

## **Louise Bourgeois' Technologies of the Self**

Katrina Mitcheson

*University of the West of England*

### **Abstract**

In this article, I demonstrate how Louise Bourgeois used her artworks not only to better understand herself but also to cultivate a self capable of taking control of and reshaping the material of her past. Exploring her artworks in the context of Michel Foucault's understanding of technologies of the self, I both contribute to the appreciation of Bourgeois' work and show how visual artworks can be used to understand, cultivate, and transform aspects of the self. Foucault's understanding of our subjectivity, as formed and deployed by power tactics, suggests the need for the formation of new subjectivities as a tactic of resistance. While his view of subjectivity as contingently created allows for the possibility that it could be different, his understanding of the conditions of its creation in terms of power tactics seems to constrain the possibilities for alternative subjectivities. I argue that artworks can help us understand the contingency of our subjectivity and illustrate how something new can be created out of existing conditions, in ways that may disrupt those very conditions. Further, in addition to bringing us to an awareness of the possibility of creating new subjectivities, artworks can directly contribute to this process for both artists and audience members. Turning to Foucault's own understanding of Stoic writing practices as a means of knowing and controlling the self, I use Bourgeois' work to illustrate how artworks can operate as technologies of the self, which work directly on the self, extending Foucault's understanding of the role of writing to consider the particular contribution that visual artworks can make. I explore how the visual form, sculptural medium, and materials of Louise Bourgeois' works contribute to their operation as technologies of the self which can allow one to relate to oneself differently.

**KEYWORDS:** Louise Bourgeois, technologies of the self, Foucault, subjectivity, sculpture

## **Introduction**

Writing privately of her “strong impulse to ‘make a figure usual Size 5 ½ feet,’” Louise Bourgeois suggests: “This figure I feel pushed to make is going to dissolve or appease my anxiety.”<sup>1</sup> Bourgeois used her artworks to explore and work through her past, and thereby explore and work through her anxiety. She did more, however, than excavate a self that was shaped by her childhood relationships. She gradually created a self that was capable of taking control of and reshaping the material of her own past. Her artworks allowed her not only to reveal and understand, but also to cultivate and transform aspects of herself.

Given Bourgeois’ artistic creations contributed to a project of shaping herself that she was explicitly engaged in, they are particularly well suited to explore how visual artworks can function as technologies of the self. My aim is not to suggest that Bourgeois’ work can be reduced to technologies of the self or should only be approached in this way, though I think this perspective does draw out important aspects of certain pieces. Rather, my aim is to use her work to exemplify visual art as a technology of the self, arguing that visual artworks can operate as such and do so in a unique way. If, as Michel Foucault argues, our subjectivity, or sense of ourselves as actors with certain possibilities open to us, is not given but formed gradually in historically contingent conditions, then it is open to change. However, Foucault’s understanding of subjectivity as formed in the context of power strategies, not only demonstrates the importance of change but also the constraints it is subject to. We face the problem of how, if our subjectivity is formed by and deployed in power tactics, according to aims that we have not chosen, we can nonetheless create new subjectivities, which can serve to resist the hierarchy these tactics express.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I argue, using the example of Bourgeois' work, that artworks can both help us understand this problematic and can operate as technologies of the self; offering, for both the artist and the audience, a means of working on the self and developing and asserting new subjectivities.<sup>3</sup> My aim is not to suggest that Bourgeois' work can be reduced to technologies of the self or should only be approached in this way, though I think this perspective does draw out important aspects of certain pieces. Rather, my aim is to use her work to exemplify visual art as a technology of the self, arguing that visual artworks can operate as such and do so in a unique way.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the example of literature, the role of artworks as technologies of the self has not been much explored.<sup>5</sup> I aim to show how the particular operations of Bourgeois' artworks as technologies of the self involve their visual and medium-specific.

Before exploring in turn how artworks can serve as models for self-creation and how they can go beyond this to directly contribute to the process of self-creation, I want first to set out in more detail the problem of subjectivity in the context of Foucault's understanding of power relations.

### **The Problem of Subjectivity**

Power, as it is elaborated in the work of Foucault, is not a thing that exists apart from its exercise. It is a question of influencing the conduct of others and is thus inherently relational. The modes of action that influence the actions of others can be termed power strategies.<sup>6</sup> It is not a question of a dominant individual or group of individuals acting on a passive subject; the dominated subject is also actively involved in power strategies. There is no fixed and single locus of dominant power, though an order that results from power strategies may be more or less flexible, and may strategically maintain patterns of dominance.<sup>7</sup> Foucault suggests that the subject is constituted by power strategies.

