

Louise Bourgeois 1997

(On Sunday Afternoons)

The following conversation took place at the home of Louise Bourgeois in Chelsea over a period of three weeks, in the summer of 1997: July 20, July 27, and August 10. We sat at a little table in a library at the end of a long corridor. The room opened into a garden.

Bill Beckley

LB Beauty? It seems to me that beauty is an example of what the philosopher's call reification, to regard an abstraction as a thing. Beauty is a series of experiences. It is not a noun. People have experiences. If they feel an intense aesthetic pleasure, they take that experience and project it into the object. They experience the idea of beauty, but beauty in and of itself, does not exist. To put it another way, experiences are sorts of pleasures that involve verbs. The fallacy occurs in putting the experience, "I like X" and referring to 'X' as beauty. So beauty is a fallacy. This is not meant to be hostile, you understand. If you agree that beauty is not a noun, then, adding to beauty an adjective like "uncontrollable" is also not correct. This is, of course, thinking in terms of language.

But I have another definition of beauty. For me, beauty is to learn, to understand, to solve a problem. That is to say it is to transform chaos into harmony. May I also say that beauty is a reward of effort. That is a moral view. The process is similar to what T.S. Eliot said of Wordsworth, "Wordsworth found the sermons you had planted there, finding pleasure in things we call beautiful. But to insist that they contain an objective quality? In fact, beauty is only a mystified expression of our own emotion."

BB That's very well said.

LB You don't have to thank me because it was Eliot who said it. But the thanks is justified, in any case.

I have here a demonstration, a visual, tangible demonstration of what I meant when I said beauty is learning, understanding, solving problems, and a reward of effort. So I am going to show it. Obviously we have no visual record, so I will have to....

The phone rings. (Only her voice is audible.)

LB Hello. So we had a telephone appointment. Thank you for being on time....So beauty is what stirs the heart? Could you be a little more explicit and give examples? Examples please....A beautiful woman, a beautiful building, a beautiful cloud....But this is only visual, you might say that I am much more moved by music....So, can you say a little bit more? That is, what does it have to do with sensual pleasures?....They are not pleasures of the senses, they are pleasures of the soul....All right then, a definition of soul will be needed....Well, you are putting the woman on the clouds--a beautiful idea, but this is a different theory....It is butterflies in the stomach?....Intellectual satisfaction? Intellectual satisfaction may be satisfying, but it is not beautiful. I have to say that if I see a beautiful woman on the street, it doesn't mean that there is much effort on my part....So you convinced me, but to convince somebody is not necessarily beautiful. However, the expenditure of your efforts was successful.

Click.

BB Who was that?

LB His name is Alain.

BB If you want I can take a photo of the letters.

LB. That would be wonderful. They have to be seen without anything else. This an O this an U this is an I this is an S this is an E. It says, "Louise." So there is a great deal of meaning in this group of letters. It is a recreation of the past. It has a symbolic value. So you see that it says Louise, but it first spelled, in fact, Louis. It was something that was important in my childhood, because these letters formed the name of my father, and

they were put on the door--Louis Bourgeois. This is not Louise it is Louis. And every time you wanted to talk to my father, you would see this on the door.

BB Do you remember the address of this door?

LB Yes, 174, Boulevard St. Germain which is next to the Les Deux Magots and the Café de Fleur, right there. This a reconstructed past. So you see that when they are all together, they mean something, and they have to find their own place. For me it shows that beauty is an intellectual thing but it is very visual. So you cannot say that all this mixed is only a mess. It has the possibility of meaning.

Proust said on Sunday mornings, when eating a Madeleine, memories came back to him. It was the smell, the sweet smell and the taste of the madeleine, “the little scallop-shell of pastry, so sensual under its severe, religious folds,” that made them come back. But, of course, music is terribly important also. In hearing, there is also the sense of touching, in the sense that the piano player touches the keys. Hearing has the most power. The king of Spain, who was a little insane, could only be brought to reason by listening to the very high voice of a certain male singer who was a castrato. Beauty of the ear kept him sane, well, perhaps really not sane, but at least not dangerous.

But, for me it is the visual that counts most. In the visual you have the symmetrical and the asymmetrical, very important. Color comes later. I make a drawing and then I discover what I meant in the drawing. It is the opposite of imitation. You don't have a conscious intent when you start out. No, it is totally unconscious. I am a sculptor. You have a certain kind of artist -- blind sculptors, because touch is so important.

BB At the Brooklyn museum you did some very large boxes...

LB They were reconstruction's of the past, of past experience. And we have had here yesterday a shooting of a film with some actors replaying some scenes of my infancy and my relationship with my father, through which terms I learned so much. The recollection was so vivid that, well, you were not here very long, no just one scene. This is what I mean by the fact that I learned so much. By reconstructing some things, I worked with memories. Memories are not a sense. Memory it is not one of the five senses. Memory includes all of them. It is a reconstruction of a whole life, and I was very

hostile, absolutely hostile and I was convinced that--they brought in some professional actors and the physical resemblance of the actors...

