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Louise Bourgeois, Cell II (detail), 1991

# Structures of Existence

Phyllida Barlow and Julienne Lorz, Haus der Kunst,
Munich, Germany, 2015

Early in her career Bourgeois pioneered the use of environmental installation for her work. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s she incorporated elements of performance and theatre into her sculpture. These facets of her practice come into dialogue with each other most notably in a series of architectural installations – the 'Cells'. Bourgeois made the first 'Cell' in 1986, and they continued to occupy her for almost two decades subsequently. The 'Cells' are constructed of sculptural forms and large objects that work to create enclosures, some more open than others, but always inviting the viewer to look, to spy, on the theatrical scenes within. The interior spaces – everyday objects such as fabric and furniture, alongside individual sculptures – are emotionally charged and provocative. The form and materiality of the 'Cell' is equally expressive as the psychoanalytical narrative found in the symbolic items within.

Earlier this year Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, showcased the largest presentation of the 'Cells' series to date, the first presentation of a major international tour.

Phyllida Barlow's sculptural practice is grounded in an anti-monumental tradition and she too is concerned with the relationship between objects and the space that surrounds them. She focuses on the physical experience of handling materials, transforming them through layering, accumulation and juxtaposition. Barlow's relationship with Bourgeois's work is centred on Bourgeois's sculptural language – her sensitive use of fundamental forms to create affecting atmosphere.

In the following feature, Barlow and Haus der Kunst Curator, Julienne Lorz, discuss this dynamic as they guide us through key works in the exhibition.

Louise Bourgeois, Passage Dangereux, 1997
Installation view, 'Louise Bourgeois. Structures of Existence: The Cells', Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 2015


Louise Bourgeois, Red Room (Parents), 1994
Installation view, 'Louise Bourgeois. Structures of Existence: The Cells', Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 2015

**Julienne Lorz:** So the first piece we are going to talk about is 'Articulated Lair' (1986). It's the first work that Louise Bourgeois considered a 'Cell'. From 1980, aged nearly 70, she starts to work from a really big, old, sewing factory. Before that she had been working in her little brownstone house, about five metres wide at the most – so very small scale. Suddenly she has this huge amount of space in the studio and increasingly starts to work in a larger scale.

**Phyllida Barlow:** I thought of 'Articulated Lair' in sculptural terms, which is really my relationship with Louise Bourgeois. I know there is a psychoanalytic narrative about Bourgeois's work, which I think is fascinating in itself, but I'm interested in the sculptural language – how form and materiality are as expressive as the verbal language of a psychoanalytic narrative that can be placed all over that.

So I saw the 'Cell' as a kind of plinth, a way of being able to put together disparate forms to create a very specific mood or atmosphere. I wonder what is that mood, what is that atmosphere that we are so repelled by but also hugely attracted to? She is playing with our emotional polarities, and I feel that she does that through a very traditional language of form: the 'Cells'' uprightness – a statement to both keep us out and lure us in. They also make us need to go round them, which is in itself the language that sculpture seems to own, over, for example, painting or wall works. The fact is, the sculptural form physically blocks our way and takes the space that we might want to be in, forcing us to do a kind of negotiation – a kind of choreographic dance around the work whether we like it or not. I think Louise Bourgeois is extremely clever and very knowing in how she psychologically plays with us, through her formal language.

It makes you look in a certain way. You have to look in all directions. What I find so compelling about these works is the gaps in between the articulated walls themselves: you become a voyeur, a spy to the scene within. Immediately, I think our emotions are aroused – what is this inside space? Why am I looking at it? Am I just looking at it or am I watching it? I was asking Julienne how many words there are in German for the act of seeing? In the English language we have many – observing, regarding, scrutinising...

**JL:** Watching, peering, spying.

**PB:** I think there are about 12 words for the act of looking and we can choose which one we are doing when we encounter her work because the work forces you to take on one of those roles, one of those verbs associated with the act of looking. [...] We were talking earlier about Louise Bourgeois as 'the great inventor', an inventor with a very limited vocabulary. If we look at these fabulous hanging shapes, these pendulous forms, and you turn them round the other way in your head, they are not unlike the Personages she created in the 1940s and 1950s. She sustains the language of

these phallic forms right through her creative life. That, to me, is possibly one of the greatest things about her work. It is not about an endless experimentation with form in the sense of having to bang her head against a wall, and forever having to think of new shapes and forms. She is actually using quite a limited range but in an endlessly inventive way. The suspended form is something she ascribed to a sense of ambivalence and ambiguity. If things are hanging, they don't know quite where they are in the world. For me, the composition of these clusters of hanging pendulous objects, against the rigidity of the articulated walls, is what generates the work's mood of threat and imminence.