For Foucault, the contemporary human subject is the disciplined subject, formed in the context of the strategies of government. Techniques of government concern themselves with an entire population made up of individuals who need to be known in their specificity. This is a form of power that is both individualizing and totalizing.<sup>8</sup> An example of a technique that achieves this simultaneous individualization and totalization, which also represents this form of power, is Bentham's Panopticon, which Foucault outlines in *Discipline and Punish*. The Panopticon's architectural design for an institution such as a prison, separates individuals into individual cells in such a way that they can be seen from a central tower but cannot tell when they are being watched.<sup>9</sup> This experience of being watched creates reflective interiority. The subject examines themselves and is aware of, and takes responsibility for, their own behaviour. Thus a disciplined subject is constituted through the strategic use of a technology of power.

Foucault subsequently suggests that in this period of his work there was an overemphasis on dominance. Discipline, he comes to stress, is only one aspect of government; there are other technologies that facilitate government including other means of constituting the subject and developing their sense of self.<sup>10</sup> This is apparent in the development of monastic confession in Christianity into the demand for "the permanent verbalization and discovery of the most imperceptible movements of our self."<sup>11</sup> This demand is incorporated into medicine and the human sciences. In the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues against the claim that sexual expression has been repressed by pointing to a discursive explosion in which we are required to talk about sex, and confess our most intimate desires.<sup>12</sup> Works of literature serve as an example of this practice of sexual confession.<sup>13</sup> This requirement to speak about sex operated to produce a subject of desire, with a sense of their own sexual identity, thus with a particular subjectivity. The connection of "the ancient injunction of confession to clinical listening methods" is what "enables something called 'sexuality' to embody the truth of sex and its pleasures."<sup>14</sup> The subject of desire plays a particular role in the strategic network of state government, submitting to questioning and

examination to yield up the necessary data for population management. Thus, our sense of ourselves as a subject is constituted through various technologies of discipline and government, as part of a network of power strategies in which we play an active role.

How then might the subject resist domination within the network of strategies that produced it? Resistance, Foucault suggests, occurs against “a form of power” as opposed to a particular dominant group. We are, he claims faced with “a form of power which makes individuals subjects,” both “subject to someone else’s control” and “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.” This suggests the need, if we are interested in opposing particular structures which sustain the dominance of certain interest groups, and limit our own possibilities, for a political struggle to take the form of resistance “against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, resistance must take the form of developing new subjectivities through the activity of self-creation.

Such resistance faces the problem of how we can act to resist domination, if we always act in the context of power relations and the subject that acts is itself constituted through power strategies? Foucault’s account of the subject of power, though, also contains the space for a solution to this problem, given that power is not simply the negative repression of a passive subject, but involves the subject’s productive and creative capacity.<sup>16</sup> Foucault insists that in human relationships “power is always present” in various forms and at various levels but these relations are “mobile, reversible, and unstable.” Power relations, as the influence of the conduct of others, imply an element of freedom; the agent influenced could have acted otherwise.<sup>17</sup> Thus “there is necessarily the possibility of resistance.”<sup>18</sup> Our actions, including the actions which contribute to our subjectivity, may be reactions to power strategies but they are not fully determined by the strategies they react against. Our subjectivity could be recreated in ways which the existing social and political order does not currently recognize. If such excluded forms of subjectivity are actualized they will serve to put this order into question; providing

a critical standpoint by asserting a novel subjectivity. In addition, our subjectivity could be re-formed in ways which, while still deriving from the context of power strategies, escape the domination of others by instead cultivating a self-mastery and independence; refusing to allow our subjectivity to be defined according to the aims of the other.

### **Artworks as Models for Self-creation**

What then is the relevance of the work of art? First, artworks can help us understand how a subject constituted through power strategies could be constituted differently. Foucault's final years of research concerned this possibility of self-creation. He turned to practices of self-cultivation designed to achieve an independence from the context of power strategies in which the subject we know has been formed. While the aim was to constitute oneself so as to avoid dependence this does not imply the subject was not still derived from this context.<sup>19</sup> In an interview in his last year, Foucault claimed that he was:

interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group.<sup>20</sup>

Alexander Nehamas, suggests that "Foucault's model for the care of the self was the work of art."<sup>21</sup> The work of art shows how something new can be created from existing materials. Think, for instance, of Picasso's sculptures from found objects. In a work such as *Goat Skull and Bottle* the artist creates a coherent unity from disparate found objects.<sup>22</sup> The materials that the artist works with are both the material of the medium, in the case of visual art the paints, clay, resin, light, etc. that they meld or assemble to form paintings, sculptures, or installations, and the cultural language available to them.

Robert Storr identifies both these aspects at play in Louise Bourgeois' art, permitting "a fundamental remaking of the world in which simple elements—a pen stroke or arabesque, carved chunk or length of wood, lump of clay or plaster—would be made to change identity or referent according to its 'behaviour' in isolation or in groups."<sup>23</sup> Thus, Bourgeois, like other sculptors, does not have total freedom of creation but must use the physical materials and cultural visual language available to her, but this does not prevent her creating new forms.

Hence, her work shows us that while self-creation operates with the practices we find in our cultural context, which is formed by the same power strategies we are seeking to disrupt or have independence from, this does not exclude creativity and thus the possibility of new subjectivities.

