

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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Abstract

This essay examines how the work of Louise Bourgeois can be understood as a material process of working-through psychological experience. Using Sigmund Freud's theories of repression, the return of the repressed and repetition as a framework, it explores how traces of unresolved experiences remain within the unconscious and persistently reemerge in fragmented and distorted ways. Rather than understanding Bourgeois' work as a direct expression of memory, the essay argues that the repetition and abstract forms within her work shows a repeated return of repressed material. Through an analysis of the *Personages* and the later *Fabric Works*, the essay explores how different material processes such as carving, cutting and stitching function as a way of reengaging with repressed memory within the unconscious. In the series of *Personages* this can be seen through the repetitive and abstract forms, whilst the act of carving and sculpting become a cathartic release of difficult emotions. Whereas in the *Fabric Works*, repetition becomes a way of containing and managing anxiety as repressed memory is revisited and reworked through the cutting and stitching together of fabrics that have personal connections to Bourgeois' past. Across both bodies of work materials are shown to be active sites where memory and emotion are held and continually reshaped. The essay concludes that Bourgeois' practice functions as a form of non-verbal working-through, where psychological experience is not resolved but can be reengaged through the process of making, offering a form of catharsis.

Materials and Memory : Working-Through in the Art of Louise Bourgeois

How can Louise Bourgeois' material practice be understood as a form of working-through in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis?

This essay uses a Freudian psychoanalytic framework to consider how the work of modern and contemporary artist Louise Bourgeois can be understood as a material process of working-through. Louise Bourgeois' artistic practice is closely connected to her own personal experiences, with themes of memory, emotion and psychological trauma explored through a wide range of materials and processes. Following her move to New York and the subsequent death of her father, she underwent psychoanalysis that lasted over thirty years. It could therefore be argued that this experience played a fundamental role in her art, where her practice became an extension of this therapeutic process, allowing her to work through her own repressed emotions.

Sigmund Freud's ideas of repression and repetition show that unresolved experiences remain within the unconscious, continually returning not as clear or complete memories but rather in fragmented and displaced ways. This became the basis for his concept of working-through, a psychoanalytic process whereby repressed material is consistently reengaged through methods of free association in order to provide an understanding and catharsis to the analysand. In Bourgeois' practice, this process can be seen through her use of materials. Using processes like repetition, carving, cutting and stitching, she is able to revisit these repressed experiences, repeatedly reshaping them and bringing new meaning to them over time.

Focusing on the Personages series and the later Fabric Works, this essay will argue that Bourgeois' work can be understood as a non-verbal form of working-through, whereby psychological experience is something that is constantly being shaped and reengaged through material processes, rather than being directly expressed or resolved.

Freud's model of repression, a fundamental concept in psychoanalysis, explains the process by which the unconscious blocks particular thoughts, desires or memories that are too painful or traumatic to face, from conscious awareness. Arising from what Freud called the pleasure principle, an innate drive to seek pleasure and minimise pain, repression, a function of the ego, is an involuntary process that acts as a defense mechanism, aiming to protect the conscious from experiencing anxiety, distress or conflict (Badcock, 1988). It is important to note

however, that repression is not simply an act of forgetting, that is to say the memory being pushed out of consciousness does not disappear, rather the unconscious continually works to conceal it. As Freud (1915a) states, the act of repression should not be considered a one off event in which the repressed material is rendered permanently inactive. Instead a 'persistent expenditure of force' (Freud, 1915a, p.150) is required, without which the process of repression would fail and the repressed content would return. In this way repression can be understood as an ongoing process by which the unconscious continuously strives to manage internal conflicts, negotiating what can remain in consciousness and what must be pushed into the unconscious. Much like a "foreign body which long after its entry must be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (Breuer and Freud, 1895, p.9), the repressed material remains active, creating a pressure from the unconscious, generating symptoms and shaping the way a person may feel, think or behave. Whilst the mechanisms of repression attempt to maintain this balance between the conscious and unconscious, it is not a perfect or stable system. Rather, it is one in which the repressed content continually resurfaces, persistently disrupting this balance through indirect forms of expression.

