



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1959, canvas and metal, overall: 20½ x 20¾ x 7¼ in. (52.1 x 52.9 x 18.4 cm). Smith Museum of Art, Northampton, MA, purchased with a gift from the Chace Foundation (artwork © Lee Bontecou; photograph provided by Smith Museum of Art)

The Terms of Craft and Other Means of Making: Lee Bontecou's Hybrid Trajectory

Elyse Speaks

In 1958 Lee Bontecou began experimenting with a technique for making sculpture based on binding fabric to thin steel frames or armatures. Executed first on a small scale that oscillated between the form of the model and the form of tabletop sculpture, the works were emphatic in their distance from the shape and tenor of the dominant field of welded metal sculpture. These initial ambiguities were retained, exaggerated even, as their scale changed. The better-known results of Bontecou's experimentation, her wall reliefs from the early 1960s, were seen

as hybrid, unfixed, and fascinating. One early relief, dated 1959 and included in the Duke University exhibition *Women in Contemporary Art* in 1963, was described in that exhibition catalogue: "Her constructions in canvas and metal, intricately sewed and tied together, swell outward from the wall in heavy forms that build into space. Here painting and sculpture meet; canvas becomes form; painting becomes structure."¹ The description highlights her methods of making and seizes on the composite nature of the form—one in process between the pictorial two-dimensionality of painting and the material three-dimensionality of sculpture.

Several of Bontecou's earliest reliefs were based on a bisected structure that encouraged the suggestions of transformation, process, and dynamism. In the 1959 untitled relief, an imperfect diagonal runs almost completely from the composition's upper right to its bottom left. Above that line, the flattish fabric fragments comprise more or less concentric rings—unified, repetitive, and centripetal in feeling. Below, in contrast, the overwhelming sense is of an increasingly swelled form that is also shattered, fractured, and in collapse. The latter fragments show as much variation in depth, shape, and size as there is uniformity above. Yet, notably, the visibility of the work's armature and stitching acts to unify the two halves by drawing attention to their shared weave and structure.

Implicit in the very palpable, divided nature of the work's construction is the significance of a third term, craft, which must be brought to bear on this perceived intersection between painting and sculpture. This essay aims to approach the topic of craft as it plays out in the reception of a woman sculptor, as well as in her methods of making. By thinking through Bontecou's reception, which was at once filled with rapid and widespread acclaim, and at the same time unusual in its rhetoric, it becomes clear that the terms of craft are at play. Those terms were no less persistently visible in other documents, photographs, interviews, and statements by the artist. They were central in constituting the groundwork of Bontecou's remarkable reputation in the 1960s, particularly by means of the emphasis placed on the works' technical roots (by both Bontecou and critics), as well as the ascription of various notions of functionality.

Of course all of these issues often extended to suggest gendered readings of Bontecou's reliefs as appropriately "feminine" (for a female sculptor). Yet I suggest that gender, like craft, became a multivalent and unstable sign in the reliefs, which in turn seemed to produce that much more appeal. Moreover, this essay will contend that craft meant something different to Bontecou the artist than it did to her critical advocates, while suggesting that in both cases a certain notion of craft was integral to the approach to the work.² While Elissa Auther has recently demonstrated that, within the framework of fine art and 1960s sculpture, craft and "high art" were still held in opposition, with the low associations of

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1. "Lee Bontecou," *Women in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963), np.

2. I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that Bontecou herself was embracing the term "craft." Like many artists in the 1950s and 1960s, she associated craft with pejorative connotations and disliked terms that situated the work as craft. She expressly preferred the term "fastening" to "sewing," for instance, in descriptions of her process, and also conveyed her relief at having a sewing machine in her studio so that she did not have to do the stitching by hand. Mona Hadler, unpublished interview with Lee Bontecou, Giles-Bontecou Farm, Pennsylvania, July 1986.

craft there to bolster and advance the more original, self-expressive work of art, in Bontecou's work the presence of craft's terms contributed to rather than detracted from her stature.³

The Terms of Craft

In the late 1950s when Bontecou began making the reliefs, and into the early and mid-1960s when their status reached a critical peak, responses to Bontecou's work suggested that the structure and tenor of the objects spoke of functionality, yet in such a way as to deprive the terms of any clear use. Initially when we see something that appears mechanical and larger than the body, as Bontecou's reliefs tend to be, we suspect the realm of the industrial. The prominent uses of steel and copper, the dominance of browns, tans, and blacks, and the persistent sense that these materials had industrial pasts lend to the association. Critics sometimes capitalized on the history of the parts to make the connection official; one of the common facts to appear in early accounts of Bontecou's work was her use of discarded conveyor belts retrieved from the laundromat below her apartment in New York. In other words, recombining different parts, many of which seemed to hail from mundane and anonymous spaces, was widely understood as a viable way of holding on to that history, to that sense that there is a functionality at play that related to the larger world of labor.

At the same time, critics regularly emphasized the expressive, handmade nature of Bontecou's reliefs. Dore Ashton, for instance, wrote that Bontecou's works "very often remind me of the great wooden totems of the Pacific Northwest."⁴ In this, Bontecou was perceived to engage with a variation on an antisculptural tradition—one largely initiated by Rodin—by allowing the mark of the maker to supersede the work's authority as a vehicle of communication. Though no telltale imprint of the thumb is visible, the works' aggregate, detailed, and individualized means of construction evoked the handmade: its disjunctive connotations of the rote and impersonal and the subjective, the impassioned, the psychological, and so forth. Such responses are partly a matter of the contradictory position in which craft itself was held. It seemed at once to preclude individuality—being merely the copy of a pattern—and yet to imply an invested maker and all of the personal qualities inextricably tied to the pursuit of the hobbyist-craftsperson.