### **Materiality**

Visual art and sculpture have an especially intimate relationship with their materials and can thereby highlight this aspect of the possibility of creating novelty within the constraints of existing material. All sculpture exemplifies how materials both constrain and make possible new forms but Bourgeois' work is particularly preoccupied with this theme. Bourgeois experimented with particularly malleable materials, such as resin, latex, and plaster, but also played with our expectations of material, opening up unexpected possibilities for transformation. Anne Coxon suggests the series of sculptures *Soft Landscape* "reflect the artist's interest in exploring the possibilities of her chosen materials, in particular the possibility that they could be used to disrupt the binary logic of 'softness' and 'hardness.'"<sup>24</sup> The sculpture *End of Softness* simultaneously conveys the mutability of biological forms and the coldness of bronze, demonstrating how existing understandings of a material's potential can be challenged, as Foucault indicates of the human subject.<sup>25</sup> *Amoeba* is another work that expresses a tension, life's expanding force pushing stiffly through the bronze in which the figure has been cast.<sup>26</sup> The rigid nature of the bronze is

denied, both in the bulbous eruptions of the sculpture's form and with the white paint which hides its true metallic character, and yet this rigidity is still expressed in the stiffness with which the bulbous shapes emerge. These sculptures are experiments in the limits of their material. They subvert our expectations of bronze and push its limits to create novel combinations of form and material, but they also exhibit that this novelty is constrained by what it must work with. As Bourgeois said in an interview with Robert Storr in 1986, regarding working with stone: "You want a hole, it refuses to make a hole. You want it smooth, it breaks under the hammer. It is the stone that is aggressive. It is a constant source of refusal. You have to win the shape. It is a fight to the finish at every moment."<sup>27</sup>

### **Corporeality**

In addition, to exploring the general problem of creation within the constraints of material, given, as Rosalind Krauss suggests, "the choice of sculptural medium—rubber latex, plastic, plaster, wax, resin, hemp—is consistently pushed towards the evocation of bodily organs,"<sup>28</sup> Bourgeois' sculptures connect this problem with the human body in particular. The role of the body in the production of subjectivity is much contested. To what extent is what we take as the body also produced, and to what extent does a given body constrain and influence our subjectivity? Visual art offers a particular opportunity to experiment with the possibilities and limitations of our own bodies by playing with bodily form. This is made explicit in performance art. Rebecca Horn's early performance films, for example, explore the extension of her body into space. These objects include "Pencil Mask," which allowed her to create sounds and marks against a surface through the movement of her head, and "Finger Gloves," which extended each of her fingers with long black attachments. In *Performances 2*, which documents the wearing of these objects, and other films, Horn places into question where the boundary of our bodies lies.<sup>29</sup>



Performance art works with the artist's own body, but sculpture allows a deeper exploration of the creation of form. Through sculpture we can explore what Judith Butler calls the cultural production of the body,<sup>30</sup> without denying corporeality. The form and boundary of a sculpture is not pre-given, it is not a surface waiting to be inscribed.<sup>31</sup> The sculptural model avoids falling back into a notion of a defined body waiting to be given significance. Yet it maintains a notion of corporeality, because sculpture, whatever form it takes does so within the, as yet undiscovered, possibilities of the material. There is no sculpture prior to the act of sculpting, just as Butler is concerned that we avoid the notion of a body that is inscribed by culture, because for her there is no body prior to its cultural production. Yet, the sculpture remains fundamentally material just as a culturally produced body remains fundamentally corporeal. Even while form, signification, what counts as the inside and the outside, the permeability, and the fluidity of the work, are produced, this production works on and through the sculptural material, as well as the cultural context in which it is received.

Bourgeois' sculptures make the most of these opportunities provided by the medium. They engage in the experiment and challenge of the construction of a subjectivity constrained both by a field of cultural significations, produced by the network of power relations in which we operate, and corporeality, experienced in and shaped by this network of power relations. Her work conveys to us the fragility and transitory nature of any such construction. Mignon Nixon suggests that "Bourgeois sought to represent subjectivity in the process of emergence."<sup>32</sup> Her increasing use of fluid and plastic materials allowed her to explore a "subject on the threshold of existence," struggling to emerge and ever in danger of being submerged by the forces out of which it emerged.<sup>33</sup> The multiplicity of forms in some of Bourgeois' sculptures, where the body's insides seem turned out, reminds us of our own multiplicity, and conveys the sense that any unity, in an artwork or a subject, is a contingent and temporary formation.