It is exactly this resurfacing of repressed material that brings about Freud's notion of the return of the repressed. Rather than remaining buried, repressed impulses, memories and desires continue to operate within the unconscious, attempting to leak back through, bypassing the ego's defenses in order to find new ways in which it may re-emerge in the conscious mind. This re-emergence of material however, does not result in a direct reproduction of the original experience, rather it reappears in often symbolic, distorted or disguised forms. Freud (1900) observed that events such as dreams, slips of the tongue and neurotic symptoms could all be understood as examples of this indirect return. Through mechanisms such as substitution, displacement and condensation, the repressed material is able to be transformed in such a way that renders it more acceptable to consciousness, thus allowing the repressed to surface whilst still maintaining a level of protection. Displacement for example, is one such manifestation of this mediated return. Allowing for intense emotions or desires to be redirected from it's original memory and instead attaching them to alternative safer substitutes, enabling what was once too painful or unacceptable to emerge in a more manageable but often distorted or

fragmented form (Freud, 1915b, p. 181). This suggests a way of understanding the fragmented and indirect forms that emerge in Louise Bourgeois' work, not as a direct expression of experience but as the return of repressed material.

Building on this idea of displacement as an indirect and mediated return, Freud further expands on this model through what he described as a compulsion to repeat. He observed that what has been repressed does not only reappear in displaced or symbolic forms, but is also enacted through patterns of behaviour. Rather, it is an unconscious drive to reenact painful past traumas, situations or relationship patterns even when they cause distress. This challenged Freud's earlier findings on the pleasure principle, complicating the idea that the psyche simply seeks to avoid pain. As Freud later acknowledges, although there is "a strong tendency towards the pleasure-principle ... certain other forces ... are opposed, so that the ultimate issue cannot always be in accordance with the pleasure-tendency" (Freud, 1920, p. 6), suggesting that the compulsion to repeat is not an attempt to achieve pleasure but rather the psyche's drive to return to what is familiar, even if it may cause pain. What Freud makes clear is that repetition compulsion does not reflect the return of memory but the enactment of the "past as a present-day force" (Freud, 1914, p. 7), emerging as an unconscious acting out of what cannot be remembered. This compulsion to repeat was understood by Freud (1920) to be an attempt to change or gain mastery over earlier traumatic experiences. However, what Freud observed was that it was only by bringing these unconscious behaviours into conscious awareness that these patterns could be resolved.

It was in response to these observations that Freud developed his concept of working-through. This therapeutic process he established as a way to address repressed psychological material in turn allowing for the analysand to overcome them. Freud argued that insight alone was not enough to produce a cure however, instead the patient must repeatedly 'work-through' the repressed emotions both to understand and to confront the resistances that were preventing them from healing. Working-through therefore is an often long and difficult process, one which requires the patient to not only identify repressed material but to emotionally process and accept it. As noted earlier, the past is not remembered directly but instead repeated through actions, behaviours and emotional responses. It is the aim then of this working-through to bring awareness to these repetitions and transform them from

unconscious re-enactments into a conscious understanding. Central to this process is the role of transference, an unconscious redirection of feelings, desires and expectations from earlier relationships onto the analyst. Whilst Freud initially considered this process to be a form of resistance he later recognised it as an essential tool in analysis, explaining how it "creates an intermediate region between illness and real life through which the transition from one to the other is made" (Freud, 1920, p. 11). Similarly, Freud's earlier model of the 'talking cure' or cathartic method, developed alongside Josef Breuer, established the importance of verbal expression in overcoming resistances and bringing unconscious material into awareness (Breuer and Freud, 1895). Through tools such as free association, Freud observed how these processes provided a method by which the analysand was able to release blocked emotions, in turn easing psychological symptoms. Together these concepts allow an understanding of working-through as an active and repetitive process, by which unconscious experience is not just revealed but transformed over time.

