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**Conspicuously absent Jews, alien environments: Polish artists Mirosław Balka and Rafał Jakubowicz on the Holocaust**

(יהודים בולטים בהעדרם: האמנים הפולנים מירוסלב באוקה ורפאל יעקובוביץ על השואה)

Both of them are easy to omit. You can just pass by not noticing anything. The first one is like a piece of trash, and the second one – like a clumsy advertisement.

The first, "97x38x45", is a strange curved metal piece<sup>1</sup>. If not for a regular square base, a vertical smashed bar would be hardly recognizable. Geometrical regularity of the pedestal makes us certain that the piece used to have another, more down-to earth appliance. Taken probably from a bin, it is a sort of archaeological discovery. It is a part of something not existing anymore.

The second, בריכת-שחייה – „berechat sechija” – a Hebrew word meaning swimming-pool, was just a screening. On April 4<sup>th</sup> 2003 on the front elevation of an old municipal swimming-pool in Poznań in Wroniecka Street a caption indicating the current function of the building was projected. The only strange thing about this is the fact that the caption was projected in Hebrew, a language hardly known in contemporary Poland. If a smart Poznań citizen wanted to learn the meaning of the word, he would probably be very disillusioned after a private investigation. „Pływalnia” – a Polish word for a swimming-pool – is just the current function of the building.

Both works were executed by outstanding Polish artists. The works seemed to be incomprehensible, the story about them hidden, not resolved in the title.

The reason for taking some rubbish and showing it in a gallery as a ready made could be of course explained by artistic procedures. A smashed metal bar looks like a mockery of *Bird in Space* by a Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi. *Bird in Space*, a masterpiece of modernism, gleams like jewelery. The meticulously polished laconic shape seems to be immaterial, combined with light and the dream of flight. Both vertical and dynamic, it combines the ambition of conquering the sky and the aspiration of distancing from the material world in one form. "97x38x45" is like a dirty impersonation, an ill, wingless bird who forgot about his instinct of flying a long time ago.

The reason to screen the function of a building in a language unknown to the community living next to it seems to be obscure. But it is not just an alien tongue. It is the language of

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1 *Beyond*. Mirosław Balka. Alfredo Pirri, The Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, Kraków 2007.

Jews, a community which has given rise to many anti-Semitic emotions in certain ultra-national circles of contemporary Poland, all despite the fact that Jewish communities are not numerous, almost non-existent. Is the screening prepared for tourists or is it for teasing with the hatred of some of our neighbors?

Both works – the first made by Mirosław Balka (born 1958) and the second – executed by Rafał Jakubowicz (born 1974) – also exist in the form of photographs. Both works interfere with real space but both have another form of existence – they are portable, evoking real space and a real event. However, a photograph always has an aesthetic aspect, it always refers to the history of the medium and to the personal history of a beholder, their references and memories. The aesthetics of photography can be named a disguise. Luc Tuymans once said about a picture he painted that it had to be somehow disguised. “If it is not disguised, it is not accessible”, he said. “Access” relates to the layers of violence, humiliations which cannot be shown just by brush strokes on canvas stretched on a frame. Balka’s photograph is very elaborated as it concerns light and shadow. The artist used a very special “disguise” for the above-mentioned fence pole; it evolved from the reminiscences from ancient museum-like art: Balka’s intriguing photograph is very inter-textual, evoking many associations, with very sophisticated light and *tenebroso* effect. We are even astonished how the artist inserts so unimportant object in the cultural web of high art. There is a deep shadow on the right (therefore we “read” it rather from the right to the left) and the contrast between clearness and obscurity evokes landscapes by Rembrandt, with biblical inspiration, stormy, with rich dark tones and ominous sky (in the collection of Czartoryski’s Museum in Cracow there is a quite similar *Landscape with the Charitable Samaritan*. Stormy weather with heavy black clouds is retreating because of a charitable deed of the good Samaritan. The sun shines again thanks to people of good will – such is the common consensual metaphorical interpretation of the picture). On Balka’s photograph, however, even the clearness is dim. Nothing passes away, nothing is finished – a metaphorical interpretation is not possible. Rembrandtesque *chiaroscuro*, a deep contrast between light and dark does not support a moral parable; Balka’s picture is not metaphorical and does not favor a spiritual concept. If it “speaks”, it does not give any prescriptive subtext introducing proper ways of behaving and believing. A noble disguise, an elegant and restrained image discredits any subtext it relates to. Balka destroys narratives to which he refers and any consensual reading.

