in the possession of something pleasing. In the end, his own happiness is destroyed when he seeks to communicate it, or, perversely, seeks to deny the necessity for communication. The protagonists are miserable because they can neither escape the isolation which has become a condition of their own identities, nor yet accept it as wholly natural." This was written some time ago, but it seems to beautifully describe the situation of frustration embodied in the age-old dilemma of the relationship of sex and death that you are so interested in. Can one say that much of your work attempts to articulate the difficult, even impossible, very intimate situation—tinge—of emotional frustration that the association of death with sex implies?

And would this have something to do with the fact that your father repeatedly betrayed your mother, making sex untrustworthy, a pawn in the game of relationship? Does it have something to do with your unhappiness about the French notion of marriage as a situation in which a man loves his wife but sleeps with as many women as possible? That is a very pure, rarefied betrayal. It is legitimized, institutionalized adultery.

LB: It is true. My father acted as he did because he was not an adult. He remained a child all his life.

DK: An adolescent in attitude?

LB: Right. And my mother was extremely reasonable, very reasonable, reasonable to a fault—foolishly reasonable. She was completely reliable, and my father was unreliable, emotionally. It is only because of her that I am able to build up a little trust.

DK: Is it correct, then, to say that your sculpture is always from the point of view of woman?

LB: Yes. But I *am* a woman.

DK: Yes, you are, but what I mean is that your sculpture is always from the point of view of the reliable woman who has been betrayed,

who has tasted death, whose sex with her husband is tainted because he has been with other women, and she thinks that is the way it should be, that is customary, allowed, even though she dislikes it intensely, unconsciously. Your mother was a model for you, as you yourself have suggested. Is your persistence against the stone, your determination in the situation of the hardness of stone, like your mother's reliability? Is your persistence your adult mother's endurance of your infantile father, whom you have destroyed in spirit in several of your works—destroyed him for your mother's sake, to revenge your mother?

LB: I don't know all that for sure. I think what is going on in my sculpture is even more personal than that.

DK: How would it be more personal?

LB: It is about how I am unable to make myself loved. The resistance of the stone is that I am unable to make myself loved.

DK: Are you saying that you feel you are unlovable, and that your art is about your unlovableness?

LB: You said it, I didn't.

DK: I asked it, I didn't say it.

LB: I said that I am presented with a game, a game I don't know how to play, a game of love which looks like a game of death. I don't know if the game is correct, but it exists, it is given, it is the family.

DK: It is the only game in town, the game of family betrayal.

LB: Right. It is easier to feel that people do not love you so that you do not break down when they betray you. So that I am unable to be trusting in love. That's it. Of course it's painful.

DK: So in a sense, the making of your work is an articulation of this difficult, even impossible, very intimate emotional situation.

LB: Right. Only the making of art makes it valuable. Valuable.

DK: Because you can endure the struggle.

LB: Right.

DK: Because you can present the struggle, in whatever elusive, abstract way.

LB: Yes. And the work is valuable in itself, as art.

DK: I wouldn't deny that.

LB: If it is valuable in itself, what enters is the celebrity factor, the way the work is understood and celebrated. I believe in that.

DK: But you said before that you felt people didn't understand your work.

LB: It is not my responsibility whether they understand it or not, only that I express it. Nonetheless, the celebrity factor, the work's reception, gives it a place. I do not care if it has the right place. I do not claim that my work is a communication, because that is like a game also. I do not play the communication game, because one will always be betrayed in communication as in love.

DK: Let's talk more about your life, about your life after you left home, which clearly had its problems. You married the art historian Robert Goldwater and you moved to the United States.

LB: I married, first of all, an intellectual. He was interested in nothing but ideas. That means he was interested in what is true and what is not true. This is a great compliment to him. My father

was also a skeptic, a disbeliever. He said you always have to prove something to him.

DK: Did your husband say that also?

LB: No, my father did, and I admired it. He said, "I do not believe in anything unless you prove it to me. It's up to you to prove it to me." Intellectually, basically he had the same idea, the same approach. But Robert Goldwater was a completely rational person; he had the same qualities as my mother had. He did not betray me. He did not betray anyone. I never saw him angry in my life. Ever. And I never heard my mother raise her voice, ever. That is something.

DK: Yes, it is quite unusual.

LB: It is amazing. I could appreciate it, because I threw tantrums. The tantrums that I threw made me feel that I was not lovable. The tantrum never gets you anywhere, certainly not in love. Some people say, "Oh, you're immature, out you go." So even now that I have success with my art I do not feel like a successful person. I do not feel welcome.

DK: But you seem to enjoy your success, your celebrity.

LB: I am selfish, like all artists. But I do not take any nonsense, all this nonsense connected with success.

DK: Did your husband's work influence yours? Were there ideas that you shared?

LB: His Penguin book called *Symbolism* was published in 1971. This is a common interest we shared.

I am not interested in art history. My husband taught it, so I had my fill at home! I do believe in it as an activity, as a form of

intellectual pursuit, but it did nothing for me—except that it kept me at a certain bracing level of intellectuality.

In general, my work portrays and encompasses the whole tradition of art. It is baroque, for example. I have even called one work *Baroque,* a work made about 1970. My art involves other styles as well. I privilege no one style or material.

DK: Can you tell me how this is shown in your art?

LB: Yes. Look at the "No" poster, which was reproduced in *The New York Times.* It is graphic design in the strictest sense.

DK: Is it that poster on the wall?

LB: Yes. The word *no* is presented in letters of different sizes. That is modern design.

DK: Does this work represent your skepticism, your saying no to everything?

LB: I didn't think of it then, because the work was made for a specific occasion, but yes, I can say it does.

DK: What is the specific event it relates to?

LB: The specific thing is that people say you must think this way or that way. I say "no" to it all. You know, you have many religions in the world, maybe eight or ten, not just one or two or three. And each of them tells you how to express yourself; each of them tells you it is incomparable. I say "no" to all of them: I will express myself. They have nothing to tell me; they can show me nothing. You can express yourself by comparing them, but none of them can express you.

DK: So you are saying "no" to any dogma that claims to speak for you.

LB: They cannot speak for anyone; they have to prove what they say. Everyone must prove what they say. I can say I like you because you are a very nice person, but what do I mean by that? I must prove it. Robert [Goldwater] was saying that all the time: you have to prove it. He would say, "But Louise, how can I prove it? How can you prove it?"

DK: I want to ask you something about the arrangement of posters and letters you have on the wall where the "No" poster is. I see that you also have a photograph of one of your sculptures, the one with the eyes.

LB: Right. It is called *Eyes.* The staring, unflinching eyes stand for scrutiny.

