

Lacey Hall

English 101

Paper 3 Draft

12 December 2010

### The Fabric of Time: Anorexics and Artists Exorcizing the Past

In *Untitled (Web)*, Charles Ledray uses fabric, yarn, threads, and buttons to create tiny clothes, hand sewn with immaculate craftsmanship. This piece is only part of the thousands of tiny garments, pots, and books he constructed in his recent exhibition, *workworkworkworkwork*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. In *Résumé*, Luc Sante perpetually works, composing eight stories of his past and combining them into one piece. Similar repetition is found in Louise Bourgeois's *Figure*, where 34 painted wood pieces create an emaciated form. This repetition, meticulous creation, centers on the idea of the artists' need to constantly produce. As Louise Bourgeois said, "Some of us are so obsessed with the past that we die of it. It is the attitude of the poet who never finds the lost heaven and it is really the situation of artists who work for a reason that nobody can quite grasp. They might want to reconstruct something of the past to exorcize it. It is that the past for certain people has such a hold and such a beauty..."

In this paper, I will focus on the work of committed artists Louise Bourgeois and Charles Ledray to suggest how a dysfunctional family past can produce artists andorexics with a constant need to work to gain control. They find comfort in the work's ability to relieve anxieties that stem from the past. I will show how the artist's and anorexic's obsession with effort and discipline relieves anxieties while inadvertently recreating the past. Fixing things from this past comes through discipline, resulting in a comfort, an instant gratification, a sense of control. This similar conduct is productive for the artist and destructive for the anorexic. The artist exercises

productive creation, working from their body, externalizing their creation. The anorexic exercises destructive creation, working on their body, internalizing. These similar cycles of catharsis keep both the artist and anorexic dependent on discipline in creation and destruction.

The constant feeling of anxiety noticeable in both artists and anorexic is often related to a dysfunctional family past. In the essay, *Fearing Fat: A Literature Review of Family Systems Understandings and Treatments of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia*, Kyle D. Killian explains the family factors correlated with the prevalence of eating disorders: “(a) the presence of affective disorders in other family members, (b) sociological factors, and (c) family relationships” (Killian). These factors may yield an anorexic that finds comfort in compulsion, but also an artist with a compulsive need to create. Through the need to create, artists subconsciously try to make sense of a guilt, attempting in “saying the unsayable” (Tate, 18). It is in similar fashion that the anorexic exhibits disciplining behavior, leaving them hungry, on the verge of starvation. In turn, they create a means of expression through destruction of the body. In the PBS documentary *Dying to be Thin*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg states that, “...the common theme in all of this is that woman are using the appetite as a voice, and they’re using the appetite to express different things, depending upon their historical situation” (Cultural Pressures). The appetite is the voice and the body is the medium. Anorexics create an idealized human form, literally starving themselves to become thin. Metaphorically, they sculpt their bodies through a process of subtraction. This idealized human form is on the verge of death, subject to starvation, heart problems, and osteoporosis. Likewise, artists teeter on the verge of affliction to produce work; the work saves them, and they save the work. Both are symbiotic relationships in that they result the artist’s and anorexic’s extreme commitment.

Artists, as Gilles Deleuze noted in his essay, *Bergsonism*, work to “reveal a desire to occupy three dimensions to gain consistency and tangibility, less to reflect on things than to create and produce.” Reflecting on things comes through the compulsive process of making, creating and producing; the idea may emerge, perhaps clouded and fragmented. Louise Bourgeois said, “With words you cannot say anything. You can lie as long as the day, but you cannot lie in the re-creation of experience...” This notion is supported by philosophers, emanating from the the analysis of the philosophy of Henri Bergson by the philosopher, Gilles Deleuze in the text *Bergsonism*. In this analysis, Deleuze notes the importance of *élan vital*: “Life is essentially determined in the act of avoiding obstacles, stating and solving a problem. The construction of the organism is both the stating of a problem and a solution.” The artist must continue to revisit this past. Bergson notes:

How can pure recollection take on a psychological existence?

We place ourselves not simply in the element of the past in general, but in a particular region, that is, on a particular level which, in a kind of Reminiscence, we assume corresponds to our actual needs. Each level in effect contains the totality of our past, but in a more or less contracted state. (Deleuze 62)

Louise Bourgeois summons up the past of a philandering father and obliging mother, a family factor falling in the category of “sociological factors” (Schwartz and Barrett 1988). Specifically, Bourgeois case belongs in “a second sociocultural factor...the subordinate position of women in society” (Schwartz and Barrett 1988, but 313 Killian’s article):

Social norms have taught women to be passive, dependent, and satisfied with limited control over their lives...An anorexic or may feel and/or look inadequate, and both frequently require physical care from others (Schwartz and Barrett,

1988). At the same time, eating disorders represent an indirect method of gaining power and control, because no one can force an anorectic to eat or a bulimic to stop bingeing and purging. Thus, anorexia and bulimia allow women a degree of power in their lives while appearing subordinate to society's expectation."