When we think about photographs of sculptures taken by sculptors themselves we cannot omit Constantin Brancusi. He has shot pictures himself because his cosmological ideas inspired him not to take documentary or conventional photographs of sculptures, but to make

another personal statement about the world which comes into living with the works he created. For Brancusi sculptures are *dramatis personae* in the beginning of the world, “a creation of a forceful mysterious entity”<sup>2</sup>. When we look at *97x38x45* (1942/2006) there is an evident similarity. A pole looks almost like *Bird in Space*, a soaring structure. *97x38x45* also has a very specific pedestal. Maybe it is in reference to the great Romanian sculptor because “Brancusi did not make a conceptual distinction between the base and the sculpture itself. (...) The so-called pedestals were constituent parts of his whole artistic conception”<sup>3</sup>. A “pedestal” made by Balka is a sponge repeating the shape of the metal base, fitting it perfectly. An industrial sponge (not of any noble natural material, like marble, onyx or brass which are so typical for the Romanian master) and a destroyed bar are a radical mockery of Brancusi’s new beginning – a form is not invented or found in the genius of the artist but is appropriated just for a comparison, being almost the same as the one conceived by a modernist genius. It is not clear if it is a homage or a mockery.

Jakubowicz shot a sort of a transparent documentary from his action. No elaborated *tenebroso*, no obvious relations with high art, neither Tuymans’s chalky palette and foggy shadows disbelieving visual world nor Balka’s limited chromatic range, poor and full of dignity. Kids in a swimming pool, showers, white tiles... It is so banal that we wait for the real reason behind shooting all these regular and casual objects. There is no groundbreaking event, not even a small incident. Kids are swimming and playing with each other, tiles protect walls from humidity, showers are functional as in thousands other places. If you can make any comparison, it would rather be Hitchcock’s suspense. There is, however, one piece of information that destroys the careless mood. The municipal swimming pool in Poznań is a former synagogue, transformed into a swimming-pool by Nazi invaders. After the liberation Poles decided to continue using the building in its altered function. On April 4<sup>th</sup> 1940 the stars on the domes in Wroniecka Street synagogue were taken down and exactly on the 63<sup>th</sup> anniversary, on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2003 a screening recalled the event in a very subversive way: not returning to the exact past, to the very moment, reenacting the atrocity of Nazi authorities. The act and power of recollecting mixed two happenings in the mind of the artist – transforming the synagogue into an indoor swimming pool and a sort of a non-event continuation of the transformed function after the liberation from the German occupation. A screening that seemed to be from a nightmare is in fact an accusation not only of German

<sup>2</sup>Edith Balas, *The Sculpture of Brancusi in the Light of His Rumanian Heritage*, Art Journal, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter, 1975-1976), p. 95, see also Victor Stoichita, *Short History of the Shadow*, The University of Chicago Press 1997

<sup>3</sup> Edith Balas, *Object-Sculpture, Base and Assemblage in the Art of Constantin Brancusi*, Art Journal, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Autumn, 1978), p. 38