Whilst Freud's model of working-through situates verbal articulation as the primary medium in which repressed memories are brought into consciousness, it also allows consideration for how this process might extend beyond speech alone. If working-through is a process of repeated return to repressed material, then what becomes significant is not the medium of speech itself but the ongoing act of encountering and reworking this material over time. In this sense, the act of making can be understood as an embodied form of working-through, in which materials become a site of non-verbal expression. This framework opens up a way of reading the repeated forms and processes Louise Bourgeois uses within her practice, not simply as recurrence but as an ongoing attempt to engage and transform unresolved psychological experience.



Figure 1: Louise Bourgeois, Personages - Installation View (Xavier Hufkens, 2008)

Louise Bourgeois' series of Personages, her first major body of sculptures were produced primarily between 1945 and 1955. Developed shortly after her move to New York, they consist of tall, vertical wooden forms, roughly human in scale and often displayed in small spatial groupings. Describing them herself as "a manifestation of 'homesickness'" (Kirili, 1989), they are understood to be surrogate figures that represent the family she left behind in France. However, rather than direct representation, the simplified, elongated structures, constructed from discarded planks of wood, provide more of an abstracted, loose suggestion of the human form. In this way, the Personages can be understood less as Bourgeois' attempt to recreate portraits of specific individuals and more as a process of displacement, where memory and affect are held within the sculptural forms.

Whilst the Personages hint at human figures, their slender forms lack any clear distinction between body parts such as heads or limbs, producing a sense of fragmentation and ambiguity. Many are also unstable due to their narrow bases, often balancing precariously or needing extra support. Maurice Halbwachs (2012)

describes how one's sense of stability is closely linked to their surroundings, so when considering the broader context of these pieces, their instability can be understood not simply as a structural decision but rather as a material embodiment of Bourgeois' own feelings of homesickness. In works such as 'Knife Couple' (Fig. 2) the proximity of the two pieces imply a relationship, however the figures remain separate, disconnected. Rather than directly representing absence and loss, these states are felt spatially.

Bourgeois produced approximately eighty Personages over a ten year period, and whilst each piece differs slightly in height and proportion, they maintain a sense of cohesion across the series (Fig. 1). This repeated return to process and form, in relation to Freud could suggest a kind of compulsion, where the act of making becomes a way of managing and working through difficult experiences. Bourgeois herself describes the series of works as "an attempt not only at recreating the past but controlling it" (Bourgeois, 1976, quoted in Coxon, 2010, p. 25), reinforcing the act of repetition as becoming a way of engaging with unresolved emotional states. In this sense, this series of sculptures can be understood as functioning as a material enactment of Freud's model of repetition compulsion.

From a psychoanalytical view then, what becomes significant in the series of Personages is not the individual sculptures themselves but rather the continued act of producing them. Each version adds to the last, resulting in an accumulation of similar works, all existing alongside each other. This process of repetition aligns with Freud's idea of working-through, where rather than repetition being a process of refinement, instead it functions as a way to reengage with repressed material over time. In Bourgeois' case this becomes visible through the Personages themselves, when considering their repeated construction, with each one representing another engagement with unresolved emotions. In this way, what becomes important is not a single sculpture but rather the repeated act of making itself.



Figure 2: Louise Bourgeois, Knife Couple, 1949 (Taylor Wendt, 2026)



Figure 3: Louise Bourgeois, Portrait of C.Y., 1947 - 1949 (The Easton Foundation, 2019a)

This process of working-through in the Personages is not only apparent in their repetition, but also in the making process. Often created from salvaged pieces of wood, the act of carving and cutting leaves visible marks on the surface, emphasising the physical labour involved in their making and a record of the actions that created them. These processes are important to be considered not just as a technique but as an embodied act. As Philip Larrat-Smith suggests "the resistances that manifest themselves during analysis are analogous to the resistances of the material with which she worked as a sculptor" (Larrat-Smith, 2022, p.107), which allows us to understand the process of carving and cutting into wood not as something neutral but something that provides feedback, a resistance. This is something that becomes more clear in works such as 'Portrait of C.Y.' (Fig. 3), this sculpture has nails hammered into the surface, suggesting a more aggressive act. Bourgeois described this piece as being a way of controlling her feelings, whilst referencing an acquaintance she states that "this piece kept me from doing to her what I did to the sculpture" (quoted in Coxon, 2010, p. 27). In this sense, the sculpture can be understood as a process of sublimation, where rather than an act of