Art gives Louise Bourgeois the power to relieve through the creation of her pieces. Bernadac writes: "we become aware that her whole being is straining to control the inner chaos through words, images, and forms. In order to summon up the past, she rehearses every aspect of time" (20). This is similar to how the anorexic or bulimic needs to have control, expressed through purging or starvation in order to feel cleansed. In the words of the psychologist, Roy F. Baumeister, "obsessions and compulsions are attempts to compensate for some self-regulatory deficit. ... The quest for such structure (boundaries, limits, time markers, and the like) and the excessive adherence to such structure, which may be a response to the inner sense that they cannot control themselves without those external aids" (873 Bénabou and Tirole). It is believed by many artists, such as one of the masters of Modernism, Marcel Breuer, that through suffering, the artist develops an ability to identify underlying principles, leading him the most pure form of knowledge. In anorexics, there is this notion of purity through suffering and discipline. Similarly, Louise Bourgeois notes in her diary, "making colored woodcuts (with several plates) and etchings, to provide myself with discipline. The techniques are easy and interesting, but the materials are so much poorer and less promising than oils and it takes a great effort to express oneself completely." The obsession with effort and discipline is at the core of relieving the past of the anorexic, and is, arguably, where the core of relief through representation arises.

Charles Ledray feels the need to revisit particular regions of the past. Perhaps, he creates miniature object as a response to a childhood struggle with identity. Adam D. Weinberg states, “Many of Ledray’s early works convey fleeting sense of love and loss--what was there is now gone, represented only by a surrogate object (Weinberg 7). These surrogate objects number in the thousands, fragmented pieces creating “a visual depiction of time broken into discrete units” (Weinberg 9.) To agree with Deleuze, it is in the process of *élan vital* that Ledray recreates memory through repetition of matter, relieving the past. As Deleuze noted, “It is in space that only presents differences in degree, to the point where it appears as the schema of an indefinite divisibility. Similarly, memory is essentially difference and matter essentially repetition” (Deleuze 92). The visitation of a “particular region” (Deleuze) is evident in *Hands, My Father’s Hands*. Fragments of a white dress shirts are isolated on multiple frames. Threads unravel, the shirt being the only thing that is left, albeit torn. The isolated shirts appear stripped from their bodily forms, reminiscent of a fragile and detached relationship. “They are the many shells we might shed to expose ourselves,” writes Jen Mergel in her essay from the catalogue. The repetition of matter displays a decay of time while providing relief through creation. As the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich wrote:

Because feeling, after all, is always and everywhere the one and only source of every creation. The emotions which are kindled in the human being are stronger than the human being himself...they must at all costs find an outlet--they must take on form--they must be communicated or put to work. (Malevich 24)

Perhaps it is a nostalgia that drives this meticulous work, as well as the work of the anorexic. It could be the “inevitable accompaniment of sexual development and maturation” (Caskey 5) that the anorexic fears and tries to control, returning to the past to revisit and relieve.

Each sculpture brings Louise Bourgeois back to the past to revisit and relieve. It is in specificity that these anxieties are relieved. In the words of Bergson, “The image pure and simple will not take me back to the past unless, indeed, it was in the past that I sought it” (Deleuze). It is only, “in a particular region...on a particular level” that this revisitation can occur, ultimately recreating a fragmented fabric of time. Louise Bourgeois said, “Once a sculpture is done, it has served its purpose and has eliminated the anxieties that I had. The anxieties are gone forever.” The artist must be constantly making because specific anxieties arise. They re-occur on multiple levels, stemming from the past, perhaps from a guilt, calling for a way out through making. Then, only as a byproduct of the need to relieve, is the past recreated in its truest form.