authorities but also of Polish ones. As Iza Kowalczyk noticed on the occasion: “It may have seemed that a swimming-pool built by the Nazi in a former synagogue should be something „temporary” but it has turned out that Poles willingly profit from that „gift” It is “the dark side of the entanglement in history”.<sup>4</sup> Jakubowicz puts the remembrance of victims under consideration. He submits a problem for the discussion about victimized Polish history which shuts the others out. The difficulty is enormous – it is the status of a victim focused on their own suffering and unable to see the atrocities experienced by their fellow victims or just unknown human beings. It seems that by putting the word in Hebrew, a “natural” language for the building, but writing a word which does not refer to the original function Jakubowicz posed a question to the public and waited for their reaction. The artist edited a postcard from the event; on the averse of the postcard there was the building during the projection, and on the reverse, an image of three swimming boys taken from a corridor through an opened door. Their attention is focused on a camera. We can see their naked bodies. One of the boys is wearing black swimming-glasses and looks as if he was blind. He obviously cannot see the real meaning of the space around him. I can imagine Jakubowicz taking a photograph of Mirosław Balka as a child. It is chronologically preposterous – Jakubowicz is 16 years younger – but it makes sense if we think about the picture in terms of bitter awakening. A boy in black glasses doesn’t know yet where he enjoys himself in a light-hearted manner. The controversy is obvious – how the victims bring up their children, how friendly is Polish public space towards discussion about the past, whether or not we – poor and Sovietized after the World War II – can see anything apart from our own disaster. And what in fact “our own disaster” means. Jakubowicz meditates on how ambivalent the intergenerational transmission of victimization can be. Transferred into a public space it is at least as long as the duration of a screening: a projection mirrors our consciousness, knowledge and prejudices. In the series of photographs taken by Jakubowicz we can see the grid form of white tiles in the interior of the former synagogue. Hygiene, functionalism and modernism - three important ideas of European heritage - bound together show their ominous side: radical oppression. Because we see how the old “improper” form is confined, imprisoned and suffocated by the “adequate” one.

There is also one piece of information about Balka’s work that radically changes our perception. Only from an article in the catalogue can we learn that the pole that Balka exhibited and photographed was once a part of a fence separating the Jewish side of Otwock (a town where Balka was born and now has his studio) from the non-Jewish one. The artist

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4 Iza Kowalczyk’s blog <http://strasznasztuka.blox.pl>

uses a piece he knew from his childhood but he probably learned its real purpose many years later. The real appliance of the pole apparently intoxicated his memory with an inconceivable pain – as a kid he played carelessly with something used to divide people into two categories: those worthy of living and those unworthy of it. No doubt, such a fact affects deeply, piercing the consciousness and emotions, changing the memory, putting a shadow on joyful childhood activities. We can imagine how a strange piece of metalwork – an ill bird – after its history has been exposed, suddenly pierced the mind changing the meaning of a childhood pastime and amusement, bringing personal involvement in the atrocities of the World War II. Real knowledge changed the past vanquishing the assumption of being innocent. If we recall the boy from the swimming-pool built in a former synagogue we realize that Jakubowicz manages to show us an alien environment. Balka and the young boy from the swimming-pool did not do anything evil. Will the youngster feel compassion and remorse, blaming himself for something done in the time before his birth? Balka's personal view supports a "disguise" of high art – a radical accusation of the Western culture. The artist does one intervention in his ready made – a spongy base which separates the bar from the ground making it a marker of the space. Balka exhibits a fence pole but at the same time prevents the space from being divided into "here" and "there", depriving it of its function. Thus the pedestal, once "the morphological generator of the figurative part of the object" and "the marker of the work's homelessness integrated into the very fiber of the sculpture"<sup>5</sup> questions its status being both transportable – as a traditional art object – and belonging for ever to the tragedy of Otwock. As Anda Rottenberg noticed: "the fence posts lost their primary function as early as 1942, but retain their utilitarian value to this day"<sup>6</sup>. If we recall the modernists' beliefs that every single object relates to us, that the quality of our life and its moral core depend on the objects and spaces we are surrounded by, it should be also noticed that getting rid of some things – carriers and witnesses of terrible stories – is connected with a wish to live in an Utopian amnesia. Undoubtedly the countries behind the former iron curtain got rid of the traces of the World War II quicker than Central Europe. Many visitors from the Western Europe or the States expect some special exotic experiences in Poland. Peter Schjedahl who came to Poland to visit Balka explains that in Poland – as in many places where poverty is a chronic condition – there is nothing really clean, there are probably as many kinds of filth as there are terms describing snow and white color in the Inuit language<sup>7</sup>. Exotic dirt and exotic haunting

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<sup>5</sup>Rosalind Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, October, Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979), p.35