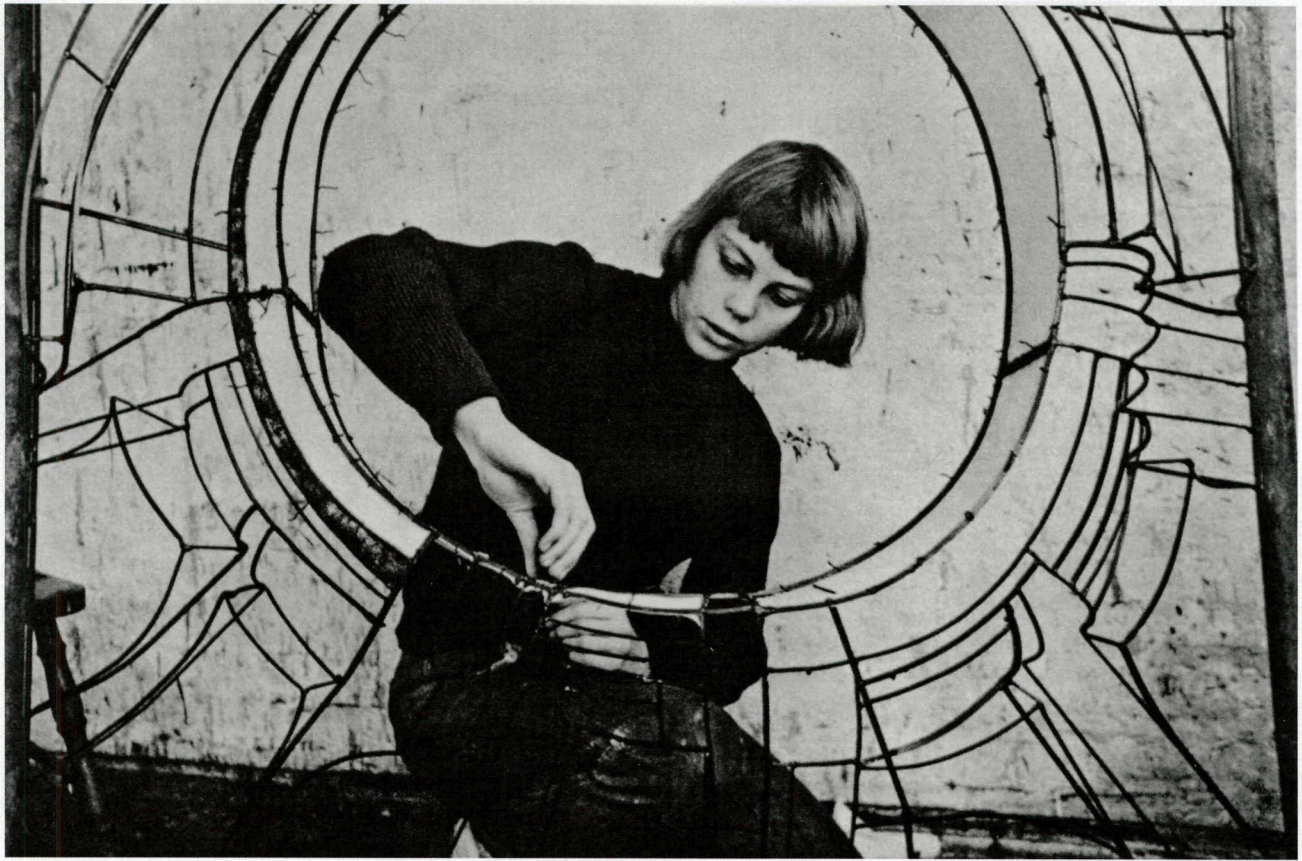
In Bontecou's case, that very contradiction led critics to treat the objects as less industrial than they first appeared. Their patched, sutured quality was said to have "hypnotic" effects, forcing the spectator into a prolonged engagement with the parts. For instance, in the pages of *Arts Magazine* between 1960 and 1965, Donald Judd, one of Bontecou's most important and persistent advocates, dwelled at length on the compositions of Bontecou's reliefs, devoting multiple reviews to formal description. His precise and careful attention increasingly elicited awareness of the works' fragility, a point emphasized through description and frequent photographs of Bontecou tying wire or looking up closely at their thin, empty armatures.⁵

The terms of craft were likewise signaled through repeated references to the labor involved in the works' construction. The contrasting types of work necessary (which included welding and sewing), as well as the extensive labor

3. Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), esp. introduction, "The Hierarchy of Art and Craft," xi–xxx.

4. Dore Ashton, "Lee Bontecou," in *Recent American Sculpture at the Jewish Museum 1964*, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1964), 13.

5. On fragility, see particularly, Donald Judd, "Lee Bontecou" (1965), rep. *The Complete Writings 1959–75* (Halifax and New York: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 179; and Jo Applin, "'This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object': Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void," *Art History* 29, no. 3 (June 2006): 499. For descriptions, see, for instance, Martin Craig, "Notes on Sculpture in a Mad Society," *Art News* 59 (January 1961): 27. The photographs appeared in several places, for example, in *Americans 1963*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963), 12; the unsigned review "Art: The Loft-Waif," *Time Magazine*, February 1, 1963, 59; and *Lee Bontecou*, exh. cat. (Leverkusen, Germany: Städtisches Museum, Schloss Morsbroich, 1968).



Guilia Niccolai, photograph of Lee Bontecou, ca. 1960–61 (photograph © Guilia Niccolai)

involved, seemed to be of particular fascination to Bontecou's audience; some, like Eva Hesse, remarked on this directly as when, after visiting Bontecou's studio, Hesse recorded, "I was amazed at what that woman can do . . . the complexity of her structures, what is involved, absolutely floored me."⁶ While Hesse referred here to the unusual and intricate technical production of the work, which would come to act as a model for her own practice, other critics regularly alluded to the use of fabric, the process of tying, and the presence of a decorative aesthetic.⁷

Yet rarely, if ever, were these various remarks, which carry the value-laden connotations of craft, burdened with attendant pejorative conclusions. Instead, partly because that labor was read to be in the service of a personal rhetoric, the presence of its components was viewed as both commendable and original. Judd, for instance, remarked on the works' "primitive, oppressive, and unmitigated individuality," concluding, "Bontecou's reliefs are an assertion of herself, of what she feels and knows."⁸ This is a somewhat surprising reading, given that the availability of craft as a vehicle for impressing subjectivity onto the terrain of an object, one that derived largely from 1970s feminist practices, and which today we associate readily with contemporary values, was entirely unpracticed at the time. Indeed, there is reason to suggest that the purchase that Bontecou's reliefs had in the 1960s, and the terms that formed the basis for that support, contributed to making that approach the viable one it is today.

While the popular/aesthetic view of craftwork entailed an association with anonymity and an absence of meaning, Bontecou's reliefs seemed to capitalize on

6. Eva Hesse quoted in Elizabeth Smith, "All Freedom in Every Sense," in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; Los Angeles: Hammer Museum; New York: Abrams, 2003), 176.

7. See, for example, William Seitz, "Eleven Artists of the United States: São Paulo Biennial," 1961; and Irving Sandler, "Review," *New York Post*, November 26, 1962.