The fragility of the subject's emergence and persistence is experienced both in relation to corporeality and our social roles. Whatever self-creation we may effect it is within the contingent particularity of our body and the cultural expectations of our gender. The unashamedly reproductive shapes, of works such as *Germinal*, *Cumul 1*, and *The Destruction of the Father*, where penises, breasts, eggs, and sacs ambiguously blur into each other, express the entanglement of Bourgeois' own identity with its embodied form, and with the social perceptions of body and gender which her works question and work with.<sup>34</sup> In her sculptures, biological forms carry a sense of threat as well as aesthetic pleasure. Any attempt to create oneself is also confronted with dissolution of the self, whether in the face of biological processes or social conformity to a notion of our biological function. Even if our experience of the biological is always cultural, and even if we accept Butler's stronger claim that the very boundary of our bodies is manipulated by cultural forces,<sup>35</sup> Bourgeois' sculptures convey that we still experience corporeality as a powerful force which cannot be entirely tamed or moulded. Whether what overwhelms us is the corporeal itself, or the corporeal in its cultural forms and significations, our attempts to form and assert ourselves both work with and are threatened by this corporeality. Thus in *Soft Landscape II*, two dominant protrusions rise up, defiantly demonstrating the mutability of the plastic they are made from, and at the same time seem to melt away again at their base, and are subject to cracks and fissures.<sup>36</sup> In this work, we witness the creation of definite forms from out of the shapeless plastic, and thus the possibility of creation, but also experience the assertion of the materials capacity to disintegrate and dissolve, and thus feel the struggle that the creation and maintenance of these forms involves.

So Bourgeois' sculptures, by illustrating how new forms emerge from within the constraints of a given material and tangibly evoking our own bodily forms, contribute to our understanding of our contingency and of the possibility of transformation within existing conditions, including our own corporeality.

## Challenging the Paradigm

Artworks serve as models for Foucault's project of creating new subjectivities not only by showing how novelty can be created from existing materials, but also by demonstrating how we can challenge existing orders from within the network of power strategies. Through working with the cultural tools available to the artist, artworks can articulate or visualize previously excluded or obscured forms. When works of art realize or represent what has been previously excluded from representation and denied recognition, they challenge the order that denied or covered over what they now present. Artworks continually challenge their own world—expanding the sphere of what is accepted as art, as with Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, finding new means of representation, and blurring the boundaries of different art forms and mediums. In this they demonstrate the potential of self-creation. Foucault suggests that "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse who we are. [...] we have to promote new forms of subjectivity."<sup>37</sup> New forms of subjectivity derived from existing networks of power strategies, as artworks are derived from existing materials and cultural language, can serve to challenge the order of this network.

The capacity of artworks to challenge and expand our existing paradigms not only serves as a model for self-creation as a form of resistance, but also opens up space for experimenting with identity by disrupting the existing power order. Bourgeois' play on the body's sexual characteristics serves to suggest sexual identities that cannot be categorized within an existing paradigm, and in doing so this play challenges the paradigm. She claimed that "we are all vulnerable in some way, and we are all male-female."<sup>38</sup> While Bourgeois never explicitly self-identified as a feminist, and it would be a mistake to reduce her work to a feminist statement, she can be seen to have contributed to a feminist movement which resisted the identities, and sexual roles, available to women. Elisabeth Lebovici suggests: "the proliferation of sexual attributes—destabilise in their turn the myths we think of as organising the originality of either sex and, by the same

token their binary fixity.”<sup>39</sup> For example, *Fillette*, a suspended sculpture of latex over plaster that at first glance takes the form of male genitalia, collapses the standard opposition of male versus female.<sup>40</sup> “*Fillette* acts to blur this distinction as the vaginal opening at the foot of the shaft and between the two testicles forces male and female to merge.”<sup>41</sup> By playing with our representations of gender, artworks such as *Fillette* can accumulatively weaken the paradigm and help to create the space for the new subjectivities that resistance ultimately demands.

### **Self-examination and Self-control**

We have seen so far how artworks can serve as a paradigm of creative resistance and help to clear a path for such resistance. I want now to consider how they can operate to cultivate and transform individual artists and audience members as part of a project to achieve independence from subjugation to the aims of others. In Foucault’s late works he explores technologies of the self:

techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves.<sup>42</sup>

In his last published works, the final two volumes of the *History of Sexuality* and his lectures at the Collège de France, he is particularly concerned with specific practices or technologies of the care of the self from classical and late antiquity.<sup>43</sup> Foucault highlights the Hellenistic model in which the objective is the self, in contrast to both the earlier Platonic model and later Christian models of the care of the self.<sup>44</sup> On this Hellenistic model, one works on one’s relationship to one’s self in order to achieve a sovereignty over oneself.<sup>45</sup> This stands in contrast to a subject that is subjugated to another. The development of this independence is crucial if the creation of novelty is not to operate in the service of existing patterns of subjugation.<sup>46</sup> The notion of technologies of the self that serve to transform

and cultivate an independent subject suggests the possibility of resistance through the creation of new more independent subjectivities.