<sup>6</sup> *Beyond. Mirosław Balka. Alfredo Pirri*, The Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, Kraków 2007, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> At my disposal is only Polish translation Peter Schjedahl, *Polskie haiku*, source: *Mirosław Balka*, Galeria Foksal, Warszawa 1993, p.14. In Polish language Schjedahl uses derogative term *Escimo*

atmosphere is an expected background for another expected factor – the overwhelming anti-Semitism. Schjeldahl expounds some other expectations from the former Soviet empire – an exotic transfusion. As he presumes, Western art is exhausted and its best hauls are namely Ilya Kabakow and Mirosław Balka. Schjeldahl's vampire-like idiom makes me very suspicious of some Western commentaries on Balka's art – as if his fame was grounded on cliché expectations. I will give some examples of such a yuppie anthropology. Alice Rekab wrote “somehow the works transgress the mere sum of their parts both critically and physically; their appearance and the spaces they inhabit can only be described as uncannily haunting, an experience which I would personally compare to that of passing through the horrifically sublime, desolate spaces of a Nazi concentration camp”<sup>8</sup>. Also Maev Kennedy wrote “Balka was raised as a Roman Catholic, but his work is described as haunted by memories of the destruction of Poland's Jewish communities in the Holocaust”<sup>9</sup>. “Polish sculptor Mirosław Balka has produced some of the most moving and haunting installations of recent decades” - wrote Robert Clark in “The Guardian” (Saturday 17 November 2007) on the occasion of *Mirosław Balka Exhibition* in Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in 2007. Richard Cork claimed that “his powerful new show at White Cube is haunted by the bestiality of crimes committed in the camps”<sup>10</sup>. Term “haunting” was used to describe Balka's works by Lynne Cook<sup>11</sup>, in Barbara Gladstone Gallery press release we can read about *Winterreise*, a work of 2003 included in this show, “embodies Balka's method of capturing these haunting aspects of the past and reframes them to highlight the contrast of what happened and what memory reveals”<sup>12</sup>. Julia Tikhonova describing a projection of the *Bottom* video by Balka in a pit of an industrial dock, on the occasion of The 6th Biennale at Site Santa Fe (2007) wrote about the “haunting nature of the artist's steps, which metaphorically echo the collective memories of the Holocaust and, in particular, the massacre of Polish Jews”<sup>13</sup>. Karsten Schubert grasped the atmosphere by saying that “the sense of loss, futility and desolation was almost unbearable”<sup>14</sup>. On the same work Márcia Fortes wrote simply: “a haunting piece by Mirosław Balka”<sup>15</sup>.

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8 Alice Rekab, *Mirosław Balka: Tristes tropiques*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, November 2007 - January 2008, “Circa Art Magazine” 2008 (<http://www.recirca.com/reviews/2008/texts/mb.shtml>)

9 Maev Kennedy, *Polish artist wins commission to fill Tate Modern's Turbine Hall*, “The Guardian”, Friday 30 January 2009

10 Richard Cork, *Mirosław Balka, White Cube, London*, The Independent, Sunday, 14 December 2008

11 Lynne Cooke, *Rites of Passage. London, Tate Gallery*, The Burlington Magazine, Vol. 137, No. 1110 (Sep., 1995), p. 635: “haunting early figure works by Mirosław Balka”

12 *MIROSLAW BALKA*, “Neither”, September 18–October 23, 2004

13 Yulia Tikhonova, *Let the Art Speak For Itself*, “NYArts Magazine” September–October 2006

14 K. Schubert, *Review: The 1998 Bienal. São Paulo*, “The Burlington Magazine”, Vol. 141, No. 1150 (Jan., 1999), p. 62. The author refers to “a, e, i, o, u,” (1997)

15 Márcia Fortes, XXIV São Paulo Biennial, “Frieze”, Issue 44 January–February 1999

To haunt means to obsess or reappear continually as a spirit or ghost. I quoted these “haunting” description with a twofold aim: first of all, to underscore that it is not Balka’s art which is haunted but the memory of survivors’ descendants and it is a postmemory torment which persistently remains causing anxiety not only to Eastern Europeans. Secondly – I want to underscore layers of clichés and the above-mentioned yuppie anthropology Balka or any artist from the former Soviet empire must challenge. Balka speaks almost intimately about his experience; what he brings to Western galleries is not exotic ambience from a haunted land but his feelings and experience. His newest installation *Audi HBE F144* (2008) showing a luxury German car with the Pope Benedict XVI passing through a gate *Arbeit macht frei* shows how the artist fights with the image of a visitor from a haunted land. The empathy and memory do not deprive the artist of a very sharp and distanced observation skill.