8. Judd, 179.



Lee Bontecou, detail of *Untitled*, 1960, steel, canvas, parchment, and plastic, 54½ x 120 x 26⅞ in. (138.4 x 304.8 x 66.4 cm). National Gallery, Berlin (artwork © Lee Bontecou; photograph provided by BPK, Berlin/Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin/Art Resource, NY)

an inversion of the gendered associations of such terms. The visibility of their handwork—their refusal to efface the labor of their construction—registered a common reading of the objects as “feminine,” in turn obfuscating their legibility. That is, that labor contested the rhetoric that derived from their decidedly “masculine” scale and the industrial affiliations courted through their materials. Critics duly noted the problem, at times asking pointedly about the sex of their maker; as Michael Fried quipped in 1962, the reliefs really beg the question as to “who would make such things?”⁹

Perhaps that issue of technique might not have been of as much interest had the imagery of the works not been seen to corroborate in their gendering. Critics who took the most issue with Bontecou’s own sex were intent on reading the imagery of the reliefs—its repetitive black holes especially—as somehow feminine, relating to the sexed body, the *vagina dentata*, or the natural swell of the earth mother/breast.¹⁰ When less centered on bodily metaphor, the imagery broadened but held on to its feminine gendering through association with enigma, mystery, or unknowability. The most compromised and reductive of reviews, often those that ran in popular magazines, drew connections between the two, as in the following excerpt from a *Cosmopolitan* article dedicated to making sense of the new category the “woman artist”: “Perhaps the black holes, the boxlike forms, and the mysterious textures in her work are visual metaphors for the secrets and complications of the eternal Eve.”¹¹ Such descriptions conveniently overlooked how the reliefs’ size and scale contested both points, by registering as conventionally masculine and announcing an emphatic material presence, their palpability posing as an interruption to their “enigmatic” symbolism.

Though such explanations were rare at the time, the more compelling critical accounts suggested the means by which such ambiguities, gendered and otherwise, were intentionally sustained. Perhaps the first appeared in 1972, the time of Bontecou’s first retrospective, when its curator, Carter Ratcliff, attempted

9. Michael Fried, “New York Letter,” *Art International* 6, no. 10 (December 1962): 57 (italics mine).

10. See, for instance, Irving Sandler, “New York Letter—Ash Can Revisited,” *Art International* 4, no. 8 (October 1960): 28; John Ashbery, “Paris Notes,” *Art International* 7, no. 6 (June 1963): 76; Stuart Preston, “What’s New at the Modern,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1962, 181; and Edward T. Kelly, “Neo-Dada: A Critique of Pop Art,” *Art Journal* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1964): 200.

11. Jean Lipman and Cleve Gray, “The Amazing Inventiveness of Women Painters,” *Mademoiselle*, October 1961, 69.

to piece together the reliefs' complex means of construction with their wide-reaching imagery. Ratcliff perceptively pointed to Bontecou's work as "organic machines" and proposed that their allusive span from the biological to the mechanical forced a hybrid: "In describing Bontecou's steel and canvas constructions, mechanical and biological allusions suggest themselves before artistic ones. . . . One sees 'skeletons' of buildings and boats, the flesh of sails and tents. . . . On the biological side, skeletons and flesh are returned to their animal origins. One sees carapaces, shells, exposed membranes—animal tissues."¹² He returned often in the essay to the concept of the skeletal and other architectural terms that astutely connected imagery to technique. Bridging the biological and the mechanical, even as it testified to their natural proximity, the framing of the analysis around architectonics promoted a reading that seemed not to eschew gender so much as to demonstrate how a continuum might be applicable. It also suggested that the ambiguities and incompatibilities sensed were not simply failures on the part of the viewer, but intrinsic to the work itself.

Moreover, Ratcliff's essay drew out the salient connection between the specific material properties of the work and the idea of what such properties might resemble, an idea that had been implicit in the criticism for years. Judd recognized that this had to do with the literal nature of Bontecou's most repeated structure, the black hole itself. In Bontecou's objects, "The black hole does not allude to a black hole; it is one. The image does not suggest other things, but by analogy; the image is one thing among similar things."¹³ In this, the holes metonymically enact the sculpture's broader operation; time and again, it has been repeated that the reliefs at once act as though the object itself is something definite, explicit, and operational, and at the same time, that its structure, materials and imagery draw connections with a vast array of other possibilities that dilute viewers' certainty about what is actually in front of them.¹⁴

Bontecou's black holes often formed the aesthetic crux in an otherwise open and compositionally amorphous terrain. Their effects were made both more real and less tangible as a product of a given work's structure, its volume and void, and its technical construction—the visibility of the support, the palpability of the binding, and the absence of both as they culminate in the holes. The most insightful writing on Bontecou's work recognized that legibility was obscured in her sculptures precisely by way of their material intricacy. As the poet and critic John Ashbery remarked, "Someone"—note the phrasing—"has been there and has spent enormous energy in constructing a grotesque and sinister machine the use for which escapes you, though it obviously exists."¹⁵

Hobby Time

For over a decade prior to Ratcliff's essay, ideas circulated about Bontecou's work that framed it in terms of materiality and making.¹⁶ That is, there is a way in which the free play of terms about the rhetoric of craft defined the works' reception and purchase, albeit somewhat implicitly. Bontecou's technical methods, moreover, stood as material means that manifest connections between languages and forms usually held to be distinct. These objects became, at once, masculine and feminine, machinelike and organic, even figurative and abstract. The most vivid point of synthesis is precipitated through their terms of construction—the

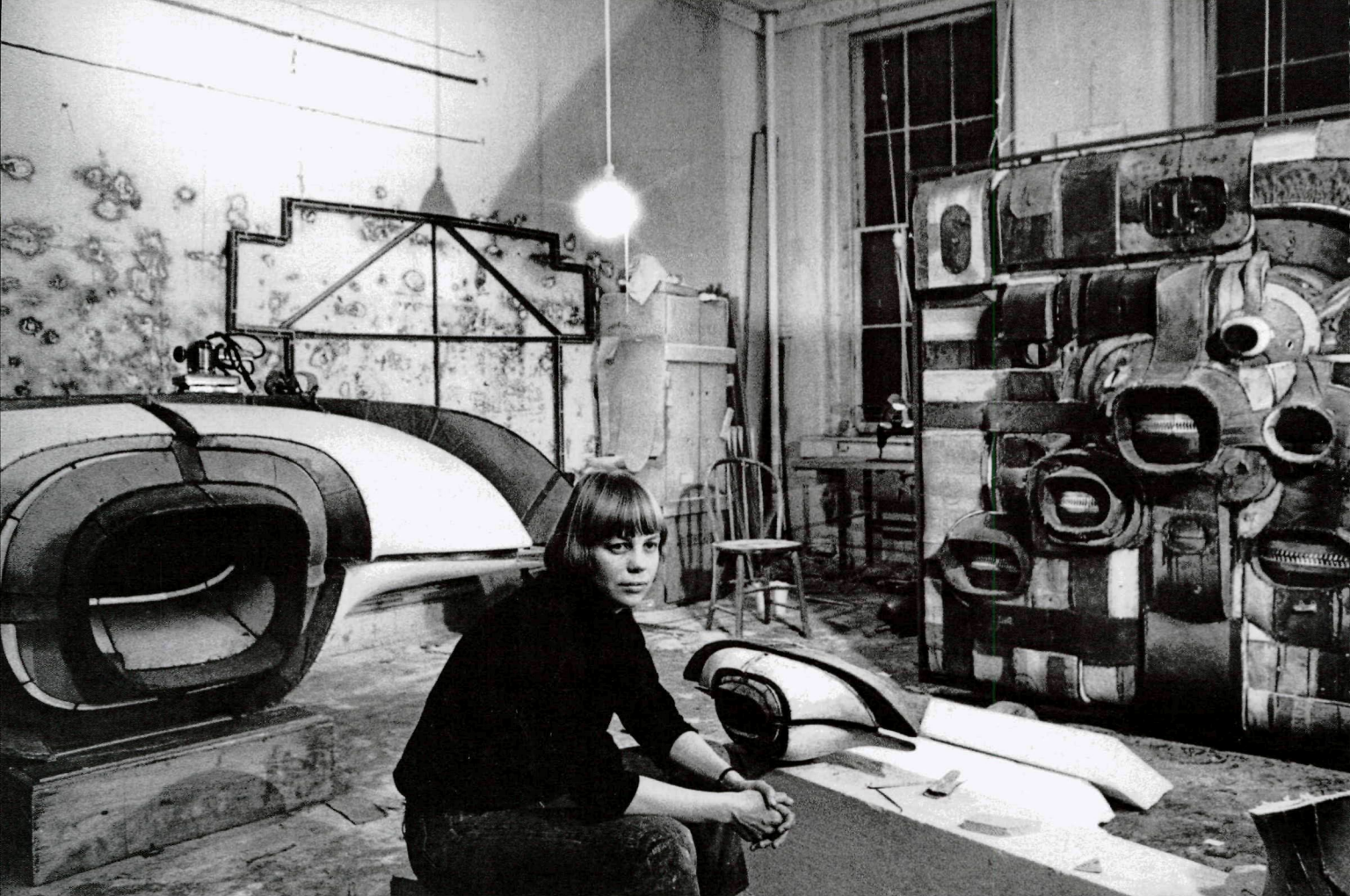
12. Carter Ratcliff, *Lee Bontecou*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1972), np.