DK: Could you tell me whether this scrutiny is related to your skepticism you mentioned before, the skepticism of Voltaire you once called it?

LB: Absolutely. It is the skepticism embodied. I have in general been preoccupied with the idea of eyes for many years. I often isolate the eyes. In general, I am interested in body parts, and most come in pairs, because the body is symmetrical. I am interested in this doubleness, just as I am interested in opposites.

DK: Can you tell me a little more about the meaning of this work, which seems to present another side of you, a more autonomous side, the independent side you mentioned, far from the family situation, with all its emotional complexity? It is as though here, at last, I am looking at the real Louise Bourgeois; her strong identity and powerful self-expression are self-evident. I see her free of her involvement in her parents' relationship, of her unconscious identification with one or the other and her uncertainty and confusion about her own place in the family. Even though this critical, strong self derives from your father's skepticism, it seems more entirely your own, more entirely you, than the works of the mother with whom you identify, the breast works, as it were. In Eyes *I see Louise Bourgeois's all-seeing, sharp eyes. In* Eyes *I see the power of consciousness embodied in a spherical form that is simultaneously organic*

and abstract, bodily and universal. It is simultaneously a pure form and an impure part of the body that yet engages in pure seeing, pure knowing.

LB: What counts, our whole purpose, is to try to understand what we are about, to scrutinize ourselves. Art is an aid in this. It involves a quality of scrutiny. I once said, "Every day you have to abandon your past or accept it, and then, if you cannot accept it, you become a sculptor." It is of course a privilege to be able to scrutinize, especially in the mode of art. Scrutiny presupposes tenacity, the tenacity to see, to concentrate. Skepticism clears the way for scrutiny, clears away the blindness of dogma, of easy belief, easy seeing.

DK: I think it is wonderful to think of your sculpture as concentrated scrutiny, as declaring the imperative of scrutiny.

LB: That has always been the quality I have sought in my work. But it depends on my power of scrutiny and concentration, and this has reduced itself to the few hours of the morning.

DK: Do you feel your work has become less concentrated as you have aged?

LB: No, more concentrated. I have become less concentrated in general. But perhaps in those few early hours I have become more concentrated.

DK: You know, we are all aging, we are all growing old, and it seems more evident as the world continues to pretend to be young. But that only makes us more tenacious. It is a way of respecting ourselves, our power of scrutiny. Your work seems to me stronger than ever. You are as tenacious as ever, perhaps more openly tenacious. Your work seems to embody what the psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi said is the great gift of old age, the combination of wise vision and youth's sense of freshness.

LB: Yes, that is true. I always feel the last work is the best, the most concentrated, the strongest, the most tenacious.

DK: What are you working on now? What is your most recent work? Tell me about it.

LB: I don't think I can do that without the work in front of me.

DK: You must have some ideas about it that you can talk about now.

LB: But I am still inside that work; I do not know where I am going, what I can do, exactly what is happening, what I am seeing. I am passionately going somewhere, but I am not sure that I know where, where it is.

DK: I understand. You're still deeply in process, so you are reluctant to talk about it. You are afraid that its spell might dissipate. But would it be fair to assume that it involves some of the ideas you have already spoken about?

LB: Yes, definitely.

DK: Is it a work in stone?

LB: Yes, it is a work in stone.

DK: And are you fighting it, struggling against its resistance?

LB: You can say that. But the stone is not a very hard stone. It is not a very hard stone at all. So, let us say that we have a cube of stone. It has happened many times that I have had such a cube of stone. The cube is a hostile entity, more hostile than the stone. It is more intact than the stone. It resists me more than the stone. I cannot destroy it! It is a problem I have to resolve. How am I going to attack the problem? What is the technique of resolving the problem of the resisting cube? How shall I get at and overcome

its truth, the truth of its existence, as hard as the hardness of stone, which is its truth?

DK: You haven't worked with the cube too often, except in recent years. Why have you turned to it now? Does it symbolize your concentration? Does its perfection make it the perfect object of your scepticism?

LB: It's true that I haven't used cubes very often, except recently. I have decided to respect the way stone is given, the way it comes to me. It comes from the quarry in the form of a cube. I want to preserve that sense of the quarry.

DK: Do you know the "Altar of Good Fortune" by Goethe, which involves a cube and a sphere, two contrary forms of perfection, two axiomatic forms, brought into conjunction? Are you interested in the perfection, the completeness symbolized, the perfection that seems to come raw from the quarry? Are you aware of the symbolic meaning of the cube? Are you trying to make a philosophical work, a conceptual sculpture?

LB: No, I don't know the symbolic meanings. I am not sure that I want to make a philosophical sculpture.

DK: Goethe's piece was a kind of minimalist work. Are you trying to be minimalist?

LB: I understand what Goethe was doing. He probably thought he had created a complete harmony, bringing the cube and sphere together. And so it was his good fortune.

DK: Right.

LB: It is the opposite for me. I see the cube as a problem, a problem you have to enter. I see it as a physical cube, not as a symbolic cube or as a concept. My problem is to penetrate the physicality of the cube. Modern technology allows you to do that. It allows

something that was not possible in the past. If Goethe could have drilled into the stone cube, he might not have thought of it as perfect.

DK: It is an aggressive act to penetrate the cube.

LB: Yes, so that my work could not have been made in the eighteenth century. I take great pride in the solitary cube, and great pride in the fact that I can penetrate it. My work with the cube is very modern. It does not repeat former work.

DK: Are you working only with this one cube?

LB: No, there are three of them.

DK: So where is the solitariness of the cube, and the unique destruction of its hardness and givenness?

LB: With three of them I can get at the truth. Three of them represent an investigation of the truth. The investigation is the driving into the cube. Each time I drive into it in a different, more thorough way.

DK: I remember you once told me that you used workmen to make the initial penetration of the stone, and then you followed on the trail they had blazed.

LB: Yes. They are very special people. They are people who do nothing but drill stone. What is important is that they do not relate to my work, they relate to their machine. They come with this machine and with this very particular drill, which they know very well. They are special kind of men.

DK: You clearly respect and admire them.

LB: I do. They raise for me a very important question, the question of the relationship of the artist to the technician, to the man of skill. It is an important question for me.

DK: Does it raise the issue of dependence on technique for you, a concern that technique may do the whole work?

LB: I am interested in technique. I respect the men with technique. I try to help by congratulating them all the time. But they are not interested. They are extremely sensitive, extremely proud. They are proud because of the prowess of their machine. They are not people-related; they are machine-related.

DK: I take it you tell them where to drill, and what size hole to make. That is already the beginning of the work. What do you do after they have drilled, after they have made their penetration?