Because of his international recognition and because his art is so entangled with the past, Mirosław Balka – an artist from a country where German Nazis built concentration camps after having enslaved the inhabitants – is of course awaited to give a statement on Holocaust. History, death and childhood are focal for Mirosław Balka’s art; the artist underscores his provincial origin and his involvement with the past exposing how his identity is based on missing, absent and dead people who left him incomplete for ever. But Balka said once, on the occasion of a common exhibition *Privacy* with Luc Tuymans: “I try not to say things directly about the World War II, because after so many years it would be too cheap.”<sup>16</sup>

For many contemporary Poles, born after the World War II, the memory about the Holocaust has been transmitted by an incomprehensible inner silence of survivors. “Daddy never spoke about it”, I can repeat myself as can my many other pals – the second generation of survivors’ descendants. We have seen what happened from Soviet and later on from Hollywood films, photographs documenting the horror but in fact the real memory carrier is incredibly subtle: these are hand gestures of our family members, body language, facial expression when reacting to an unexpected event, ways of eating meals. My father was very thoughtful not to transmit evil, to stop it, believing that oral histories communicated to his nearest and dearest can affect them somehow. I think that according to him, his taciturnity built a sort of shelter protecting his family. My position towards the silence of survivors is very personal – my father was imprisoned in Stutthof concentration camp. I can repeat after Marianne Hirsch that “my reading is overwhelmingly autobiographical” and I do eagerly adopt her term “postmemory” relating to the second generation memory – as it connects the objects or

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16 *Privacy*. Luc Tuymans/Mirosław Balka 1958, 1998, Fundação de Serralves, Porto 1998 (no pagination)

sources “mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation”<sup>17</sup>. Because of my personal experience I am especially responsive to such kind of art dealing with the Holocaust that shows it in the perspective of intergenerational haunting and transmission but also as ineffable though ineradicable experience. I assume the perspective of the children of survivors, with – as Hirsch put it – “a need both to rebuild and to mourn the lost world of their parents”. Thus paradoxically, on the level of collective memory we cannot erase the experience but on the level of a personal wish there is a natural will to begin once again, to be reborn and not to remember. We have neither exact words nor adequate pictures but art keeps showing its impotency to describe our world plunged in the remote past we have not even experienced. For Balka taciturnity is not an evasive maneuver, it creates both a mental space to perform the task of mourning and alienation from what we see. But first of all a space of left traces sucks you in to make susceptible to vulnerability. He manages to speak about bodily experience of absence which makes us incomplete.

To use postmemory means to blur a time distance in an abrupt and acute act of revealing small detail from the past which irreversibly shifts an actual position. The past is not narrated but is suddenly revealed, and the precipitant agent of a comment like a stroke will not leave the beholder in the siteless realm of the sublime and grace but will transform or even substitute the past perfect tense. Balka’s works are not titled – they are usually actual dimensions instead of titles. To learn what we really see is conceived as a way, as binding together distant pieces of information. On the exhibition we encounter only centimeters of height, width and depth, no other explanation. Reading the catalog we usually must relate to our memory from the gallery. There is a gap between stories and the artworks, a meaning revealed in time and with a certain resistance. Works do not speak for themselves. Their stories are revealed instantly, almost whipping our body and penetrating our consciousness. As Luc Tuymans put it on a similar occasion, “Anything banal can be transformed into horror. Violence is the only structure underlying my work”. For Tuymans the discrepancy between a picture and the caption is also obvious – the Belgian artist stabilizes their meaning by naming pictures, by giving external explanation though it is always an opposition between a picture and a word, an inconsistency – they do not support each other. A picture destroys words and words destroy an image. Tuymans and Balka are especially aware of the fact that original production is not possible. Tuymans, however, shows the failure of representation using photographs as memory carriers, convincing us that no image can bear witness to war atrocities or document