aggression being expressed outwardly, it gets redirected into the material itself. The act of carving and marking the wood therefore becomes a way of managing and transforming these impulses. In this sense, the Personages can be understood as carrying a material record of psychological experience. Each cut or gouge leaves a trace, building up over time, much in the same way Freud (1925) describes the idea of memory traces, where impressions remain within the unconscious never fully erasing even as new memories are created. The sculptures then are not a representation of any single fixed memory or emotion but a continual layering of embodied gestures. In this way the material itself become an intrinsic part of the process of working-through, acting as both a cathartic process and as a site of non-verbal expression.

In her later series of works, textiles became a more prominent feature in Louise Bourgeois' practice. Many of the fabrics she used came from her own past, including her old clothes, household textiles and pieces of tapestry. These materials all carrying their own history connecting her to her childhood and family life. Bourgeois cut, rearranged and stitched these materials back together, creating a series of soft sculptures, hanging forms and fabric panels. In this sense, the memories embedded within these materials become an integral part of understanding this body of work. For Bourgeois "fabric has been the locus of a desire to 'repair' memory and the past" (Celant, 2010, p.14), suggesting that the materials not only carry these fragments of the past but also act as sites in which it can be revisited.

In this sense, Bourgeois' series of Fabric works introduces a different relationship to memory than that seen in the Personages. Whilst the wooden surfaces of the Personages reveal an emergence of memory through the accumulation of carved marks and gestures, the Fabric Works are constructed from materials that already carry memory traces. More than this, Bourgeois process of cutting and reassembling these materials into sculptural form can be understood as a direct engagement with these memories, positioning the past not as something fixed but as something that can be reshaped through the making process. This body of work can in this way be considered a process of assemblage, "an act of slowly repairing, salvaging and revisiting aspects of the past to make something new" (Coxon, 2010, p.31). This shift in process also suggests a change in how Bourgeois

engages with her past. Whilst her earlier series of Personages often show a more aggressive engagement with material, the series of Fabric Works display a more reflective slower way of engaging with the difficult emotions associated with repressed material. Therefore, suggesting not a resolution of earlier psychic experiences but rather a change in how they are worked through. As Bourgeois herself states "assemblage is different to carving. It is not an attack on things. It is a coming to terms with things. ... It is really a work of love" (quoted in Coxon, 2010, p.30).

This shift in process is also reflected in the scale and physical presence of some of the pieces in this series. Rather than the more large scale, imposing nature of the Personages, the Fabric Works are often smaller and more contained, as can be seen in works such as 'The Couple' (Fig. 4 & 5). This piece depicts two small fabric figures in an embrace, their smaller scale suggesting a more intimate form of engagement. Often displayed beneath a glass dome, the work is physically enclosed introducing a feeling of both protection and separation. This containment suggests that what is held within the piece cannot be fully exposed but instead must be kept within a protective space. In turn, this also reinforces the fragility of the piece, suggesting that the emotions embedded within the piece are vulnerable and raw, in need of careful handling. This is something Bourgeois herself explains when speaking about her process, stating that "the intensity of the emotions are much too much for me to handle ... and that is why I transfer them. I transfer the energy into sculpture" (Cajori and Wallach, 2009), reinforcing the idea that the act of making can function as a way of containing and managing difficult experiences.