13. Judd, 178.

14. Many reviews catalogued such imagery, noting, for example, that Bontecou's reliefs "suggest blowers with adjustable nozzles, furnaces, extinct volcanoes, eyes, mouths, in fact, so many things one can understand their popularity. Some critics have called them frightening, but not this one. To him they suggest a stove where one can burn letters." L. C., "Bontecou at Castelli," *Art News* 61, no. 9 (January 1963): 11. See also William Seitz, "Eleven Artists of the United States," in *Estados Unidos*, exh. cat. (São Paulo Museu de Arte Moderna, 1961); Preston, 181; and John Canaday, "Americans Once More" *New York Times*, May 26, 1963, 107.

15. John Ashbery, "Fire that Burns in the Heart of the Void," *New York Herald Tribune* (Paris), April 20, 1965, 5.

16. For example, a two-year span presents at least seven essays or reviews (not including Judd's) that focus on such questions. See Craig, 27; anonymous, "Review of São Paulo Biennial" (1961), 156; Lipman and Gray, 69; Fried, 57; Dore Ashton, "Lee Bontecou," *Arts and Architecture* 80 (January 1963): 5; and "Lee Bontecou," in *Women in Contemporary Art*, np.



Ugo Mulas, *Studio of Lee Bontecou, 1964*,
photographs (photographs © Ugo Mulas Heirs;
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tension that endures between their handmade quality and their mechanical, or at least industrial, appearance.

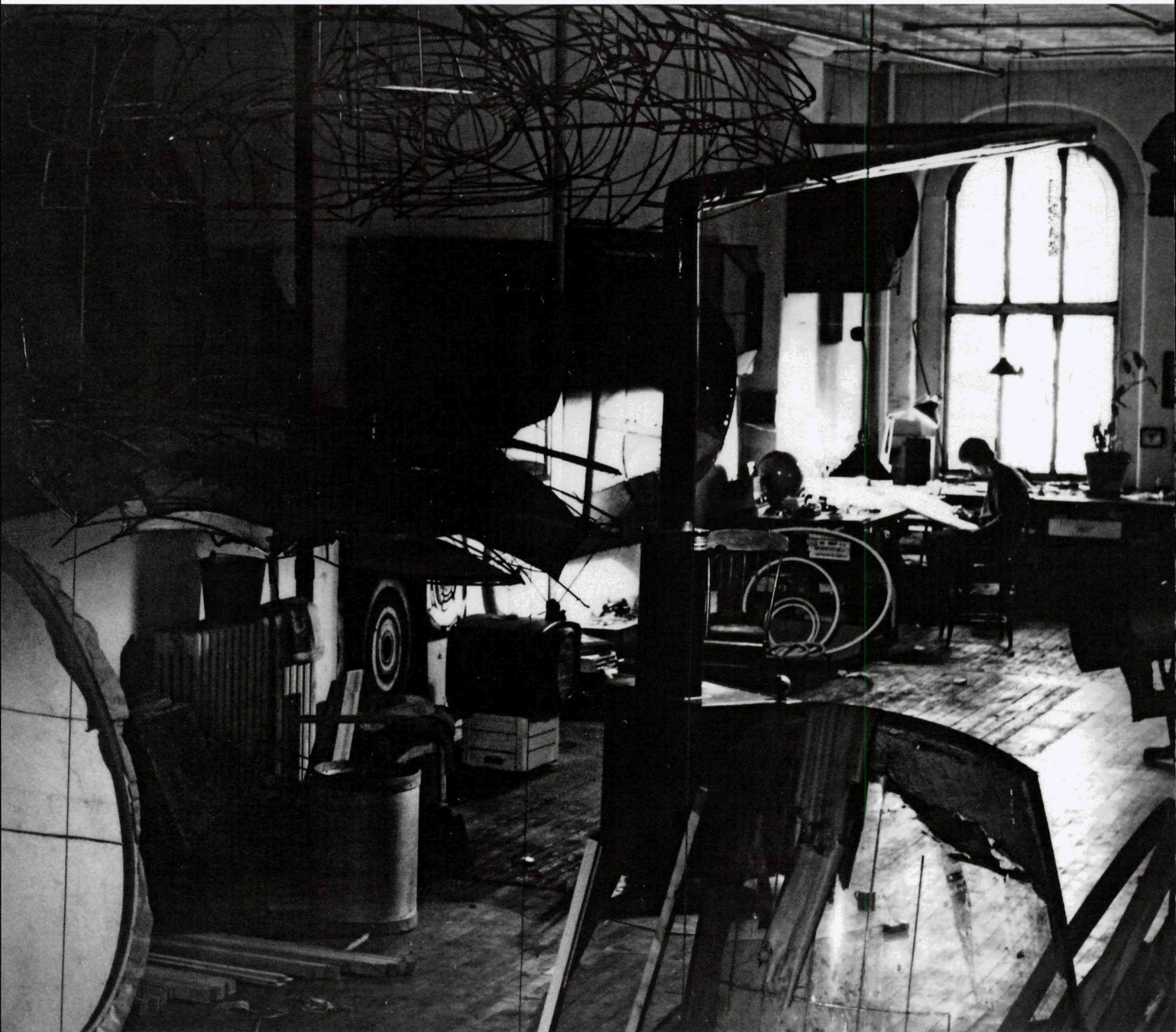
Such syntheses emerge in a vivid photo essay documenting Bontecou's loft studio in the 1960s. Taken by Ugo Mulas for the photo book *New York: The New Art Scene* (1967), they were part of a project put together with the art historian Alan Solomon that documented the working spaces and habits of young New York artists, including Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg. Each essay paired images of studio and artwork in ways that speak to their symbioses; the portrait of Bontecou arguably offered the most complete record of her pastimes and living space, a point that set it apart from the other essays. By documenting Bontecou's hobbies and other interests, the photographs submit that a broader composite, one that moved away from that physical effort spent making the work, was called for in approaching her work. Together, the images convey an avid investment in a variety of activities: television, model building, ice-skating, fish and plants, and naturalia collections.