LB: We work for one day at it. It is exhausting.

DK: What do you do then?

LB: I contemplate the penetrated cube for a long time. Then I try to express what I have to say, how I am going to translate what I have to say to it. I try to translate my problem into the stone. The drilling begins the process by negating the stone. The problem is how to complete the negation, to take away from the stone, without altogether destroying it, but overcoming it, conquering it. The cube no longer exists as a pure form for contemplation; it becomes an image. I take it over with my fantasy, my life force. I put it to the use of my unconscious.

DK: Can we say that geometry casts another kind of spell for you, over you? To work on the stone cube still seems to have symbolic significance for you, but the significance now seems more obscure, although it is related to your idea of skeptical scrutiny—the skepticism of your scrutiny.

In any case, this is a different approach than you used in the past.

LB: Yes, it is.

DK: In the past you added materials; you accumulated them. You put a lot of different things together.

LB: Right. And now I attack.

DK: You attack. You empty the stone. You scoop the cube out.

LB: Yes. Now I want to know. I want to ask questions. That is to penetrate. I used to be frightened and have to recover when I made work. Now I ask questions, I scrutinize with questions, I am not frightened.

DK: Now you are aggressive againist the stone. You are not frightened of any material.

LB: Right.

DK: You enter the material. You want to empty it out.

LB: I am not aggressive in that fashion. I want to find something out.

DK: Something inside the cube.

LB: The cube represents my concern. The cube represents a problem.

DK: So you are attacking a problem. As you talk about it, it doesn't seem like a personal problem; you speak of the cube in an impersonal way—you regard it impersonally. And yet you don't seem to be talking entirely of a technical problem, of making something out of the cube, of changing the raw stone cube into a refined sculpture. It still seems more than an issue of making an art object. To work on the stone cube still seems to have symbolic significance for you, but the significance now

seems more obscure, although it is related to your idea of skeptical scrutiny. I have it: you want to undermine the dogma of the cube, its dogmatically given form, to express skepticism of that form the way Voltaire, whom you once told me your father admired, expressed skepticism of religion. No religion of the perfect cube for you!

LB: It is true. But I am also going back to basics. Part of skepticism is to go back to basics, to call for a return to basics.

DK: *Is that itself the problem you spoke of, to go back to basics?*

LB: The problem is always the same.

DK: *But this return to basics seems different than the old family problem. The return to basics does not seem to have any personal dimension.*

LB: It is the same problem.

DK: *How so?*

LB: It is always the same problem.

DK: *Then you are articulating it in a different way?*

LB: Oh yes. I am still ashamed of the problem.

DK: *You don't seem ashamed.*

LB: I am not as ashamed as I was when I worked with the cube.

DK: *Why are you less ashamed? Is it because the problem is transformed in the cube?*

LB: Yes. It is now the problem of the voyage.

DK: *Voyage?*

LB: Right. It is the voyage inside the cube. After the penetration by the technicians, comes the voyage. That is the art. I am now alone; I do not need anyone around any longer. I am just going on with this investigation, this voyage by myself. Inside the cube, I am on my own.

DK: Is it correct to say that in the 1968 work you showed me before, you are pointing to the problem of the voyage that you have now realized in the isolation of the cube?

LB: Right. I am totally on my own in the cube. There is no family, no forced togetherness. I accept the challenge. I am not terrified by the challenge. I just accept it.

DK: You have been quoted as saying, with respect to your study of solid geometry, "I got peace of mind only through study of rules that nobody could change, that were safe."

I remember that once you spoke of your work as an exorcism. Is the exorcism complete in the cube works? Is that why you can be on your own inside the cube?

LB: Yes. The process of making is an exorcism. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. In the cube works it has worked.

DK: How do you know when it works?

LB: When it works you know it. You can redo it, reshow it, as in the three cubes, one after another. It works in this piece. *(Holds up a photograph.)*

DK: What is that called?

LB: *The Witness.*

DK: From what year? It looks very early.

PILLAR, c. 1949.
Painted wood; 64⅜″ high.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.

LB: It is a work from 1947.

DK: Does the exorcism work in it?

LB: No. The exorcism came later. These figures were very precarious. Their position was precarious. In fact, they couldn't stand by themselves. This one is later; the figure repeats. The witness is still terrified.

DK: That seems apparent in the hands and arms.

LB: Yes, the terror is in the stiffness.

DK: The arms are close to the body.

LB: And the witness has no feet.

DK: There you are with your foot problem again, Louise.

LB: Right, right. The figure tries desperately to be level, but it can't.

DK: It tries to be on the level, but it's not.

LB: Right. Once I had a man who wanted to do my taxes—he really wanted to do them. I gave him a carpenter's level as a joke, a long level. And I said, "Are you on the level?" You know, he did not cringe. It did not threaten him. That was how I knew he was honest.

DK: He did not feel offended by your subtle aggression?

LB: Not at all. He was delighted. He hung the carpenter's level on his wall. He was not offended.

DK: All these figures you are showing me have the same desire to be on the level, but they cannot stand alone on the level.

LB: Right.

DK: Why are they?

LB: That was what I was blamed for, for not being able to stand up alone. You are not good, you cannot take care of yourself, much less of others, I was told. The exorcism happened when I could. In the cube I can take care of myself. The cube is on the level.

DK: Who said those things to you?

LB: Well, this is very personal. In a closed society, the first child in the family would inherit the wealth, whatever wealth there was. Sometimes there was nothing to inherit, but the first child was expected to have the values, the good judgment. If there was a house, the first child would have it. The second would have the intangibles, or a little money, or something like that. The third child would join the foreign legion. This was a very cruel world, a really cruel world. You had constantly to prove to everybody that you were worthwhile, that your life was worth something. You had to prove to your parents that you were worth having. Your parents had you only because the Church said they should have you. This is the world I was born into. It was a very cruel world.

DK: What order were you born in? Were you the firstborn?

LB: My sister was the firstborn. She was born out of wedlock, because my parents escaped . . . I mean eloped.

DK: When were you born?

LB: My sister was six years older than I was.

DK: Were you the second born?

LB: Just a minute. I must think. My mother lost a child. I don't know if it was the first one or the second one. Anyway, I was the third girl born. Of course, my father wanted a son. So I was an embarrassment when I was born. It is a fact. My mother, who, as I said, was very rational and a very cool person, my mother said to her husband, to my father: "Don't be disappointed with that little girl. You know, she is your spitting image. Don't you think so?" It was not clear that he thought so, but my father said, "Yes, she is pretty nice." And my mother said, "She is your spitting image, and we are going to name her for you." You see, my mother was trying to sell me to him. And she succeeded to an extent. But my father was still disappointed that he did not have a son. My brother finally came, but my mother had problems. She was quite a strong woman, from the mountains in central France. But soon after my brother came she contracted Spanish influenza; it was all over Europe at the time, in 1918. She recovered, but not totally. She contracted emphysema as well. She remained ill the rest of her life. After that, maybe their sex life was not quite the same, not as it had been. It was then that my father looked at other women, looked. His behavior became very, very childish. Immature. Not childish, but immature. After the war, the First World War, he was desperately trying to find peace, and women were his way of doing so.

