

Jenny Holzer curates Louise Bourgeois: 'She was infinite'

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The inimitable work of Louise Bourgeois is seen through the eyes of Jenny Holzer in this potent meeting of minds at Kunstmuseum Basel



Louise Bourgeois, *Nature Study*, 1984. Photography: Kunstmuseum Basel, Jonas Hänggi

The idea for an exhibition of Louise Bourgeois' work curated by Jenny Holzer had been in process for some time before the puzzle pieces came together. But the Kunstmuseum Basel began to work in earnest with Holzer and the Eastern Foundation, Bourgeois' estate, and at long last, this potent meeting of creative minds is a reality.

In 'The Violence of Handwriting Across a Page' Holzer curates selected excerpts of Bourgeois' notes and writings alongside her artwork in a huge exhibition that spans sculpture, installation, works on paper and textile art. Tying these elements together captures the essence of Bourgeois as an artist, a person deep, forceful, outspoken and uncompromising.



Portrait of Holzer in the exhibition 'Louise Bourgeois x Jenny Holzer' at Kunstmuseum Basel |
Neubau. *Photography: © Xandra M. Linsin*

'I was invited to her house, and I had the luxury of spending an extended period of time with her, where I could look at, for example, a red wax ear of what appeared to be a demon sitting on the table beside us, and to have [an] extended, unselfconscious, absolutely sincere conversation about how to make the colour blue work,' Holzer recalled of their first meeting.

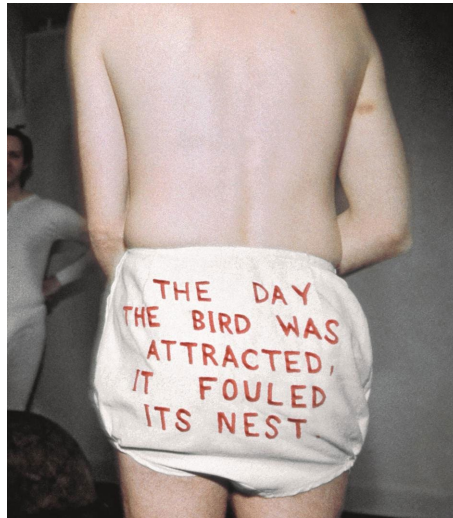
Holzer, who knew the legendary late French artist when they both lived in New York, always held great respect for her work and achievements. Combining this with an intrinsic boldness and understanding of the impact of language, Holzer brought together the text selected for the exhibition alongside works created throughout Bourgeois' prolific career.



Louise Bourgeois, *UNTITLED (I HAVE BEEN TO HELL AND BACK)*, 1996. *Photography: Christopher Burke*

'We went deep into the writing. She worked incessantly on her art, and wrote when she couldn't sleep, so we had a treasure trove,' said Holzer, who brought in a team of readers to get as deep an understanding as possible of the artist's notebooks.

Holzer's clean, precise type only serves to emphasize the visceral fury, blood, sex and humour in Bourgeois' words and works, in projections that cover the façades of three locations in the city at night – Kunstmuseum Basel, City Hall, and the Old University on the Rheinsprung. Inside the museum, the works tap into Bourgeois' comfort with extreme thoughts and emotions. Her drawings and textile works bear phrases such as 'The Rage to Know' and 'I am afraid therefore I live'. You can also experience these through an augmented reality app and Instagram filter.



Top: Louise Bourgeois, garment from performance *She lost it*, 1992. Above: Louise Bourgeois x Jenny Holzer projections, Alte Universität, Basel, 2022. Excerpts from Louise Bourgeois' personal writings, used with permission of the Louise Bourgeois Archive. © The Eastern Foundation/ Licensed by ProLitteris and VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

'As they say in Brooklyn, she was not playing,' said Holzer. 'Although she did have a wonderful sense of humour [and] a sense of adventure, she was utterly serious, dead serious about what she attempted and she would try again, again and again, to get it right. Unlike many artists, she often did.'

In studying Bourgeois' notes – a task Holzer says she could never have done while Bourgeois was alive – she was able to see where words and ideas translated into sculpture and drawing. Shown in Europe for the first time is the mechanised work *Twosome*, 1991, which links the old museum, the Hauptbau, to the contemporary wing, the Neubau via an underground passage. This takes you to four works by Bourgeois, in dialogue with the medieval to post-impressionist collection including pieces by Holbein and Cézanne.

Holzer's take on Bourgeois is a celebration of this inimitable artist. From an air of levity as you hear her singing in the museum lifts and bathrooms to her unwavering fearlessness and ability to confront the most unruly facets of humanity, this work hits you with its complexity in a manner impossible to misinterpret. 'She was enormously intelligent,' said Holzer. 'She was distressed, she was determined, she had incredible range, she was obsessive, she was furious, she would have a giggle from time to time and I will have to resort to the word infinite again. She was infinite.'



Louise Bourgeois, *Nature Study*, 1984. © The Eastern Foundation/ Licensed by ProLitteris and VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. *Photography: Allan Finkelman*



Portrait of Jenny Holzer, 1982 (taken at the installation: 'Jenny Holzer, Lee, Aron Fink', American Graffiti Gallery, Amsterdam, 1982) *Photo Credit: Aad van den Born - BFN, © ProLitteris, Zürich*



Louise Bourgeois, *The Family*, 2007 © The Eastern Foundation/ Licensed by ProLitteris and VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photography: Christopher Burke



Louise Bourgeois in her home on 20th Street in New York, 2004.

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