Part of the effect of Solomon's essay was to frame Bontecou more generously than it did the other artists; it did not reduce her to her work. The attention paid by Solomon and Mulas to Bontecou's leisure pursuits was likely spawned by the way these interests were announced so readily in her domestic work space; the environmental dynamism of Bontecou's loft felt as if it transcended the work it contained and was not made to appear equivalent to it (a departure from the



other essays). Among the rooms, kitchen, living room, office, studio, a series of complete, if artificial, environments emerges, as if to bridge the everyday—the present world of domestic objects like pots, pans, and ducts—and some other, more fantastic time and space. Bontecou's studio appears as a recognizably modern living space, and at the same time, it feels like a series of sets or scenes, portals to what might be a future, science-fiction world and a prehistoric, fossilized past. The fantastic and the everyday seem to collapse, creating a past and present (and imagined future), that make the images read as playful stagings in themselves. Photographs that reveal the use of the sculptures as props, mostly as vast, open-ended spaces from which one of Bontecou's model airplanes might appear or into which it might fly, contribute to this effect, as do the sinewy wires and other raw materials that are stored at all levels of the loft.

Other examples of ad hoc installations were also visible, likely as much from necessity as play. Bontecou needed storage space for her massive works, and so components of them are found at scattered and unusual intervals throughout the kitchen, office, and living room, environments into which they seemed to fit. In the kitchen they hang indistinguishably alongside pots and pans. Near her desk they sit beside plants, fish tanks, and other biological specimens, as if they were oversized remnants of some formerly organic matter. By photographing Bontecou's collections of fossils and of pinned and mounted insects and crustaceans, Mulas draws out their structural associations. The reliefs share in the feel



Hollis Frampton, detail of *Lee Bontecou*, 1963, black-and-white photograph, 14 x 17 in. (35.6 x 43.2 cm). Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, gift of Marion Faller, 1990 (photograph © 2012 Estate of Hollis Frampton; photograph provided by Albright-Knox Art Gallery)

17. See, for example, Isabelle Graw, "When Life Goes to Work: Andy Warhol," *October* 132 (Spring 2010): 99–113.

18. In 1960s art, one might draw an analogy to the way in which the surface of (predominantly minimalist) sculpture was seen to overtake the sculptural "core," thereby negating any distinction between interior and exterior. See, for instance, Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

19. See Steven M. Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

20. Mills quoted in Clifton Bryant and Craig Forsyth, "The Fun God: Sports, Recreation, Leisure, and Amusement in the United States," *Sociological Spectrum* 25, no. 2 (2005): 206.

21. For a concise history of that particular craze and a broader consideration of the realm of hobbies in American life, see William L. Bird, *Paint by Number* (Washington DC and New York: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, in association with Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

22. Historically, of course, such boundaries and positions differed for women, who were usually understood as hobbyists or amateurs rather than workers. When "work" was undertaken, it required a complex rearrangement of time and space, the legacy of which was well known. Mid-century women artists—even those who received the support of families and partners—inherited the remnants and consequences of this legacy. As Virginia Woolf famously remarked, "To have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless [a woman's] parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century." Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 52. As Woolf's own writing testifies, such an absence sometimes produced a manifest rearrangement of the terms of the work produced; her writing, in form and substance, seemed to derive from the embrace of the imperfect terms of its production. Feminist visual art, particularly from the 1970s, serves as an even more explicit and intentional example. Everyday life—domesticity, maternity, the physical female body—became the substance of art. See also Gelber, 155–92.

23. This temporal dimension marked hobbies at their origins, as distinct activities that related to craftwork. Gelber writes, for instance, of nineteenth-century hobby work: "The real purpose of crafting was not to make things . . . the real purpose was to occupy spare time, so hobbyists were expected to develop a craft 'career.'" Gelber, 173.

of caught specimens, flayed, mounted, and hung in order to classify and describe natural phenomena. Unfinished wire frames, moreover, populate the ceilings and walls, charging the space with a kind of electrified connectivity that finds its counterpart in Bontecou's television antenna and radio. Exaggerated and amplified variations on the short-wave radio, in particular, feel as if they inspired the sculptural imagery of the reliefs; though that device cannot be discerned in the photographs, it is known to have filled her studio continually with the sounds of world news.

By dwelling at length on these photographs, I mean to propose that the kind of interconnectivity and symbiosis that they picture speaks to salient cultural and aesthetic currents that extend beyond Bontecou's practice. Connectivity is an apt term for the 1960s, a period that saw the aesthetic and (counter)cultural embrace of the breakdown of barriers and partitions. One manifestation came by way of importing or exporting aspects of work to life, and vice versa.¹⁷ Whereas middle-class daily life in the 1950s United States has been characterized by highly demarcated spheres—work and life held in strict opposition—among avant-gardists and middle class alike, a new attention was increasingly granted to activities that blurred those boundaries, or otherwise inflected the one with the strengths, values, or talents of the other.¹⁸ The period saw an increase in conventional hobbies as well as the cultivation of routine undertakings as hobbies (cooking, gardening, do-it-yourself handiwork, and more).¹⁹ In other words, from a current that connected the new leisure class to artists and counterculturalists alike grew a sphere of activities where work and everyday life overlapped, spatially, temporally, or otherwise, to produce a new fluidity of engagement.

At mid-century, C. Wright Mills wrote of the "craftsmanship pattern" of previous centuries (especially the nineteenth), suggesting how that progenitor of the hobby industry contained a model that saw "no split of work and play, work and culture."²⁰ The rhetoric of hobbies in particular gained rapid currency in the 1950s, especially among middle-class Americans; the paint-by-number phenomenon alone producing an almost entirely new industry that imported ideas of craft, creativity, and artistry to hobbyists of all ages.²¹

By designating an activity as a hobby, a framework of production and its conditions were implied; these include a project's origins (instruction manuals, kits, previous collections), the spaces where objects were made (supplemental domestic spaces, e.g., the garage), the circumstances (personal or leisure time), and the degree of utility (superfluous or useless). Such conditions, in turn, had to be matched by the position the activities held in a person's daily life (leisure, fun).²² The ideal, then, was to initiate a sphere of production that had entirely personal boundaries and aims. Despite recent scholarship pointing to its potential to reify and reinforce a capitalist structure, in the 1950s and 1960s hobby work offered a potential model for a connectivity that was principally temporal: a way of bringing to bear knowledge, ideals, or values from work to home, or vice versa.²³ Or it allowed, in contrast, for the practice of a kind of free play in one place that might be missing in the other.