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<sup>17</sup>Marianne Hirsch, *Postmemories in Exile*, Poetics Today, Vol. 17, No. 4, Creativity and Exile: European/American Perspectives II (Winter, 1996), p. 662

the horror. Tuymans reframed and cut them using a manner of painting he called himself “painterly clumsiness”, executing images insisting on their own failure. Everything important for both of the artists is beyond eyes, but for Balka the image itself is a secondary conveyor of experience because the primary one is combined with a human body. Thus through rediscovering the meaning of space and his own identity in it he makes past events vivid for our bodies enabling us to experience things which happened in remote past. His identity is constructed by the space he lives in, being more like a plant drawing water from the soil than like a man. Taking photographs of many wells, wells on cemeteries to make clear his, our situation: we drink water soaked and permeated with blood.

“I never refer to violence”<sup>18</sup> - said Mirosław Balka in an interview. It may have seemed quite surprising that without referring directly to rough and immoderate vehemence he manages to speak about damage, distortion and alteration of our being. Even using shadows, introducing absence as an index referring to the reality, he does not follow a traditional flight from immanence. A work is constructed not as opposed to the body and with an affinity to the shadow<sup>19</sup>. The author gives shadows to things – remarked once Andrzej Przywara commenting on Balka’s art and added that for him an artist was someone who can hold out, persisting with their failure<sup>20</sup>. There is no redemption – such a position enables the artist to speak about Holocaust. And the persistence of a personal narrative makes Holocaust for him – born in 1958 – a personal post-experience, exploring the individual’s relationship to the tragedy.

As opposed to Balka, who points out our incomplete bodies, condemned to be incubators of those who passed away, Rafał Jakubowicz uncovers and indicates spaces which cannot be grasped. The beholder realizes that he cannot take hold of a building, a back-yard; that he is an intruder even at home. The artist asks how spaces left by Jews can be used again because to domesticate them means to forget.

Anger, despair and rage are constituent elements of “Swimming-pool” and ”97x38x45”. The viewing of the works takes time, imposes the awareness of temporariness and of personal attitude, almost bodily participation. But first of all, these works need private investigations because nothing is obvious just by watching. There is no consensual

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18 *Każdy chłopiec boi się inaczej. Z Mirosławem Balką rozmawia Bożena Czubak/Each Boy Fears Differently. Mirosław Balka – interview by Bożena Czubak. „Magazyn Sztuki”/”Art Magazin” No 19 (3/98)*

19 Hans Belting describes Dante’s strategy of an image in *Divine Comedy*, focusing on Virgil, or rather his shadow in Hell and Purgatory, see H. Belting, *Toward an Anthropology of the Image*

20 Andrzej Przywara, *Puste miejsce*, in a catalogue: *Mirosław Balka. April. My Body Cannot Do Everything I Ask For*; Galeria Foksal Warszawa 1001

interpretation and the only exact elucidation is strictly personal and single. The gap between words and pictures entails drawing conclusions at one's own responsibility. In the works of Balka and Jakubowicz we cannot find any metaphors of new beginning. Balka's and Jakubowicz's works cover the narrative with ambivalence because different layers of an interpretation resist the integration, destroying one storyline. It is purposeful to quote Mieke Bal and her pertinent qualification of a narrative role in Louise Bourgeois' work: "a narrative becomes a tool, not a meaning, a mediator, not a solution, a participant, not an outsider"<sup>21</sup>. A narrative also seems to be a trap, because what we experience can be neither told nor seen. The forms of the works are infused with memory and await a bodily, temporal response. In contemporary art a modernist belief that to see means to understand is replaced by an understanding which comes with certain resistance and requires engagement far above visual form. Balka and Jakubowicz insisting on personal experience make the absence of our neighbours a very intimate experience.

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<sup>21</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narrative inside out: Louise Bourgeois' Spider as Theoretical Object*, Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 22, No. 2, Louise Bourgeois (1999), p. 103