DK: How old were you when you came to America?

LB: I was twenty-six.

DK: Why did you come?

LB: I came because I was married.

DK: Why did you like Robert?

LB: The fact is that Robert had some attraction to me because he could put my father in his place. Robert was the only person who ever could. My father had this strange humor. He would tell these stories that he thought were funny. But at the end of the story Robert would say, "Is that supposed to be funny?" My father literally fell apart. He didn't know what had happened. Robert was really effective.

DK: You had three sons with Robert.

LB: Right. The marriage did work. Right. But Robert did not want any children. He used to say, "You have me." He was actually bothered. And then as soon as my sons came, I lost interest, and he picked up—he took care of the children. He was a very tender father. Men are strange. I'm supposed to be the one to be tender, but he was the one. You really don't need children. God knows, the world didn't need more children.

DK: But family is so important to your art. How did having children affect your art? Were you making art during the time you were having children?

LB: Oh, definitely. Because I felt that I did not deserve the children, that they were a privilege. And the art was a privilege also. Art is a privilege, a blessing, a relief. Privilege means that you are a favorite, that what you do is not completely to your credit, not completely due to you, but is a favor conferred upon you. Privilege entitles you when you deserve nothing. Privilege is something you have and others don't. Art was a privilege given to me, and I had to pursue it, even more than the privilege of having children. The whole art mechanism is the result of many privileges, and it was a privilege to be part of it.

DK: So you had to keep making art to prove your privilege, to live up to it?

LB: Absolutely. The privilege was the access to the unconscious. It is a fantastic privilege to have access to the unconscious. I had to be worthy of this privilege, and to exercise it. It was a privilege also to be able to sublimate. You have to learn to sublimate. A lot of people cannot sublimate. They have no access to their unconscious. There is something very special in being able to sublimate your unconscious, and something very painful in the access to it. But there is no escape from it, and no escape from access once it is given to you, once you are favored with it, whether you want it or not.

DK: Is your sublimation of your unconscious— of which you seem very conscious— into art an escape?

LB: Absolutely. To escape you have to have a place to go. You have to have the courage to face risk. You have to have independence. All these things are gifts. They are blessings.

Sublimation is a gift; lots of people cannot sublimate. The life of the artist is basically a denial of sex. I really think my power of sublimation, my power of total recall, is due to the education my parents gave me—the discipline, and also the notion of what you can expect. Today I see people who have expectations—you have a poor kid out of engineering school who thinks to himself, "What does Donald Trump have over me? What does he have that I don't have?" This is absolutely ridiculous.

DK: You had three sons. Your mother had three daughters. Do you have any thoughts about that?

LB: Yes, of course. Everything comes back in time, but in a different way. I want to show you a sculpture that is based on that idea. It is called *Clouds and Caverns.* It is a five-sided world, a little world built up of five facets.

DK: Are you saying that it is your family world, and your parents' family world? You and your husband had three sons; your parents and their three children.

LB: Yes. And a pentagon, like married life, is completely uneventful, or at least my married life was. All my work is about the first pentagon, which is also the title of the work. The first pentagon is my family. But children do not like their parents; the wheel goes the other way around—the parents of course love their children, and the wheel, the momentum, goes in that direction only. Again, it's A who is interested in B, who's interested in C.

DK: Let me change the topic. Let's talk about your current status in the New York art world. You must be aware of the fact that you have become an important symbol for many New York artists. You are an older artist who has finally had serious recognition, after great persistence. Your tenacity, as you call it, has succeeded. And you are a woman artist, which has made your success even more important, even more necessary, to feminists. To many people, you are a beacon of hope in a dark, difficult, male-chauvinist art world.

LB: I am totally unaware of that, of any of it.

DK: Certainly you must be aware of your own struggle for recognition; you must have some feelings about it. You must remember the crowds of women artists who came to the opening of your retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, who celebrated you. You have become a symbol like Georgia O'Keeffe. Your work has been called a "rallying point" for feminist artists. Even if you are not aware of this, how do you respond to the idea of it? Are you a feminist? What do you think of feminism in the art world? How do you respond to the idea of being an important woman artist?

LB: Well, I don't think it is particularly flattering.

DK: This surprises me. You don't find it flattering to become an important symbol of a breakthrough for women artists?

LB: Not at all flattering. Since it took me so long to prove my point, my importance, I can hardly be flattered that I am at last recognized. It doesn't matter to me.

DK: Didn't you feel neglected over the years? Didn't you feel the Museum of Modern Art exhibition was vindication for your long career?

LB: Not at all. No, no, no. I did not feel neglected. I just worked. I am happy about my success only because it has brought me to the attention of the younger generation. Only the younger generation likes me and understands me. I want to speak to the younger generation. My own generation is indifferent, as I am to it.

DK: What about your position as a woman artist? Do you have any thoughts about feminism, particularly in the art world?

The feminist aspects of your work were pointed out long ago. As early as 1947, in response to your second one-person show at Norlyst Gallery, a critic wrote, quite accurately: "Hers is a world of women. Blithely they emerge from chimneys, or, terrified, they watch from beds as curtains fly from a nightmare window. A whole family of females proves their domesticity by having houses for heads."

LB: I don't feel I have suffered more than any other artist. Man is a wolf to man, you know. That is a general truth. It exists in the art world, like everywhere else.

But feminism is important to me. *The Blind Leading the Blind* is a piece that brings me to the feminist cause. Another, which is very close, is *C.O.Y.O.T.E.*, which was the name of the prostitutes' group. All they can do is hold on to each other. Individually, they couldn't even stand on their feet, but holding on to each other, they make it. It's also a comment on failures, on shortcomings, on being disabled. They huddle together, and through their positive attitude toward each other they summon the energy nec-

JANUS FLEURI, 1968 (left).
Bronze; 10⅛" x 12½" x 8⅜".
Private collection.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.

JANUS, 1967 (right).
Bronze; 11" long.
Private collection.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.

essary to stand against the world. They conquer their fear enough to finally express themselves and be what they are.

My feminism expresses itself in an intense interest in what women do. But I'm a complete loner. It doesn't help me to associate with people; it really doesn't help me. What helps me is to realize my own disabilities and to expose them. Another very sad statement is that I truly like only the people who help me. It is a very, very sad statement.