While there is a sense in which Bontecou took an extreme view of this situation, ultimately turning her artwork into a kind of personal hobby by removing herself from the market, she was among the many artists in the 1950s and 1960s who were both aware of and interested in the increased potential for ways of

making that embraced these connections. Play with the conditions of making both references and grows from a real interest in the overlap between work (art) and leisure (building and inventing, model making, biology, and so forth). While a more straightforward example of such interchange might appear to be Andy Warhol's *Do It Yourself* series (1962), replicas of paint-by-number watercolors transferred to canvas and left incomplete, Bontecou's reliefs played all the more creatively with the parameters of "making" in the 1960s.²⁴

Bontecou's Errant Trajectory

It is worthwhile to examine the various means by which Bontecou pursued the methods, materials, and sources that weave in and out of different visual languages of making, often diverging into procedures that belong to more domestic or leisurely realms. Just as Michel de Certeau claimed a new model was offered when the North African living in Paris found "ways of using the constraining order of the place or of the language" in creative combination with his own, by effectively departing from the position of the hobbyist, Bontecou opened up the boundaries of sculpture making to produce a hybrid form. She too found "a degree of plurality and creativity" through the "art of being in between" modes of producing.²⁵ Not bound by circumstance or necessity, Bontecou in a sense allowed her loyalty to or fondness for a way of living to organize her approach to sculpture (at least after 1957, when her formal education ended). In refusing to adhere to different categories of making, privileging ideals such as craftsmanship and technical construction alongside conventional aesthetic ones, Bontecou created an integration of pursuits and a visual language that spoke to that integration.

Most directly, Bontecou applied the detailed handwork often required of the hobbyist to the surface of her reliefs, forming a kind of counterpoint to the more timely sculptural torch work that preceded it. The initial armature was a wiry and web-like design reminiscent of Abstract Expressionist metalwork, but its aerial effects were then effaced by the application of canvas. Bontecou was comfortable enough with basic stitching to house a sewing machine in her studio and to employ it visibly in the reliefs' surfaces, using various fabrics that were first cut, then patched and sewn together. Sustaining the duality between metal and canvas seems to have been paramount to Bontecou's design; even the earliest, smallest sculptures that incorporate both materials retained their mutual visibility. The resulting juxtaposition, though, was not simply tactile; it also suggested a fluidity of visual languages, a new compatibility among methods of making that stemmed from different traditions.

In this, the reliefs at once embody and counter the rhetoric or structure of the hobby as much as any direct allusion to its products. Just as de Certeau suggests that the concept of residing "in between" can become manifest through material means, the reliefs propose a blended activity or means of making, one that straddles the conventions that constitute the work of sculpture and that of craft or hobbies.²⁶ Here I consciously do not distinguish between craft and hobbies, but rather treat craft as one paradigmatic example of a hobby as they were understood and practiced in the United States around mid-century.²⁷ While this is something of a generalization, I try to remain squarely within the framework by which craft and hobbies are broadly construed, while calling to attention the way

24. It has been noted, however, that by the late 1950s, paint-by-number kits had enough of a pejorative connotation to become the standard means by which to designate any formulaic approach; "by the numbers" came to replace "by the book" as the common phrase. That attitude must have contributed to Warhol's interest in the subject in a way that distinguishes his approach from Bontecou's. See Bird, 97.

25. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 30.

26. This, too, becomes a more common approach in the 1960s and is by no means unique to Bontecou. It might be seen to follow in the recent tradition of Robert Rauschenberg or other sculptors for whom collecting and assemblage—window dressing, even—formed the active precursor to their sculpture making.

27. Although there might be a gendered distinction that seems to divide craft from other hobbies, handicraft, as thought of in the late nineteenth century, was one of two pastimes to first be generally classified as a "hobby." See Gelber, esp. 3 and 168–76.

in which craft and model making (as discussed below) were oppositionally gendered. For critics, the recognition of that blended language was most palpable in her means of fastening fabric to the armature, particularly in the early reliefs. From 1958 to 1962, Bontecou commonly used copper wire to tie or bind fabric to frame, and that shiny material thereby capitalized on a point of contact, offering a visible juxtaposition of materials and actions: the alternating pliability and rigidity of metal, the movement back and forth between blowtorch and hand. Critics remarked, for example, on the relief's "awesome dexterity down to the last deft turn of a wire," or commended them as "hypnotic, perfect, the tiniest detail of twisted wire works, both psychologically and visually."²⁸

The work was unquestionably received as detailed, skilled, laborious, and "well made," in a sense, and was thereby extolled for its craft-like virtues, which, too, are paradigmatic among those merits that attach broadly to most hobbies.²⁹ (De Certeau remarked, for example, on the "rare precision" with which the hobby is performed in opposition to the attention afforded a person's "regular work.")³⁰ Yet, any amount of further inspection of the reliefs easily reveals an equal element of the unscripted and ambiguous, the messy and menacing, all properties that eschew the formal language of the hobby or craft and instead veer back into the realm of the aesthetic and the subjective.³¹

In one of Mulas's most emblematic images of Bontecou in the studio, torch and sewing machine form an opposition and a collusion that readily exemplifies the polarities that commentators found so compelling in the reliefs. The sewing machine acts as an alternate—and alternately gendered—technology that Bontecou both employs directly and refers to in her handwork. The central process of cutting and fastening pieces of fabric together itself derives from an amalgamation of gendered hobbies, fabric work or quilting on the one hand, and the construction of models (planes, submarines, and so forth) on the other. While Bontecou was able to sew, it was model making that she practiced as a hobby in itself.

But to characterize vividly how Bontecou created a synthetic language requires more than an outline of the structural and technical overlaps with hobby work that her work sustains. As has been pointed out by scholars such as Mona Hadler and Elizabeth Smith, there are direct ways in which her specific hobbies, many of which are conventionally gendered as masculine, are brought to bear on the reliefs; their presence pops in and out continuously, through both symbolism and imagery in the composition of the reliefs, and in less straightforward ways as well. Bontecou spent time during her childhood and adult life listening to short-wave radio, reading science fiction, building model airplanes, and practicing amateur biology and entomology, collecting, preserving, and mounting specimens.³² Scraps and materials used for these extra-aesthetic projects that she exhibited in her loft among the reliefs, as the photographs of the studio show, likely comprised some of the debris in her studio along with metal and canvas. These activities did not just occur in the same space; they informed her work materially and conceptually (as they continue to in the twenty-first century).