Figure 4: Louise Bourgeois, The Couple, 2005 (The Easton Foundation, 2019b)



Figure 5: Louise Bourgeois, The Couple, 2005 - Installation View (IMMA, 2005)

Much like with Bourgeois' earlier series of Personages, repetition is also a significant feature in her Fabric Works. However, whilst the function of repetition in the Personages can be understood in relation to Freud's concept of repetition compulsion, as a return to something unresolved, in her textile pieces rather than compulsion, repetition for Bourgeois becomes instead a way of engaging with and working through fragments of memory and time. For Bourgeois "repetition ... is invigorating. It allows one to survive one more day, to contain anxiety within tangible form" (Lancelin, 2025). This is especially evident in works such as *Ode à l'Oubli* (Fig. 6 & 7) a fabric book made from fragments of Bourgeois' archive of textiles, including items such as her own clothing, embroidered napkins and scarves. Each page features a fabric collage, made up of repeating abstract forms, the act of layering and assembling these fragmented pieces suggests an attempt to give structure to her past. As the materials themselves carry traces of lived experience, each page provides a site for re engaging the past, an opportunity to process and bring a new understanding. In this sense, repetition becomes a way of seeking stability and

order, functioning as "a liberation from fear and anxiety : a therapy" (Celant, 2010, p.14).



Figure 6: Louise Bourgeois, Ode a l'Oublie (Sothebys, 2021)



Figure 7: Louise Bourgeois, Ode a l'Oublie - Installation View (Griesel, 2021)

These processes of repetition and containment then, align with Freud's model of working-through, carried out through the acts of cutting and sewing. In Bourgeois' textile practice cutting becomes a moment of rupture, "a symbolic wound" (Pajaczkowska, 2019, p.90), where the materials are separated and disrupted. In this sense, what is also being disrupted is the personal history held within the materials themselves. Bourgeois herself states that she is "a prisoner of [her] memories ... [her] aim [being] to get rid of them" (BBC, 2007) so it can be considered that this process of cutting therefore becomes a "symbolic representation of an imaginary separation" (Pajaczkowska, 2019, p.90). However, this act of fragmentation is not left unresolved, through the process of sewing and reassembling Bourgeois reconfigures pieces of her past. Sewing in this sense, functions as a form of repair, "if the cut is a wound, then the sewing brings together, it is a form of reparation" (quoted in Celant, 2010, p.19). This process is visible in works such as 'The Woven Child', 2002 (Fig. 8 & 9) where two figures are composed of stitched fabric pieces, held together by exposed seams. These visible seams emphasise the process of making, whilst at the same time highlighting the act of repair. The small childlike figure placed on top of the torso and held in place by netting, brings a sense of vulnerability, again suggesting a need for support and containment. In this sense, these series of works

suggest that the act of making does not resolve the past but instead it provides an opportunity for reengaging with it. Bourgeois does not erase these experiences but rather, through process such as cutting and sewing she reshapes them, allowing them to be worked through over time.



Figure 8: Louise Bourgeois, The Woven Child, 2002 (Einspruch, 2006)



Figure 9: Louise Bourgeois, The Woven Child, 2002 - Detail (Einspruch, 2006)

This essay has explored how Louise Bourgeois' practice can be understood as a process of working-through, where she uses materials to engage with her own psychological experience in a non-verbal way. Drawing on Freud's model of repression and repetition, it has argued that rather than simply being a direct expression of emotions and memories, Bourgeois' practice can be understood as enacting psychoanalytic processes. At a deeper level, it is a returning to and reworking of difficult experiences through the act of making.

In the *Personages* series, this process is visible in the repetition of similar forms and the abstract nature of the sculptures, suggesting the indirect and displaced return of repressed material. The more abstract forms of these sculptures reinforce Freud's assertions that repressed material emerges in fragmented ways, suggesting that what is being worked through in this series of works is too difficult to process directly. In the later series of *Fabric Works*, this relationship to memory

shifts, with the materials Bourgeois uses already being embedded with traces of the past. By cutting, stitching and reassembling, she reengages with these traces, reconstructing and shaping her own memories. In this way, the function of repetition in this series can be understood as a way for Bourgeois to gain a sense of control and order over her own anxious thoughts and emotions.

Through this understanding, Bourgeois' work shows that psychological experience is not something that can be directly expressed or resolved but rather it requires a process of repeated engagement over time. In this sense, for Bourgeois the act of making becomes a way of thinking through the body, where materials become a site for containing, managing and reshaping difficult experiences. This can be understood as a material form of Freud's notion of working-through where understanding emerges through the physical interaction with materials.

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