In the essay “Will Power and Personal Rules,” Roland Bénabou and Jan Tirole write about how anorexics exhibit compulsive behavior, creating distortions of memory:

The foundation for this mechanism is the imperfect recall of past motives and feelings, leading people to draw inferences from their past actions. The degree of self-control an individual can achieve is shown to rise with his self-confidence and decrease with prior external constraints. On the negative side, individuals may adopt excessively rigid rules that result in compulsive behaviors such as miserliness, workaholism, or anorexia. We also study the cognitive basis of self-regulation, showing how it is constrained by the extent to which self-monitoring is subject to opportunistic distortions of memory or attribution, and how rules for information processing can themselves be maintained. (Bénabou and Tirole, 848)

It is art that takes the place of these “rigid rules.” Marie-Laure Bernadac writes:

Drawn lines and written lines entwine to create the tapestry of her childhood memories, and to exorcize her fears. Although true exorcism is achieved only in sculpture, drawing is a soothing and healing activity... (Bernadac and Obrist 18)

In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke believes, “the poet will naturally tend to write about that which most deeply engrosses him--and nothing more deeply engrosses a man than his *burdens*, including those of a physical nature, such as disease.” Louise Bourgeois and Charles Ledray were engrossed by their burdens, perhaps so engrossed that they became close to this disease. They did not “come to have a ‘vested interest’ in [their] handicaps” that became “an integral part of [their] method; and in so far as [their] style grows out of a disease, [their] loyalty to it may reinforce the disease.” This is refuted by Louise Bourgeois’ answer to a question posed by *Art News* in the late 1980s:

I was the third daughter of a man who wanted a son. So to survive I had to create ways of making myself like-able. It was the only way of escaping the depression which came from feeling superfluous--from feeling abandoned. Having been privileged with a native energy I switched from a passive role to an active one, which is an art I have practiced all my life--the art of fighting depression (emotional dependence). (Bernadac and Obrist, 167)

Anorexics strive to be like-able. Using deprivation, they make themselves seem pure and disciplined. This notion dates back to the 14th century when the mystic Saint Catherine of Sienna, starved to death at the age of 33 through self-denial and penitential acts. The committed artist uses art, rather than starvation, to gain gratification, relieving anxieties. Through repetition, the artist finds comfort as well as creates an “imperfect recall of past motives and feelings” (Bénabou and Tirole, 848). The impossibility of a cohesive past creates a constant cycle

dependent on discipline. Both the anorexic and the artist are addicted to discipline in different ways Louise Bourgeois noted in a diary entry on November 14th, 1944:

I'm in a state close to sleepwalking, which has something to do with the impression I have of not being able to focus my attention on anything for long. At the same time my brain is tremendously active...but physically I'm very tired and calm and feverish. I'm irritable with the children, highly sensitive, as if on the verge of tears. But this condition seems favorable to intellectual work. Make notes another time and compare them." (42)

It is in this state that the artist can relieve the anxieties of the past. Subconsciously, out of need, they create a fabric woven from fragments of memory. Again, as Deleuze noted, "Life is essentially determined in the act of avoiding obstacles, stating and solving a problem. The construction of the organism is both the stating of a problem and a solution." Through constructing, the Charles Ledray shows a fracture of love; he did not teeter off the edge, for deprivation to the extreme results in the inability of the artist to think, to function on an alternate level. In the essay, *Emily Dickinson's "Renunciation" and Anorexia Nervosa*, Heather Kirk Thomas believes, "that a consideration of the connection between the poet and the syndrome will ultimately provide a productive path to her writings" (Thomas, 5). This is countered once again by Louise Bourgeois's 1988 interview with Stuart Morgan of *Artscribe*. When asked of the strategy in making life tolerable, Bourgeois responded:

You know I have no recipe for anything...we can end by saying that sculpture is an exorcism and when you are really depressed and have no other way out except suicide that sculpture will get you out of it and get you back to a kind of harmony. That is the purpose of it. (Bernadac and Obrist, 156)

The artists cannot be affected by disease because they need to produce in order to exorcize their anxieties, a never-ending cycle. They deal with guilt and anxieties in a constructive way, one that requires them to retain a certain strength, to resist against the affliction through the material. In the words of Louise Bourgeois, “the resistance of the material is part of the process...I can express myself only in a desperate fighting position.”(Bernadac and Olbrist 155) Therefore, they must not be afflicted; they must remain on the verge.