**JL:** There are very opaque 'Cells', 'Cells' with doors, and then, with her use of wire mesh, you start to see a progression. The 'Cells' become gradually more open, more translucent. However, on the whole, Louise Bourgeois's oeuvre is not a straightforward trajectory, it is rather cyclical in the way that she works.

So we are now entering a space with the only two 'Cells' that belong together. They are the red rooms. 'Red Room (Child)' and 'Red Room (Parents)', both from 1994.

**PB:** When I first saw these works in 1995, I was struck by the incredible relationship with a filmic language – with the idea of capturing a moment. This idea of film having a language that can become sculptural is extraordinary. As with 'Articulated Lair', the gaps between the doors offer a very coherent, physical presence that the viewer can actually participate in: peering through these gaps, we are being given snap shots of the work and then when we eventually find the opening, we discover a very staged vignette of the work in its entirety.

In some ways maybe that sculptural language goes from being sculptural to becoming pictorial. Like a magical trick; you go from one kind of physical state to another. I think that's something that I feel happened to Louise Bourgeois as she grew older and was perhaps no longer in absolute control of physically making the work. It went from the intimacy of her handling plaster and wax and stone herself, to perhaps working collaboratively. So from having made work in a very sentient way, in a particularly physical way, as we see in the early works, these become visionary works – they become a heightened visual, almost hallucinogenic experience that somehow records her memories. They no longer have that traditional sculptural language of working directly with a material like plaster or clay or wax, materials that are going to, as she put it, do their own thing. We see an imaginative shift in these works. [...]

Louise Bourgeois, In & Out, 1995. Installation view, 'Louise Bourgeois. Structures of Existence: The Cells', Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 2015

I think there is also a shared language between these 'Cells', which is that of fragmentation, of how you deal with broken thoughts, of broken, fragmented, dreamlike states or thinking.

**JL:** And memories as well [...] Bourgeois speaks about how these 'Cells' are about pain, about the past she has lived, or is reliving through the 'Cells' – about her childhood. As if these 'Cells' were little nutshells, a way of dealing with a huge trauma she can only bear in little parts.

**PB:** Does the work speak enough for itself so that we don't have to pry into that biography of hers? How much do we need the phenomenal Louise Bourgeois biography? Personally, I don't want it. I want to find, or make this language work for me. I don't want the overlay of narratives that have been enhanced by psychoanalytic theory to bully me, in a way, to seeing this as purely symbolic, as a collection of symbols. I think they are more than that. I think they are rooted in compulsive, obsessive human behaviour, but translated into huge emotional actions of making which becomes her work. [...]

**JL:** Let's move onto 'Passage Dangereux' (1997). This is the biggest 'Cell', it's also one of the early ones that are very transparent. For me it is probably the most filmic, because you are really meant to journey through. It's a journey through different scenarios, different scenes.

**PB:** I'm curious – you mention that she moved from using very solid walls to mesh walls. Louise Bourgeois in her drawings and in her sculpture had a real affinity with grids. Mesh is a gridded material. She saw grids as a means for organising chaos. I think she said, 'with a grid everything has its place'. I think there's a quest with Louise Bourgeois to give order to disparateness.

**JL:** The general trajectory of this piece, is the idea of sexual awakening – at the beginning the breast, birth, elements that belong to her father, cuffs, and other elements appear such as perfume, Shalimar (that turns up repeatedly in the 'Cells'). And then you have bones, which might suggest death and a chair that looks like an electric chair – this idea of punishment. Then there is a little child's swing in front of a tapestry. You could explain every little element. You could ask, 'why the hanging chairs?' – and then talk about Louise's father who collected chairs and hung them from the ceiling in the attic. They are separate elements that create a larger whole. [...]