Such overlap was sometimes as simple as the transfer of materials, as when Bontecou employed balsa wood or silk in the sculptures. But the ways of working that stemmed from her hobby work also fundamentally transformed her means of making. When Bontecou (abruptly) jettisoned the scale and form of conventional welded sculpture around 1958, several of the first experimental works were

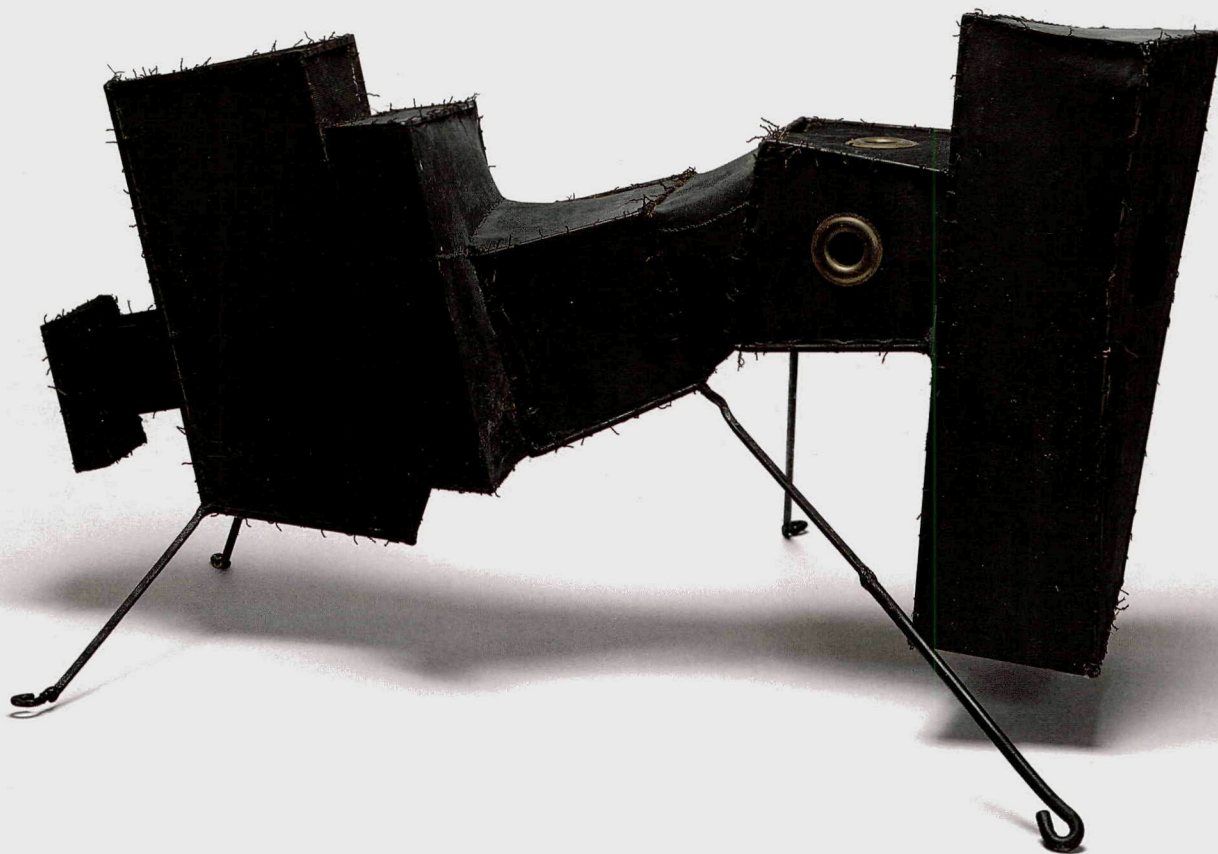
28. Sandler, "New York Letter," 30; and Craig, 27.

29. See Fried, 57; Craig, 27; and note 5 above.

30. De Certeau, 51.

31. See Preston, 181.

32. Since the transfer of symbolisms and iconography from her hobbies to her work has been considered elsewhere, particularly in relation to aviation and science fiction, I will not dwell on it here. See, for instance, Mona Hadler, "Lee Bontecou's Worldsapes," in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, 200–11.



Lee Bontecou, Untitled, 1958, welded steel, muslin, soot, and wire, 17 x 31 x 26 in. (43.2 x 78.7 x 66 cm) (artwork © Lee Bontecou; photograph by Will Brown, provided by Freedman Art)

produced on the scale of models (i.e., of planes and submarines). Despite their size, these objects never served as models for larger sculptures, but were works in their own right, a point that highlights their direct relationship to their hobby predecessors. Specifically, as Hadler has recently noted, Bontecou had not lost interest in her (gendered) childhood hobby, model planes and helicopters, during the 1950s and 1960s, and she employed both their imagery and materials in her sculptures of the 1960s.³³

But how these two types of making should be viewed in relation to one another is a further question. Where Hadler rightly reads the models as “exercises in veracity,” there are less straightforward connections at play as well.³⁴ Take, first, an untitled 1959 metal sculpture that was at once highly experimental (especially in its materials and form) and, yet, clearly driven by a set of readymade conventions. The sculpture retains direct reference in scale and form to the model airplane (or miniature military machine), even as it abruptly departs from the materials and tenor of its source. Made of welded metal rather than of wood or entirely of plastic, the object also appears as a hybrid, part plane, part tank, gun, or weapon. Bontecou takes the form and scale of the hobbyist’s military model and imbues it with a degree of menace. While the object obviously shares something with her

33. Mona Hadler, “Lee Bontecou: Plastic Saw Blades and Grinning Fish,” *Women’s Art Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 2007): esp. 13–14.