Foucault gives the examples of self-examination and of writing amongst various possible technologies of the self. In his discussion of Marcus Aurelius' letters to his teacher Fronto, we see self-examination and writing in combination. These letters provide "an account of the self through an account of the day." They reveal the body, and questions of diet and exercise; family relations and household matters; and love as domains in which the self is actualized.<sup>47</sup> The activity of writing about these activities to Fronto involves Marcus Aurelius taking stock and examining his day and how well he has taken care of himself. Foucault suggests that "by the Hellenistic age [...] Taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity." Writing came to be an important part of this attention to the self. "A relation developed between writing and vigilance."<sup>48</sup> Marcus Aurelius' letters do not exemplify the theory of Stoicism, in the sense of expressing or representing it, but are rather his attempt to put this theory into practice.

For an artist, therefore, their artworks might be seen as technologies of the self in the sense of facilitating the process of self-examination. The danger, here, however, is falling into a psychoanalytic model in which the artwork expresses something hidden and in need of interpretation. Given Foucault's opposition to the idea of a pre-given subject, or aspect of the subject, that requires deciphering, this would present a tension with Foucault's own understanding of technologies of the self as contributing to resistance. Foucault's critique of the "Repressive Hypothesis" suggests that the idea of a repressed or hidden self is itself a strategic deployment, which sustains practices of observation and confession that are integral to contemporary disciplinary society.<sup>49</sup> For Foucault, the problem is not so much that sexuality is reduced to material sex but that the unknown of sex is used in our subjugation.<sup>50</sup>

Taking stock of oneself and one's actions, emotions, and experiences, however, is not synonymous with the attempt to reveal a hidden self: "It is not a matter of deciphering oneself."<sup>51</sup> As Chloë Taylor points out, Foucault does not simply oppose confession with silence. Self-reflection is possible without the reification of a hidden self.<sup>52</sup> Cultivating attention to oneself and one's reactions to different situations does not presuppose an essential self beneath these reactions, or the reliance on a powerful other to tell us what the self really is.

What did writing add to this process of examination? First, as a record it allowed the possibility of revisiting and reactualizing experiences.<sup>53</sup> Second, Foucault suggests that it actually allows us to experience the self more broadly. "Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent."<sup>54</sup> The instances of writing to which Foucault refers here are not necessarily what are typically taken as artworks, he discusses diaries and letters. But if writing about one's experiences serves to open up to the subject a new field of experience, doing so in ways that employ different artistic styles has the potential for a further expansion of both the intensity and range of understanding our experiences.

Employing a different art form also suggests the possibility of expanding this intensity and breadth of the experience of the self beyond what can be achieved through words. If there are aspects of our experience and reactions that cannot be verbally articulated then perhaps they can be rendered visible. These aspects need not refer to any pre-cultural or hidden, in the sense of repressed, reality. For example, visual works can serve to express certain ways of seeing, which might encompass ways in which we see ourselves or imagine ourselves to be seen. Or, if we consider the self to include a variety of drives (which need not presuppose that these drives have a pre-cultural reality), some drives may need to be expressed and harnessed visually.

Bourgeois' work can be seen to operate as such a tool of self-exploration and as a means to develop self-control. She herself describes her diary keeping, which included writing, tape-recording, and most importantly drawing, as allowing her to "keep my house in order. They must be up-to-date so that I'm sure life does not pass me by."<sup>55</sup> For Bourgeois drawing was the most essential to this process which, as with Marcus Aurelius' letters, could operate to widen the experiences available to self-examination, and allow them to be revisited. Much of her work, revisits the events of her childhood, for instance, exploring her relationships with her parents. Other works consider the experience of emigration, and leaving her family behind.

A potential tension arises here between Bourgeois' self-understanding of her activity and Foucault's concern to avoid positing a hidden reality in need of being deciphered. Bourgeois has spoken of her artworks as a means to access her unconscious.<sup>56</sup> Mignon Nixon, who develops a detailed Kleinian reading of Bourgeois' works, suggests of *Double Negative* that it expresses "the body reduced to the organ-logic of the drives."<sup>57</sup> Bourgeois' apparent belief in a reality of the drives, however, as something repressed and to be discovered or released through artistic practice, does not prevent us viewing her activity as a form of the hermeneutics of the self, which she is in control of. Bourgeois is not relying on a powerful other to reveal to her what is allegedly repressed or hidden. She is expressing her own self-understanding, selectively presenting to us what she takes to be the significant, traumatic events that have influenced her subjectivity. Crucially she takes ownership of these memories, and works on them and shapes them to create something new. As Rosalind Krauss suggests, if Bourgeois' sculptures are viewed as part-objects, which psychodynamic psychoanalytic theory claims is the child's experience of the self and others as sets of objects and not as integrated wholes, this does not imply that we need see them as merely symbolic. Rather than being limited to symbols in need of interpretation back to the reality of drives, Bourgeois' sculptural part-objects can be understood to form a new reality.<sup>58</sup> The creation of this reality allows

Bourgeois to get control of her drives. She is working on herself and asserting herself. Forming an independent subjectivity. While she may employ the discourse of psychoanalysis, which Foucault treats as suspect, she uses it to refuse other discourses regarding her role as daughter, mother, and wife.