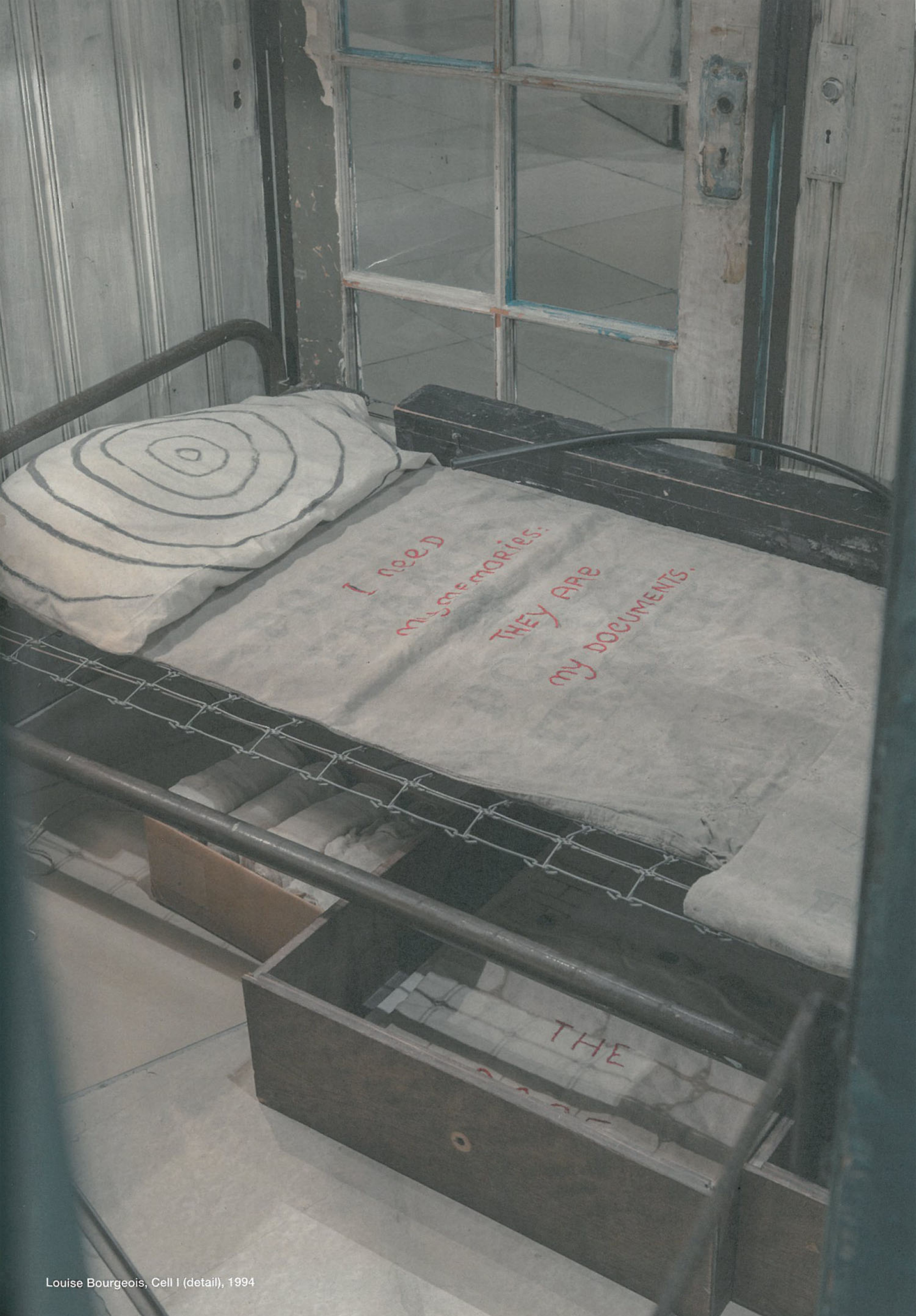
**PB:** The way that you can half enter the work is provocative: again she is frustrating us in someway, about how we experience this work. The movement in this work is us. We're the moving component and everything else is frozen in time. I think this element of time in her work is crucial. What is the syntax of her work? Is it always in the past? Are we looking at the work as though it has passed, it has happened, or is it happening now, or is it about to happen? Where do we place the grammar of the work? Past, present or future? [...]

**JL:** This is exactly where the mirrors in her works are so important: they immediately place you in the present. [...] Let's move onto 'Spider' (1997). One of the few 'Cells' where Louise is going beyond the outer confines of the 'Cell'.

**PB:** The spiralling form on top of 'Spider' – which to me is a classic sculptural form that goes back thousands of years – the twisted shape which Louise Bourgeois, in her early time as a sculptor, played around with a lot – the spiral woman and the spiral wooden pieces of the 1940s and 1950s. It is a way of being able to see two sides of an object at the same time but here she has appropriated the spiral forms of 'Lair' (1963) and relocated it as the body of the 'Spider' [...]

In 'Spider' (1997), the spider is used as a spacial control isn't it? It launches itself over us to make us behave in a certain way. But with 'In and Out', a version of 'Avenza' is the monster within – the monster contained – but which has erupted and escaped. It produces an antithesis to the container state of the objects within the 'Cells'. It's like a feral creature that is the nightmare that has emerged from within the highly controlled environment. It is a luscious, bulbous, overflowing, half-man, half-woman creature, combining every sort of erotic aspect of the human body. It's prowling, almost waiting on the outside of this very, very tight world within. [...]

In an absurd way I wonder whether this heaving pink form is us? Is this the protagonist that spies and peeps and peers and watches into these private worlds?




Louise Bourgeois, Cell I (detail), 1994