DK: But you don't feel there is any special prejudice against women artists?

LB: No. Many artists have been ignored. This is the problem. To be ignored is not the same as to be discriminated against. I don't think many are discriminated against, but many are certainly ignored. It is part of the situation of man being a wolf to man; it is part of the way man is a wolf to man.

DK: So you don't feel you have been discriminated against because you are a woman?

LB: No, I don't. I feel that I have been completely ignored, and that is the fate of many. But it is nobody's fault. It is the condition of the world.

DK: You don't feel it has anything to do with the art system? Why do you feel you were completely ignored, if not because of the art system?

LB: I was ignored because nobody showed me then. It is part of the indifference of the system, but that is true of every system, which favors only the few. But my work is still there.

DK: I want to persist: why do you think nobody showed you then?

LB: It has to do with success. As the saying goes, nothing succeeds like success. Unless you break into what is called success, you

simply don't exist. People are not going to hurt you, at least not deliberately; they are going to ignore you unless you have success. What success means is not always clear, but everyone knows when you have it. After you have success, you have wonderful friends, and everything is very nice, but it changes nothing.

DK: Are you saying that these people who flock to you because you are famous are not your real friends?

LB: No, of course not. My real friends are the people who helped me to come to success.

DK: When you started making your work, didn't you have success in mind? Didn't you want success? Didn't you want people to approve of your work, which is one definition of success?

LB: No. I did not make my work for everybody, perhaps not for anybody. I made my art as a means of survival. It was a basic necessity for me.

DK: You were really not interested in success?

LB: No, I was not. That is why I have lasted so long. I have ridden out my success because it was not really the purpose of my work to be successful. My work will outlive its success, be more enduring and stronger than success. I was never disappointed when I never had success, which is why I never destroyed any of my work. Many artists destroy their work not because it is bad, but because it is not successful—because other people aren't interested in it, because other people don't attend to it. When the dealers finally began to look me up, finally came to me, all my work was there. It was on the shelves. I will admit that I now take better care of it than I did. I used to just let it sit, untouched, gathering dust. I have a cannibalistic attitude to my work. I would let it sit until I could use it to make new work. It had to reach a certain state of familiarity. Then I could incorporate it in a new work. I had already

worked on it, and this prepared it to be worked on further, once I had assimilated it, digested what I myself had done.

DK: I was speaking to someone the other day, a well-known artist, who remembered that you had an exhibition in the forties, just after the war. He said it was a stunning exhibition, and everyone said so. He said it was in fact the most marvelous exhibition he had seen at the time, and for some time afterward. That was success, but it seemed to have disappeared until relatively recently. Did that success affect you? Did it encourage you?

LB: Yes, it was the show at Norlyst Gallery. It was in 1946 or 1947. Some artists noticed it.

DK: What happened after the show? What was its effect on you?

LB: What happened is that today those objects are very valuable. But then, after the show, they disappeared. They went underground for many years. Nothing changed. I did not change.

DK: When was your next show?

LB: It was in 1948, at Peridot Gallery.

DK: So you had a certain number of shows in the 1940s. You were not entirely neglected. You were visible, even regularly visible. You were known. You cannot say you were neglected. Perhaps that is why the woman's issue does not interest you. What was the critical reception to your shows?

LB: It was mild and it was not discouraging. But the work was not taken seriously; it was neutrally accepted. To really be noticed, you have to put out a fantastic amount of time and energy into entertaining and cultivating other people. Maybe I didn't have that energy. Maybe it was not my motivation to be really noticed,

to be taken so seriously by the art world. Maybe I did not want to be processed by it.

DK: The fact remains, you were regularly shown, and it seems to have had nothing to do with your being a woman. Nobody seems to have identified your art as explicitly woman's art. Did you sell any works?

LB: Alfred Barr bought one work, the *Sleeping Figure.*

DK: What year was that?

LB: That was 1951.

DK: So you have at least one work in the Museum of Modern Art's collection. Did they buy any other work?

LB: Not in the fifties. It was after the Pompidou in Paris bought work. But I now have about seven works in the Museum of Modern Art collections.

DK: Were there sales in the years in between? What happened?

LB: I worked by myself.

DK: You worked resolutely by yourself.

LB: Absolutely. It did not matter if I sold or did not.

DK: But you had exhibitions.

LB: Yes. I had pieces at Betty Parsons's Gallery. I had exhibitions with the Stable Gallery. At the time, Leo Castelli was supporting the Stable Gallery, was paying the rent. I stayed with the Stable Gallery through the time Warhol started, and Robert Indiana, and Twombly. That was the period, the particular period. The direc-

tor, Eleanor Wood, showed me. She was a nice person. I do not quarrel with the galleries.

DK: But all that time, for over twenty years, not a museum purchased your work. You were outside the money system.

LB: It is generally true. I do not recall the details, but it was generally true. But it did not affect the evolution of my work.

DK: And you never thought that it had anything to do with your being a woman artist, even with the advantage of your being French?

LB: No. But I have a strange feeling. I am not sure that I should speak of it here. I think I know why the Museum of Modern Art did not buy my work. The truth is very difficult to speak of. There was a certain style of collecting at the Modern which had to do with . . . I think I should watch my words.

DK: Why? Don't watch your words. You have lived long enough to tell the truth.

LB: Well, it had to do with the trustees, with pleasing the trustees. Alfred Barr was not a trustee; he was an employee, like all the rest. The trustees had real buying power. Alfred Barr had special skills, but he was not part of the Board of Trustees. He was on the other side. The artists who succeeded in selling at the time—Calder, Mark Rothko, Ben Shahn, they were the three—pleased the trustees. You had to entertain the Board, and these Three Stooges knew how to do that, knew how to socially entertain these important people, these trustees. I did not mind that, as a woman, but I could not do it.

Women had to work like slaves in the art world, but a lot of men got to the top through their charm. And it hurt them. To be young and pretty didn't help a woman in the art world, because the social scene, and the buying scene, was in the hands of women —women who had money. They wanted to be entertained—they

were very lazy and sometimes stupid, and they wanted to be entertained by men of a certain age. So these charmers were what was called in the eighteenth century a *pique-assiette* in French, somebody who picks at your plate, who will come entertain for dinner, like a buffoon—it is a kind of profession that interests me very much. And they are picked from among artists because there is a certain prestige to being an artist, but from a professional point of view they are more entertainers than artists. They relate to the storyteller, which was a profession. The storytellers of the Middle Ages were men who went from place to place, telling their tales, and sometimes reached the top because of their acting and verbal abilities.