BB You were born in France, but you have lived a long time in the United States. Here, we can be puritanical. What is the difference between the aesthetics of the two countries?

LB I'll tell you a story about my mother. When I was a little girl, growing up in France, my mother worked sewing tapestries. Some of the tapestries were exported to America. The only problem was that many of the images on the tapestries were of naked people. My mother's job was to cut out the, what do you call it? Yes, the genitals of the men and women and replace these parts with pictures of flowers so they could be sold to the Americans. My mother saved all the pictures of the genitals over the years, and one day she sewed them together as a quilt and then she gave the quilt to me. That's the difference between French and American aesthetics.

Here the beautiful changes for me from day to day, when I am my rational self, and when I am divided between the rational and the emotional. As my brain experiences the duality of subjective and objective, my sense of beauty swings between the two. I refuse to choose. I am a woman of emotion who still pines for a woman of rationality. I am torn between the two, and I have learned to accept them both. To seduce is a harmonious merger of the two and it is the greatest art of all. I am a total rational person, but prone to ecstasy, like religious ecstasy. I forgive people their religious ecstasy, but I feel sorry for them. Are you a religious person?

BB In a quiet way. We had our son baptized--on the Epiphany--It started to snow, the greatest snowstorm ever in New York. The skies opened. My uncle Bob, a retired Air Force Chaplain, had flown in from Alabama for the service. He was stranded at my house for three days. We sent him off in a cab at three in the morning. Newark airport was deserted at that time of night, there were only three men, three Episcopal Bishops who had just returned from Bethlehem. I became more religious after that, or at least, superstitious.

LB We are not talking about religion.

BB There is the darker side of life where perversity plays a part. Is there a connection between perversity and beauty?

LB No, no, this is not my idea, Beauty is a positive thing.

BB The Surrealists were interested in perversity, weren't they?

LB I cannot talk about surrealism, because it is not my period. I cannot spend my time talking about people who have nothing to do with me. If I talk about Andre Breton and the surrealists that I knew personally, very well since they were in New York, I would not talk about them because I do not have much positive to say.

BB There is quote by Breton, "Beauty will be convulsive, or won't be."

LB I consider this remark a pun, or in any case, not serious.

BB You have used sexual metaphor in you work, haven't you? You have used imagery that was very phallic. I certainly mean this in a positive sense, though there has been much suspicion of the phallic as of late. You claimed it as *your* territory, in your sculpture as well as that beautiful portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe where your were holding a hairy black phallus.

LB This is an unconscious part of me. I don't know it well, but my unconscious is pretty wild. And that is why at a conscious level I am so much in love with rationality. That is the economics.

BB I was criticized for photographing faucets next to a drain becauseof their phallic nature. Maybe it's easier at the moment for a woman to use phallic imagery than for a man to use it.

LB That I know, but I decline to answer this on the basis of my lack of knowledge. Since I am a woman, I am not going to answer a question about how men feel. I cannot answer that. I am not qualified. This is not my cup of tea. I have enough time being a woman without being something else on top of it .

BB On the cover of your new book of drawings there is something very feminine, a rainbow colored oval.

LB Are you talking about what the metaphor of the oval is? I never had a chance to say that. An oval means allot of things, very important to me. The circle is a one centered

thing, but the oval is my favorite image because it involves two centers. An oval is two. An oval from the beginning is a metaphor for a twosome. Two centers, two entities.

BB We met briefly in 1974. I was working at 112 Greene St. I installed some silent ping-pong tables. You did this incredible piece called “The Destruction of the Father.”

LB Yes, that’s right. It upsets people. Because its aggressive. If you look at that piece you see that the children are devouring the father. That what that means, we are not going to talk about that, but usually, in antiquity, it is the father that devours the children. But I reversed it and it is a revenge. This time it is the other way around. It is the children who are devouring the father. I like my father, but I still like that piece very much.

BB Some people might have seen it in the context of minimalism which was very cool--masculine. “The Destruction of the Father” was really crazy, a rebellion--Dionysian.

LB But of course, any work of art worth its soul is subject to many interpretations. It is important if it arouses people in very different ways. This is the richness of interpretation. I don’t mind.

BB At that point in the early seventies, the question of making something beautiful really didn’t come up very much. Beauty was the bi-product of an activity, the result of a tension between the classical and the present. I do remember Gordon Matta’s tray of mold, and Raffael Ferrer’s piles of leaves, very beautiful.

LB Yes, Gordon was the center of that group, wasn’t he?

What did you think of Fluxus?

BB. I liked Fluxus.

LB Did you know them?

BB I didn’t know them personally.

LB They say that Fluxus had something to do with Surrealism.

BB Well I was afraid to mention it, after your response to Surrealism.

LB I knew the Fluxus here, personally.

BB They certainly were anti-visual.

LB Yes, certainly. They were smart alecks. Absolutely ridiculous. Smart alecks. You are not a smart aleck. You know my English is not very good.

BB Fluxus was before my time. The first person I met in New York was Vito Acconci .