The medium of sculpture allows the expression of the drives to be experimented and played with. A particular theory of the content of the drives, of what needs to be liberated, as in the “Repressive Hypothesis” which Foucault criticizes in his discussion of sexuality, need not be assumed. Theories of the drives can themselves be played with in art and not taken as a doctrine or used as the justification for subjugating practices. Just as corporeality is experienced in Bourgeois’ works without a particular body being taken as given, the drives that make up the self are expressed and reshaped without assuming a particular theory of the drives, or that they have a determinant pre-cultural content.

In work such as *The Destruction of the Father*, where the red lighting makes the latex shapes’ evocation of the flesh and bodily organs more explicit than ever, Bourgeois is revisiting, re-examining, and thereby taking control of her past experiences through her exploration of traumatic events, and the impulses, attachments, and desires they involved and produced. This piece works through the desire to consume her father, who had hurt and betrayed her with his affair with her governess. It involves destruction through incorporation, allowing simultaneous revenge and unification with the object of anger and desire. It might also be viewed as refusal of a discourse which views little girls’ rage as always directed towards the mother.

In addition to allowing self-examination to take into account experiences that cannot be verbally articulated, thereby contributing to the project of exploring how one engages in the world, such an artwork can serve as a direct technique of managing one’s emotions and getting control of oneself. Robert Storr comments, how the stories of Bourgeois’ various artworks are linked, allowing her “to order



the flow of events and emotions whose ordinarily unpredictable, often alarming shifts in intensity threaten to overwhelm her.” For Bourgeois, without the outlet of the artworks it would not be possible to maintain her mastery over herself and her own life because she would be overwhelmed. The work is a way of “staying centered.”<sup>59</sup> The activity of creation may also function as a form of training for the purposes of developing control and ultimately sovereignty over oneself. Just as Plutarch writes of the practice of setting out a banquet of delicious food in order to resist it as a means of training the body as part of the care for the self, crafting powerful emotions and memories into unified works of art could serve as practice for handling these potentially overwhelming forces in one’s life.<sup>60</sup>

An artwork does not relate only to its creator, of course, but also to the audience. If it widens the access to breadth and depth of self-experience of the artist it may also do so for the audience by resonating with their own experience in a way that facilitates their self-examination, and their attempt to understand their reactions, thus contributing to a project of cultivating a greater sense of independence. We each bring our particularity to our encounter with a work and the work resonates with our particularity, stirring up memories, arousing desires and emotions, allowing us to reflect on and gain control of these memories, desires, and emotions. For each individual there may be triggers to particular emotional experiences. A visual cue might therefore widen the experience of the self in a way a linguistic cue could not in relation to the contingent particularity of a viewer. One might be aroused or repulsed or amused, or all of these things, when one takes in the sight of a sculpture such as *Cumul 1*. Through the multiplicity of our reactions, mirrored in the multiplicity of *Cumul 1*’s sculptural form, we become aware of our own complexity, and the tensions within us. We can begin to navigate this complexity, such that we can practice what Nietzsche terms getting control of our “For and Against.”<sup>61</sup> So visual artworks offer possibilities, which make use of their particular mediums, for widening and understanding our self-experience and for the attempt to practice our reactions and conduct in a process of working on the self.

## Self-creation

The above applications of artworks as technologies of the self, concern using artworks to understand the nature of the self and its potential for transformation, to facilitate self-examination, and to control oneself. In the latter capacity an artwork can allow the controlled expression of potentially overwhelming aspects of oneself or offer the opportunity to practice reacting to certain experiences. In these capacities artworks are technologies of the self because they help either the artist or the audience relate to themselves differently.

If, however, we view the artworks as actually part of the artist then the work the artist undertakes on their artwork can be viewed as direct work on the self. On this view, the artwork would be more than a technology that could aid a process of self-creation it would directly contribute to the subjectivity that is being created. As Nehamas suggests in his reading of Nietzsche, self-creation could be organized according to aesthetic criteria which sought a unity in a life as a whole.<sup>62</sup> For an artist, their artworks would be part of this unity. The idea of the artwork as a means not just of self-expression but of self-creation is clear in a figure such as Joseph Beuys, whose apparently autobiographical works significantly rewrite his history. As someone who has created performance pieces, such as *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, when he shared a room with a coyote for three days, his life, subjectivity, and artworks blur together.<sup>63</sup> This process of self-creation bore on a wider project of the care of self. Beuys engaged with memories and past experiences, including the collective trauma of war. He saw his work as fulfilling the function of therapy, using the public space of the artwork for our collective cure. In doing so he casts himself into a particular role, and constructs his own past in order to fit it. Beuys can be seen to be engaged in an act of self-creation, forming a self through an artistic process.