Because of the profession and personality of my husband, I lived among these people. It was interesting. And because I was French and kind of discreet, they tolerated me—with my accent I was a little strange, I was not competition—and I was cute, I guess. They took me seriously, on a certain level, but they refused to help me professionally. The trustees of the Museum of Modern Art were not interested in a young woman coming from Paris. They were not flattered by her attention. They were not interested in her three children. I was definitely not socially needed then. They wanted male artists, and they wanted male artists who did not say that they were married. They wanted male artists who would come alone and be their charming guests. Rothko could be very charming. It was a court. And the artist buffoons came to the court to entertain, to charm.

Now it has changed, now the younger men are in—older women and younger men.

DK: These artists, then, played the role of courtiers, which you could not play. That is how they sold their works to the museum. It had nothing to do with the quality of the works even though the works may have had quality.

LB: Absolutely. And you will notice that the buffoons were never women.

DK: So being a woman had something to do with your difficulties in selling and getting recognition?

LB: I could write a book about this period. Now, in this respect, I am a little bit of a feminist. But it is subtle. I was still not discriminated against. I would not call it that. I was not openly rejected. I was there, on the scene, but by accident, as it were. I was simply not suitable to these situations, and so in a sense invisible.

DK: Why do you think the Museum of Modern Art finally gave you a retrospective exhibition?

LB: It had to do with one person, that wonderful, wonderful woman, Deborah Wye. She worked very, very hard. She convinced them, she got all the information, she cleared up many of the dates of the works, she convinced them that I was important.

DK: Was this time—if I recall correctly, it was in the early eighties—an appropriate moment for recognition for you? It was certainly an important event in the women's art movement, and in general an important victory for feminism.

LB: I was very pleased by it personally.

DK: How old were you at the time?

LB: I was in my seventies.

DK: All those years in limbo. Was the Modern's exhibition your first major retrospective? Did you have any before, in France?

LB: No. But there is a big retrospective being organized now in Germany, Holland, Switzerland and France for 1989.

DK: Surely it must bother you a little bit, that you had to wait so long for full-fledged recognition, for recognition on that scale, for that matter on any scale. And that your native country was also indifferent.

LB: Well, you have made me say it, with all your pressure, your persistence. I will say it. But it is true that men could be successful at the Museum of Modern Art, had the chance to be successful, but that I was not, that I was not even in the running, because I was a woman.

DK: So women were, after all, shut out, in your perception?

LB: They could not attend the court; they could not be courtiers. Of course, this spared them the fate of becoming buffoons. They did not have the opportunity to make fools of themselves, to be sycophants.

DK: They had the privilege of being invisible.

LB: Right. People didn't know they existed. They were ignored. The male artists were charmers. Rothko was a great charmer. Being the daughter of a charmer, I can spot one. I know when I see one.

DK: Has William Rubin come to your studio?

LB: Many times.

DK: Really?

LB: Yes, he has come many times. But I was not a charmer. John Graham was another charmer. There have always been a number of artist charmers. They always succeed.

DK: You don't like them, do you?

LB: I am indifferent. I am not terribly involved. I feel sorry for them. I am interested in the syndrome of the charmer, which is pervasive in the art world, but I am basically not involved. But the syndrome of the charmer has to be exorcised; it interferes with art making, it corrupts the art world and, perhaps inadvertently, it confuses.

DK: I recall some psychoanalyst once writing that people who are able to maintain their charm in the face of great anxiety are not to be trusted. Are you suggesting the charmers are not to be trusted?

LB: Many of them are good artists, but they are not to be emotionally trusted. And they are all men. They will betray you sooner or later. I could give you a list of famous artists who were charmers, at least a dozen, much of whose success depended on their charm. Brancusi was one, for example. So was Calder.

DK: Do you think these artists made a point of being charming in order to succeed in the art world?

LB: I am not talking about artists. They may call themselves artists, but I am talking about men who made it in the art world. What is important for making it is that they are men and charming, not that they are artists.

DK: Is that what it finally takes to make it in the art world?

LB: I am not sure. But I respect their charm, the presence it gives them. I notice their charm more than their work. Nobody in the art world is really interested in a woman's charm. It is the opposite of the larger world, where women must be charming and beautiful. But that is a way of not taking them seriously. Whereas it makes us take men more seriously, because we do not expect them to be really charming. Who can be seriously interested in a beautiful woman, after the first look? It is absurd. But an artist, let's say like

a Léger, may be a peasant, but if he has charm, all is forgiven; he has a certain social presence, charisma.

DK: I'd like to ask you a few last questions about your art. You have spoken of it as encompassing the whole history of art, but I wonder if you have any special consciousness of modern art. What do you think about modern art in general, if you want to talk about it generally? How do you see yourself in the history of modern art?

LB: I am not interested in art history, in the academies of styles, a succession of fads. Art is not about art. Art is about life, and that sums it up. This remark is made to the whole academy of artists who have attempted to derive the art of the late eighties, to try to relate it to the study of the history of art, which has nothing to do with art. It has to do with appropriation. It has to do with the attempt to prove that you can do better than the next one, and that a famous art history teacher is better than the common artist. If you are a historian, you have to have the dignity of a historian. You don't have to prove that you are better than the artist.

But I can say this. I studied in Paris in the thirties at a time when artists had ateliers that were open to students. My favorite teachers among many were Fernand Léger, Othon Friesz and Paul Colin. Michèle Leiris and André Breton were also part of my education. Also, I taught for a long time and was given many honorary doctorates. Flattering as it is, it has little to do with my ongoing self-expression. Also, I valued my friendships with Corbusier, Duchamp, and Miró, Arp, Brancusi and Franz Kline and Warhol. Today I value my friendships with Robert Mapplethorpe and Gary Indiana.

DK: Which artists do you like?

LB: I like Francis Bacon best, because Francis Bacon has terrific problems, and he knows that he is not going to solve them, but he knows also that he can escape from day to day and stay alive, and he does that because his work gives him a kick. And also, Bacon

is not self-indulgent. Some people will say, "What do you mean by that? He always paints the same picture." That's true—he always paints the same picture, because he is driven. But he is not self-indulgent. Never.

DK: Apart from your history of involvement with modern artists, what does modern art as such mean to you?

LB: What modern art means is that you have to keep finding new ways to express yourself, to express the problems, that there are no settled ways, no fixed approach. This is a painful situation, and modern art is about this painful situation of having no absolutely definite way of expressing yourself. This is why modern art will continue, because this condition remains; it is the modern human condition.

DK: Do you feel modern art has a special relationship to the painful difficulty of self-expression in the modern world?