LB Yes, he is very ambitious, he will do anything to be interesting. He is something quite special.

BB What would a feminist have to say about beauty?

LB First I must ask *you* some questions. What do you mean? Do you mean passive or active beauty? There is a difference between the two-- being looked at because you are beautiful is one thing, but as an artist, you must create beauty. In relation to viewing as opposed to creating, I experience beauty in an oscillating manner. First, I see beauty in the intellectual operations of the mind--perfection in logic, learning, understanding and convincing. Second, the pleasure principle can produce beauty through the body, the heart and the five senses. For example, the flirtacious gaze or the touching of the skin can generate an almost electric current. There is the smell of roses. In music or in someone's voice an echoe may re-enact an emotion of the distant past. These rare memories may also be beauty. Fear is a passive state. and the goal is to be active and to take control, to be alive here and today. The move is from the passive to the active, for if the past is not negated in the present, you do not live. Since the fears of the past are connected with functions of the body, they re-appear through the body. For me, the sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.

BB Perhaps we have been for so long, under the mistaken perception that if you *are* beautiful it is difficult to *make* it.

LB Sure, that's a problem. Just look at Cyrano de Bergerac. He was ugly as sin. But he had the talent to write all those beautiful love letters. Ugly as sin-- that's probably a very puritanical concept too. But I will give you another example: Beauty is the ability, through your talent, to please the man you love. But it depends on a very important condition. That condition is that the talent exists. I had a friend, I can't remember his name at the moment, but it will come to me. He said he took an art class with 30 other students. All his life he had wanted to make a difference. After awhile he realized that some of the students in the class were much better than he was. When he came to this conclusion, he decided to take another path. He became an art dealer. And here is

another example, the “Desire de Plaire,” the desire to please. And what about your child?

He wants to please you to show that he loves you. If he knows you like the color blue, he will put the color blue all over his drawings. Art comes from the inability to seduce. I am unable to make myself loved. I am still motivated by the attraction of “the other” which is a mysterious beauty. Seduction is a form of convincing. I am an indefatigable seducer. Beauty is the pursuit of “the other.”

BB I guess part of the confusion sometime is that beauty can describe both art and people. Some people don’t want to be thought of as objects of art.

LB Yes, and you can have a beautiful dog too.

BB What about the influence of so-called “Primitive art” in your work. Is there an affinity?

LB What are you talking about? You changed the subject, I thought we were talking about beauty, not the primitive. The primitive is irrelevant to our discussion. In any case, there is no influence. To call something ‘primitive’ has moral implications. “I am civilized, you are primitive.” As I said, I am not concerned with the moral, I am concerned only with the visual. What would it mean to have a primitive smell, to have smells that you thought were primitive? Do we have musicians that we call primitive? Do we have music that is primitive? If it is strange to have ‘primitive’ sounds and smells why use the word for art? In any case, if you have an artist who likes the primitive it doesn’t mean he has to *be* primitive.”

BB I’m sorry, maybe we should get off the subject. I guess I was thinking about it because of the debate in the book between McEvelley, Rubin, Varnedoe. You like Bill Rubin don’t you?

LB Of course I like him, he gave me a show at the Museum of Modern Art, didn’t he?”

BB You were also in the Primitive show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984 too, weren’t you?

LB Yes.

BB Keats wrote of Beauty and Truth. Thomas Mann linked beauty with death. With what do you associate beauty?

LB Well, first it is much bigger than that. It goes back to Shakespeare doesn't it, even further? You should get the quotes from Shakespeare. What about Romeo and Juliet, and all the others?

LB Do you ever associate sex with death?

LB Never. I associate *that* [sex and death] with repression and guilt. Beauty is associated with love, isn't it? Maybe it's religious. Christ died because of his love. Perhaps it is a religious tragedy.

BB My friend David Shapiro thinks that you are the greatest living artist. The first time I had dinner with my wife Laurie, who is a sculptor, she brought along the catalogue from your show at the Museum of Modern Art. My students at the School of Visual Arts regard you as goddess, in a way that we regarded Andy Warhol as a god. Young people look up to you. What would you say to them about the possibilities for art?

LB What age?

BB 17 18 19 20

LB That young? They have should show that they can make a living without the burden of selling their work. That they can put their work away, the way that I put my sculptures away in Long Island. It took 20 years to show this work. I would say that they have to be ready to wait twenty years without selling their work. They need to have a way of making a living. Indispensable. I would say to the girls, go to school, and insure yourself a modest, but steady living. Its very difficult to live in New York, but people like to stay here. I taught at SVA in the print department in 1973. Things were different then, I traded copper etching plates for pot. SVA means allot to me. I mean that.

BB When did you come here from France?

LB In 1939.

LB Do you want to go back?

LB I am not interested in going back. I am not interested in traveling. I am only interested in remembering.

BB I liked the part about the fallacy and the phallic.

LB Oh yes, that's very good. They *are* similar in many ways. And the madeleine. Don't forget the madeleine.