If we accept this account of subjectivity to include an artist's works then Bourgeois' work does not merely allow her to control herself, or to examine

herself in ways that the verbal format does not permit, but actively serves to create her own subjectivity. Who Louise Bourgeois was, male-female, mother-child, artist-wife, this is established through her work, and so is her identity as an explorer of the dualities and fragilities of our identity.

To some extent the way we take up and relate to artworks, what we make of them, can also contribute to the construction of our own subjectivity. For Ladelles McWhorter, her reading of Foucault facilitated her development of a positive identity by allowing her to understand the contingencies of the identity imposed on her.<sup>64</sup> Her subsequent account of this process in her own writing on Foucault is thus part of the simultaneous presentation and production of this identity. Similarly, how we respond to an encounter with a work of art, including how we reflect on, discuss, or write about it, situating ourselves sympathetically, critically, or emotionally in relation to it, is not only a means of understanding and exercising control over the complexity of our subjectivity but becomes part of this subjectivity.

## **Conclusion**

Louise Bourgeois' art demonstrates how artworks can make a significant contribution to the activity of self-creation and its potential to resist existing structures of dominance and challenge what we take to be our sphere of possibilities. The significant body of her work being sculptures, often exploring the plasticity of materials, they offer an immediate expression to the viewer of the possibility, but also the struggle, of creating novelty from contingent, given conditions. Her works thus show us how artworks can serve as models which deepen our understanding of the problem of self-creation within the context of power strategies and illustrate how something new can be created out of existing materials.

Bourgeois' works are not alone in serving this function, but her visceral sculptures not only serve as models for self-creation but, by creating a sense of identity between the works and our own physicality, allow the audience to engage tangibly with the actuality of their own contingency. Dealing with questions of gender, and challenging existing constructions of it, Bourgeois' works also show how artworks can disrupt the existing network of power relations, which proscribes the subjectivities available to us. By bringing to light what was previously excluded artworks can thus operate as a means to destabilize existing power structures, opening the space for new subjectivities, and again serve as a model for how the creation of alternative subjectivities could have a similarly destabilizing effect.

What makes Bourgeois' artworks particularly interesting for this exploration, however, is that they are explicitly concerned with the emergence of her own subjectivity, and can be treated as part of her work on her self. Thus her *oeuvre* shows how artworks can act as more than a model and contribute to the project of self-creation as technologies which work directly on a particular self; facilitating the process of self-examination for the artist or the audience, operating as an aid to or training for self-control, or even, if their production is viewed as continuous with the subject, by directly contributing to new and potentially revolutionary subjectivities.

## Notes

1. L. Bourgeois, *The Return of the Repressed, Vol II: Psychoanalytic Writings*. P. Laratt-Smith (ed.) (London: Violette Editions, 2012), 42.
2. Foucault suggests that "instead of asking ideal subjects what part of themselves or what powers of theirs they have surrendered, allowing themselves to be subjectified [*se laisser assujétir*], one would need to enquire how relations of subjectification can manufacture subjects" (M. Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984: Volume 1, Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*. P. Rabinow, (ed.) (London: Penguin, 2000), 59).

Foucault analyses various ways in which power strategies contribute to the formation of a particular kind of subject; including surveillance in *Discipline and Punish* (M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. A. Sheridan (ed.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)) and the imperative to confession in *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (M. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. Trans R. Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978)).

3. By artworks I mean artifacts or actions which we take an aesthetic interest in. I am not here interested in offering a definition of art, or with debating whether any transcultural definition of art is possible, rather I am interested in whether certain examples of accepted artworks and artistic practices can contribute to resolving the problem of self-creation.
4. Nor do I want to suggest her works alone offer this potential, rather they exemplify my claim that one function that artworks can serve is to operate as technologies of the self.
5. Chloë Taylor provides a very interesting discussion of Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings as a non-confessional form of working on the self, in which the artist resists the discourses imposed on her. While, this discussion does consider the role of space and composition in Gentileschi's paintings, Taylor does not explicitly address what the visual form of the artworks and their painterly medium contributes to their role as technologies of the self (C. Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the "Confessing Animal"* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 200).
6. Foucault asserts that "Power is games of strategy" as late as 1984. Given this statement, and that Foucault takes the "power relations" or "strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others" to be part of any society, and immanent in our relationships with others, self-creation must occur as part of this network of strategies (*Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 298). I disagree, therefore, with Kevin Thompson's claim that the possibility for self-formation depends on a radical shift in Foucault's view

of power, away from a strategic view, to one which allows actions on the self that are not reactions to the strategies of others (K. Thompson, "Forms of Resistance: Foucault on Tactical Reversal and Self-formation." *Continental Philosophy Review*, 2 (2003): 113–38). Rather, the possibility for creative resistance resides in the fact that we are free to react in different ways to the strategies of others. I argue this in more detail in "Foucault's Technologies of the Self: Between Control and Creativity" (K. Mitcheson, "Foucault's Technologies of the Self: Between Control and Creativity." *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 43(1) (2012): 59–75).

7. Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 283.
8. M. Foucault, "Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8 (4) (1982): 782.
9. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 195–228.
10. M. Foucault, "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self; Two Lectures at Dartmouth." *Political Theory*, 21(2) (1993): 204.
11. *Ibid.*, 222.
12. "This is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 23).
13. *Ibid.*, 21–3.
14. *Ibid.*, 68.
15. Foucault, "Subject and Power," 781.
16. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 86. See C. Colwell, "The Retreat of the Subject in the Late Foucault," *Philosophy Today*, 1 (1994): 56–69; B. Hofmeyr, "The Power Not to Be (What We Are): The Politics and Ethics of Self-Creation in Foucault." *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 2 (2006): 215–30;

- A. Schrift, *Nietzsche's French Legacy: a Genealogy of Poststructuralism* (London: Routledge, 1995).
17. Foucault, "Subject and Power," 786 and 790.
  18. Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 292.
  19. Gilles Deleuze draws this distinction when he suggests that a subject may be derived from power relations without being entirely dependent on them (*Foucault*. Trans. S. Hand (London: Continuum, 2006), 84).
  20. Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 290.
  21. A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 178.
  22. Pablo Picasso, *Goat Skull and Bottle*, painted bronze, 31 × 37 5/8 × 21 1/2" (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951 (cast 1954)).
  23. R. Storr, "Abstraction: L'Esprit Géométrique." In M. Frances (ed.) *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 2007), 32.
  24. A. Coxon, "Soft Landscape." In F. Morris (ed.) *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1994), 272.
  25. Louise Bourgeois, *Soft Landscape II*, plastic, 6 7/8 × 14 5/8 × 9 5/8" (1967).
  26. Bourgeois, *Amoeba*, bronze, painted white, wall piece, 37 1/2 × 28 1/2 × 13 1/4" (Tate, London, 1962–5).
  27. L. Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923–1997*. M. Bernadac and H. Obrist (eds) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 142.
  28. R. Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2000), 55.
  29. Rebecca Horn, *Performances 2*, 16 mm, colour, sound, 38 minutes (Production: Helmut Wietz with D. Finke, Gavin, Karin Halding and E. Mitzka, 1973).
  30. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), viii.
  31. Butler suggests that even in Foucault's work a prior "body is figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription" (*ibid.*, 129).

32. M. Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2005), 174.
33. *Ibid.*, 10.
34. Bourgeois, *Germinal*, marble, 5 1/2 × 7 3/8 × 6 1/4" (1967); *Cumul 1*, marble, wood plinth, 22 3/8 × 50 × 48" (Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne/Centre de Creation Industrielle, 1969); *The Destruction of the Father*, plaster, latex, wood, fabric, and red light, 23 1/2 × 10 1/2 × 7 3/4" (1974).
35. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.
36. Bourgeois, *Soft Landscape II*, plastic, 6 7/8 × 14 5/8 × 9 5/8" (1965).
37. Foucault, "Subject and Power," 785.
38. Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father*, 101.
39. E. Lebovici, "Is She? Or Isn't She?" In M. Frances (ed.) *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 2007), 133.
40. Bourgeois, *Fillette*, latex over plaster, 23 1/2 × 10 1/2 × 7 3/4" (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968).
41. R. Krauss, "Fillette." In M. Frances (ed.) *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 2007), 146.
42. Foucault, "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self," 203.
43. M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*. Trans. G. Burchell (New York: Picado, 2005), 491.
44. *Ibid.*, 257.
45. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 3*, 85.
46. Susan Bordo warns against the idea that all novelty is subversive and liberating, pointing out that "capitalism depends on the continual production of novelty, of fresh images to stimulate desire" (S. Bordo, "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body." In C. Ramazanoglu (ed.) *Up against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 196).
47. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 139, 161, and 500.



48. M. Foucault, "Technologies of the Self." In H. Gutman, P.H. Hutton and L.H. Martin (eds) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 27–8.
49. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*.
50. This point has been made by Wendy Grace (W. Grace, "Faux Amis: Foucault and Deleuze on Sexuality and Desire." *Critical Inquiry*, 36(1) (2009), 73).
51. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 222.
52. Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 193, 197, and 199.
53. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 500.
54. Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 28.
55. P. Herkenhoff, "Diary." In M. Frances (ed.) *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 2007), 104.
56. D. Kuspit, *Bourgeois (An Interview with Louise Bourgeois)* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 67–8.
57. Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 184; Bourgeois, *Double Negative*, latex over plaster, 19 3/8 × 37 1/2 × 31 3/8" (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, 1963).
58. Krauss, *Bachelors*, 64.
59. Storr, "Abstraction," 21 and 35.
60. Foucault cites this example from Socrates' Daemon in his course overview for *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 502.
61. F. Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9.
62. A. Nehamas, *Nietzsche; Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1985).
63. Joseph Beuys, *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, performance (New York, 1974).
64. L. McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 33. Taylor discusses McWhorter's reading of Foucault as a care of the self (*The Culture of Confession*, 231–3).

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