LB: Definitely. It is about the hurt of not being able to express yourself properly, to express your intimate relations, your unconscious, to trust the world enough to express yourself directly in it. It is about trying to be sane in this situation, of being tentatively and temporarily sane by expressing yourself. All art comes from terrific failures and terrific needs that we have. It is about the difficulty of being a self because one is neglected. Everywhere in the modern world there is neglect, the need to be recognized, which is not satisfied. Art is a way of recognizing oneself, which is why it will always be modern.

Nature Study, 1986.
Marble; 35″ x 61″ x 29″.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Photo: Allan Finkelman.

APPENDIX

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1947 Norlyst Gallery, New York.

1949/50 Peridot Gallery, New York.

1953 Peridot Gallery, New York.
Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago.

1959 White Art Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

1964 Rose Fried Gallery, New York.
Stable Gallery, New York.

1974 112 Greene Street, New York.

1978 Xavier Fourcade Gallery, New York.
Hamilton Gallery, New York.

1979 Xavier Fourcade Gallery, New York: "Louise Bourgeois Sculpture 1941–1953 plus one new piece."
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum.

1980 Xavier Fourcade Gallery, New York: "Louise Bourgeois Sculpture: The Middle Years 1955–1970."
Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York: "The Iconography of Louise Bourgeois."

1981 Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago: "Louise Bourgeois: Femme Maison."

1982 Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

1982/83 Museum of Modern Art, New York: "Louise Bourgeois: Retrospective"; traveled to Contemporary Arts

Museum, Houston; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio.

1984 Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles.
Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco.
Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

1985 Serpentine Gallery, London.
Galerie Maeght Lelong, Zurich.
Galerie Maeght Lelong, Paris: "Louise Bourgeois: Retrospective 1947–1984."

1986 *Eyes,* Doris Freedman Plaza, New York.
Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Texas Gallery, Houston: "Louise Bourgeois: Sculptures & Drawings."

1987 Robert Miller Gallery, New York: "Paintings from the 1940s."
Yares Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona.
The Taft Museum, Cincinnati: "Louise Bourgeois"; three-year traveling tour.
The Art Museum of Florida International University, Miami: "The Louise Bourgeois Exhibition."
Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco: "Sculpture 1947–1955."
Janet Steinberg Gallery, San Francisco: "Paintings & Drawings."

1988 Robert Miller Gallery, New York: "Louise Bourgeois Drawings 1939–1987."
Museum Overholland, Amsterdam: "Drawings 1939–1987."

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1943 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1944 San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco.

1945 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.
Art of This Century Gallery, New York.
Curt Valentin Gallery, New York.

1946 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1948 Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York.

1949 Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1951 Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1953 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1954 Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

1955 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1957 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1958 Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio.

1960 Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas.
Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York.
Claude Bernard Gallery, Paris.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1962 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1963 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1965 Musée Rodin, Paris.

1966 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence.

1968 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1969 La Jeune Sculpture, Paris.
La Biennale di Carrara, Carrara, Italy.

1970 Knoedler Gallery, New York.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1973 Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York.

1974 Sculpture Now, Inc., New York.

1976 New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1977 Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.

1979 Marion Locks Gallery, Philadelphia: "In Small Scale."
Hamilton Gallery, New York: "Gallery Artists."
112 Gallery, New York: "Artists Against Nuclear Power Plants."

1980 Graham Gallery, New York: "Originals."
Helen Serger, La Boetie, Inc., New York: "Pioneering Women Artists 1900–1940."
Art Expo 180, New York Coliseum: "Sculpture at the Coliseum."
Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York: "10 Abstract Sculptures: American and European 1940–1980."
Neuberger Museum of the State University of New York at Purchase: "Hidden Desires."
Frank Marino Gallery, New York: "Heresies Benefit."
Henry Street Settlement, New York: "Exchanges II."
Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, New York: "Perceiving Modern Sculpture: Selections for the Sighted and Non-Sighted."
Xavier Fourcade, New York: "One Major New Work Each."

Xavier Fourcade, New York: "Small-Scale Paintings, Drawings, Sculpture."

1981 Westbeth Gallery, New York: "Voices Expressing What Is."

Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York: "Sculptors and Their Drawings."

Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, New York: "Permanent Collection Installation."

Drawing Center, New York: "Sculptor's Drawings."

Marisa del Re Gallery, New York: "Sculptures and Their Related Drawings."

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: "Decade of Transition: 1940–1950."

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York: "Heresies Benefit Exhibition."

Robert Miller Gallery, New York: "Summer Exhibition 1981."

Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York: "Sculpture."

Stamford Museum, Stamford, Connecticut: "Classical Americans."

Oscarsson-Hood Gallery, New York: "The New Spiritualism: Transcendent Images in Painting and Sculpture"; traveled to Jorgensen Gallery, University of Connecticut, Storrs; Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, Burlington.

Forum Gallery, New York: "Sculpture in Wood and Stone."

Institute for Art and Urban Resources at P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York: "Figuratively Sculpting."

Zabriskie Gallery, New York: "Art for ERA."

Graham Gallery, New York.

1981/82 Sewall Art Gallery, Rice University, Houston: "Variants: Drawings by Contemporary Sculptors"; traveled to Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi; Newcomb Gallery, Tulane University, New Orleans; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

1982 Marisa del Re Gallery, New York: "Selected Works on Paper II."

Montclair State College, College Art Gallery, Upper Montclair, New Jersey: "Visiting Artist Invitational."

Harcus Krakow Gallery, Boston.

Robert Miller Gallery, New York: "Landscapes."

Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco: "Casting: A Survey of Cast Metal Sculpture in the 80's."

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco: "Twenty American Artists: Sculpture 1982."

Roger Litz Gallery, New York: "The Erotic Impulse."

Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans: "The Human Figure."

Sculpture Center, New York: "Houses."

1983 Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles: "Drawing Conclusions: A Survey of American Drawings: 1958–1983."

Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia: "Artists in the Historical Archives of the Women's Interart Center of New York City."

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: "1983 Whitney Museum Biennial Exhibition."

McIntosh/Drysdale Gallery, Houston: "Small Bronze."

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York: "Twentieth-Century Sculpture: Process and Presence."

Wave Hill, Bronx, New York: "Bronzes."

American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York: "Works by Newly Elected Members and Recipients of Honors and Awards."

Renaissance Society, Chicago: "The Sixth Day."

Robert Miller Gallery, New York: "Surreal."

Jersey City Museum, New Jersey: "Selected Drawings."

Bethune Gallery, State University of New York at Buffalo: "Portrait Sculpture: Contemporary Points of View."

Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan: "Drawings."

Fayerweather Gallery, University of Virginia, Charlottesville: "Sensuous Art."