What would happen if anorexics fought desperately against the body, not on the body? If they resisted against a different material, before getting creating the “denial system,” they would not become anorexic. In many instances, it is too late, and Barbara Kruger is right: *Your Body is a Battleground*. For artists and anorexics, the repetitious battle is numbing and familiar. The benefit or problem, respectively, is the “denial system.” This system produces a very committed anorexic and a very committed artist. The artist produces while the anorexic decays. For the artist, the purpose of art is catharsis, taking place of diseases rather than being fueled by them. In Louise Bourgeois’s words, “Art is the guarantee of sanity” (Tate). It is not an isolated practice reserved to struggling minds, as another undeniably productive artist, Robert Rauschenberg, believed. On his recent exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, Holland Collar said, “He believed that if he, or we, or anyone could just produce enough art, then art and life would be the same thing, and the world would change for the better. So, committed universal citizen that he was, he kept trying to make enough.” (Coller 1)



*Untitled / Web*

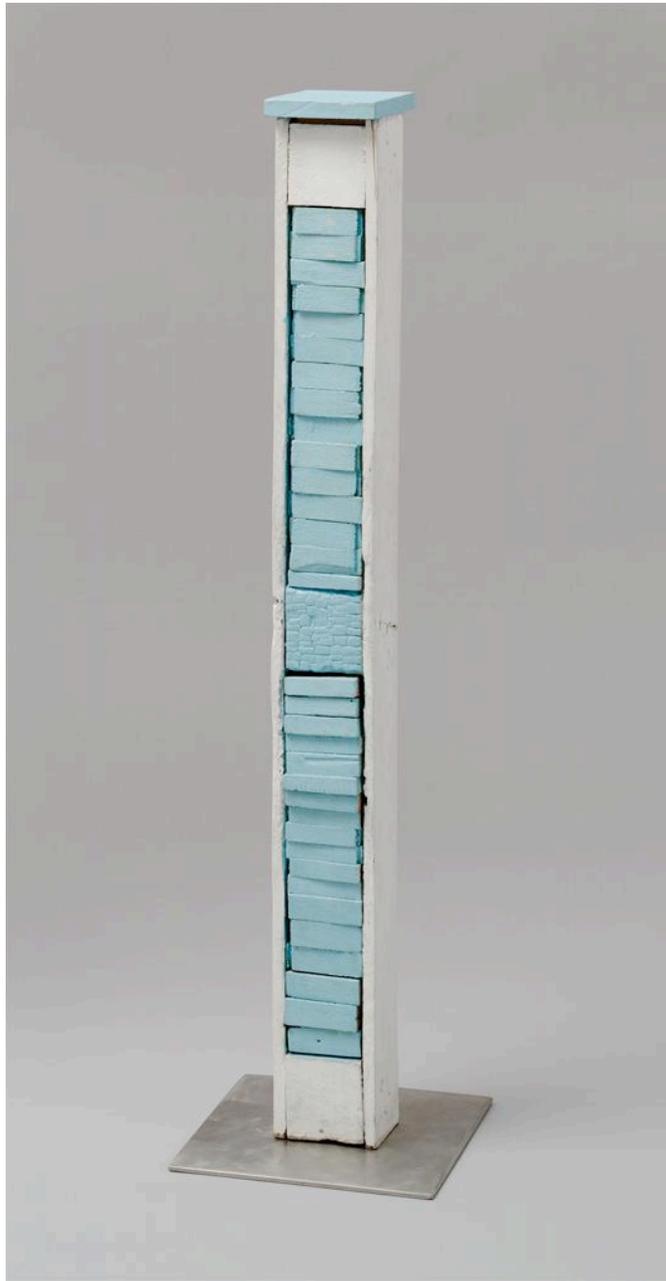
Charles Ledray

1992

The Museum of Modern Art

10 December 2010

ARTstor



*Figure*  
Louise Bourgeois  
1954



Barbara Kruger  
*Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*  
1989

## Works Cited

Institute Of Contemporary Art/Boston. *Charles Ledray: workworkworkworkwork*. New York:

Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2010. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Bergsonism*. New York: Zone Books, 1988. Print.

Caskey, Noelle. "Interpreting Anorexia Nervosa." *Poetics Today*. 6.1/2 (1985): 259-273. Print.

Coller, Holland. "Fruitful Talent Who Made Art World Multiply." *New York Times*. 26 November

2010: LZ01. Print.

Bernadac, Marie-Laure and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. *Louise Bourgeois: Reconstruction of the*

*Father/Deconstruction of the Father Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*. Cambridge,

Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998. Print

Tate Modern. *Louise Bourgeois*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2008. Print.

Malevich, Kazimir. *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*.

Roland Bénabou and Jean Tirole. "Willpower and Personal Rules." *The Journal of Political*

*Economy* 112.4 (2004): 848-886. Print.

Kirk, Heather. "Emily Dickinson's "Renunciation" and Anorexia Nervosa." *American Literature* 60.2 (1988): 205-225. Print.

Killian, Kyle D. "Fearing Fat: A Literature Review of Family Systems Understandings and Treatments of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia." *Family Relations* 43.3 (1994): 311-318. Print.

"Cultural Pressures." *Dying to be Thin*. PBS. WGBH/Boston. Online.