1983/84 International Sculpture Center, New York: "Bronze at Washington Square."

1984 Fayerweather Gallery, University of Virginia, Charlottesville: "Excating Clouds, Dismantling Silence."

Paula Cooper, Inc., New York: "Artists Call, Benefit Exhibition."

Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin: "New American Painting: A Tribute to James and Mari Michener."

Tracey Garet Gallery, New York: "Drawings."

University of South Florida Art Galleries, Tampa: "Humanism: An Undercurrent."

Sidney Janis Gallery, New York: "American Women Artists (Part I: 20th-Century Pioneers)."

Hill Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan: "Sculpture."

Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York: "Forming."

Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey: "Women Artists Series."

White Columns, New York: "Bunnies."

Holly Solomon Gallery, New York: "The Innovative Landscape: New Approaches to an Old Tradition."

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York: "Socialites & Satellites."

Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro: "An Other Vision: Selected Works by Women Artists in the Weatherspoon Collection."

Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York: "Forming."

Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York: "Ecstasy."

Galerie Maeght Lelong, New York: "Sculpture on a Small Scale."

Laforet Museum, Tokyo: "Correspondences: New York Choice 84."

Blum Helman, New York: "Drawings."

1984/85 Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.: "Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974–1984."

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: "The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School."

The Museum of Modern Art, New York: "Primitivism."

1984/86 Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California: "Works in Bronze: A Modern Survey"; traveled to Redding Museum and Art Center, California; Palm Springs Desert Museum, California; Boise Gallery of Art, Idaho; Cheney Cowles Memorial Museum, Spokane, Washington; University Art Gallery, California State University, Stanislaus; University of California, Santa Cruz.

1985 Hill Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan: "Sense and Sensibility."

Philadelphia Art Alliance, Pennsylvania: "Forms in Wood: American Sculpture of the 1950s."

Robert Miller Gallery, New York: "Works on Paper."

Whitney Museum of American Art, Stamford, Connecticut: "Affiliations: Recent Sculpture and Its Antecedents."

Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles: "Actual Size: "An Exhibition of Small Paintings and Sculptures."

Galerie Maeght Lelong, New York: "20th-Century Master Prints."

Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati: "Body and Soul: Aspects of Recent Figurative Sculpture."

University of Pittsburgh Gallery, Pittsburgh: "Sculpture by Women in the Eighties."

Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro: "Art on Paper 1985."

New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture: "Ontogeny: "Sculpture and Painting by 20th-Century American Sculptors."

Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta: "20th-Century Masters."

1985/86 Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale: "An American Renaissance: Painting and Sculpture Since 1940."

Stamford Museum and Nature Center, Stamford, Connecticut: "American Art: American Women."

Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia: "Small Monuments."

Kunsthaus, Zurich: "Traces: Sculpture and Monuments."

1986 Nohra Haime Gallery, New York: "Drawings by Sculptors."

The Mendik Company, New York: "Universal Images—People and Nature in Sculpture."

Galeries Contemporaines, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles: "Individual: A Selected History of Contemporary Art 1945–1986."

Arnold Herstand Gallery, New York: "American Sculpture—A Selection."

Pictogram Gallery, New York: "Odd and Intense."

Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City.

Cheney Cowles Memorial Museum, Spokane, Washington: "Works in Bronze: A Modern Survey."

Robert Miller Gallery, New York: "Summer Group Show."

Sierra Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, Nevada: "Works in Bronze—A Modern Survey."

Dolan/Maxwell Gallery, Philadelphia: "Avery, Bourgeois, Hayter: Atelier 17 in 1947."

Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia: "Body Electric: Four Currents."

Freedman Gallery, Reading, Pennsylvania: "The Freedman Gallery: The First Decade."

1986/87 Carlo Lamagna Gallery, New York: "Traps."
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York: "Elders of the Tribe."
Galerie Maeght Lelong, Zurich: "The Draughtman's Eye."

1987 Art Advisory Service Exhibition, A Project of the Associate Council, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Loaned to General Electric Company: "Black and White."
Whitney Biennial, New York, Spring 1987.
Ein Ausstellungsprojekt Zeitgenössischer Kunst in der Psychiatrischen Klinik der Universität Mainz (Germany): "Von Chaos und Ordnung der Seele."
Kunstmuseum Lucerne: "L'Etat des Choses I."
Kent Fine Art, New York: "Assemblage."
Galerie Maeght Lelong, New York: "Group Show."
Blum Helman, New York: "Sculptors' Drawings."
Paris–New York–Kent Fine Art, Kent, Connecticut: "22 Artists: The Friends of Louise Tolliver Deutschman."
CIAC Montreal International Centre of Contemporary Art, Montreal: "The 100 Days of Contemporary Art of Montreal 1987: Stations."
M-13 Gallery, New York: "Lust One of the Seven Deadlies."
Siegeltuch Gallery, New York: "Black."
Zabriskie Gallery, New York: "Sculpture from Surrealism."
Iannetti-Lanzone Gallery, San Francisco: "After Pollock: Three Decades of Diversity."
Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne: "La Femme et le Surrealisme."
Grossman Gallery, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: "Undercurrents: Rituals and Translations."
Edith C. Blum Art Institute, The Bard College Center, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York: "Process and Product: The Making of a Contemporary Masterwork."
Kemper Gallery, Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri: "Drawn Out: An Exhibition of Drawings by Contemporary Artists."

Sander Gallery, New York: "Boundaries: Works on Paper."
George Dalsheimer Gallery, Baltimore: "Contemporary Sculpture."
Galerie Maeght Lelong, New York: "Sculpture."
Pat Hearn Gallery, New York: "Sculpture."
Harcus Gallery, Boston: "In Defense of Sacred Lands."

1988 Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York: "Sculptors' Drawings: 1883–1965."
New York Studio School, New York: "The New Sculptor Group—A Look Back: 1957–1962."
Greenville County Museum of Art, North Carolina: "Just Like a Woman."
Whitney Museum of Fairfield County, Connecticut: "Enduring Creativity."
Museum of Modern Art, New York: "Committed to Print."
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: "Vital Signs."
The Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York: "The Politics of Gender."

COLLECTIONS

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.
Australian National Gallery, Canberra.
Denver Art Museum, Denver.
Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit.
Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris.
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
Museum of Modern Art, New York.
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans.
New York University, New York.
Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine.
The Rhode Island School of Design, Providence.
Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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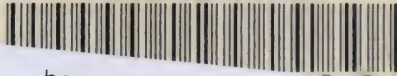

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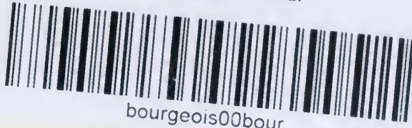

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