34. *Ibid.*



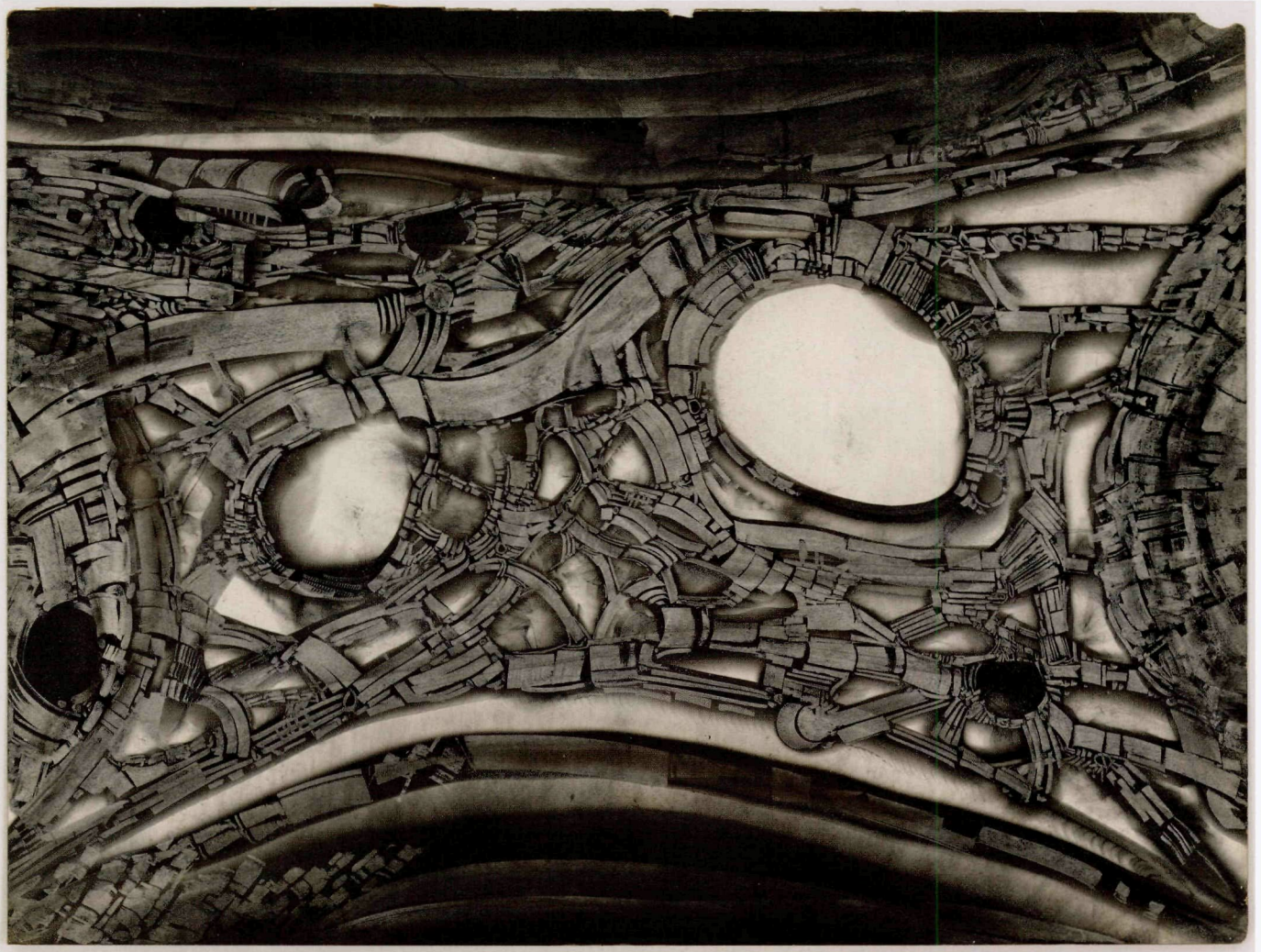
Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1959, welded steel and plastic, 9 x 27 x 7 in. (22.9 x 68.9 x 17.8 cm) (artwork © Lee Bontecou; photograph by Will Brown, provided by Freedman Art)

own model planes that hung nearby, the new crossbreed, and particularly the application of painted nails to the tip of the object, creates something else altogether.

Despite the masculine associations that derive from the hobby's conventional practitioners, model making has been connected to the domestication of violent, frightening world war by producing harmless, diminutive versions of military machines that dissociate them from use. Yet here, in place of a casual, unthreatening, and easy object Bontecou offers a spiky, ad hoc military machine, loaded, yet unwilling to declare its purpose. Substituting metal for the standard model's lightweight plastic or balsa lends the machine a clunky, martial feel, endowing it with a sense of weight as well as violence. In other words, the 1959 untitled piece undoes some of the work of the model from which it stems, increasing the degree of menace and imparting a lack of resolution while retaining its framework.

At the risk of overthinking the experiment for the sake of argument, the hybrid nature of Bontecou's practice here, which informs the way she constructs her work for the next ten years, at least, might be understood as a means of making that was conceived on an "errant" trajectory," to return to de Certeau's terms, one that establishes and follows its "own logic."³⁵ Everyday activities that

35. De Certeau, xviii.



Lee Bontecou, Untitled, ca. 1958, soot on paperboard, 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York, Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift (artwork © Lee Bontecou; photograph © Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY)

constitute Bontecou's hobbies are, at once, folded into and transformed in her artistic practices, often in ways that confuse and conflate gendered associations. All accounts, moreover, suggest that Bontecou's experimentation with materials was a common practice among artists during the late 1950s especially. Like many others, she scoured the thrift shops and surplus stores of Canal Street, enjoying the process of collecting scattered, random, categorically unbound parts as an aesthetic activity in itself.³⁶ Recently recollecting the availability of such a diverse array of readymade materials, she wrote,

The materials: some was found—some bought—some was manipulated—some cut and left alone and some were worn and decayed when I wired them on the work and left it as it was found. Canal St. was heaven—old surplus hardware stores—plastic rubber—metal etc. All is gone now—the old generic commercial world has moved in. It was my favorite shopping place as well as for other artists at the time.

As far as actual constructing the work—learn, experiment, invent, as you go.³⁷

36. See Smith, 173.

37. Lee Bontecou in a letter to Jo Applin, June 2002, Bontecou archival file, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

Bontecou had no investment in using everyday materials to divest the sculptural object of its aesthetic authority. Rather, such an intermingling of the descriptions of her working and collecting methods speaks to the way in which the hobby of collecting formed an integral part of her working process. Photographs that document Bontecou's playful willingness to convert a relief into a metaphoric abyss through which a model plane might any moment disappear initiates an analogy between those activities designated as aesthetic or professional, and those conventionally designated as hobbies, or amateur. It was the widespread net that Bontecou cast when thinking of the idea of making that seemed to inspire the approach.

What should be noted here is how this idea differs from the use of craft in art today; techniques that may read now as subversive or activist are here more open-ended, less precisely motivated. Bontecou's use of sewing and needlework is a good example. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, for instance, have shown that as the detail and meticulousness of needlework became intimately associated with femininity, it too was awarded the broader connotations of the domestic: tidiness, fastidiousness, and the necessary neatness of the home.³⁸ Yet Bontecou was neither interested in imparting the virtues of the domestic to the public spaces of aesthetics nor in challenging those gendered associations. One untitled drawing of 1958 confirms the point visually. It conveys the appearance of a work in fiber that is at once stretched and limp, whole and torn, left in tatters with holes formed by the acts of stretching and cutting. Rendered in soot, and produced by using a torch with the oxygen turned down, the work exhibits a charred look, as if the material itself had burned away, leaving a shadowy residue.³⁹ Little reference to the intricacies and neatness of needlework remains, far too few to suggest an investment in overturning hierarchies—specifically those related to gender. Rather, the drawing calls into question the distinctions and frameworks that supported such systems and divisions. The work, as well as the technique by which it was rendered, offers in their place a language that operates on equivalences and connections. It brings fiber in touch with paper, and the torch into conversation with the string.

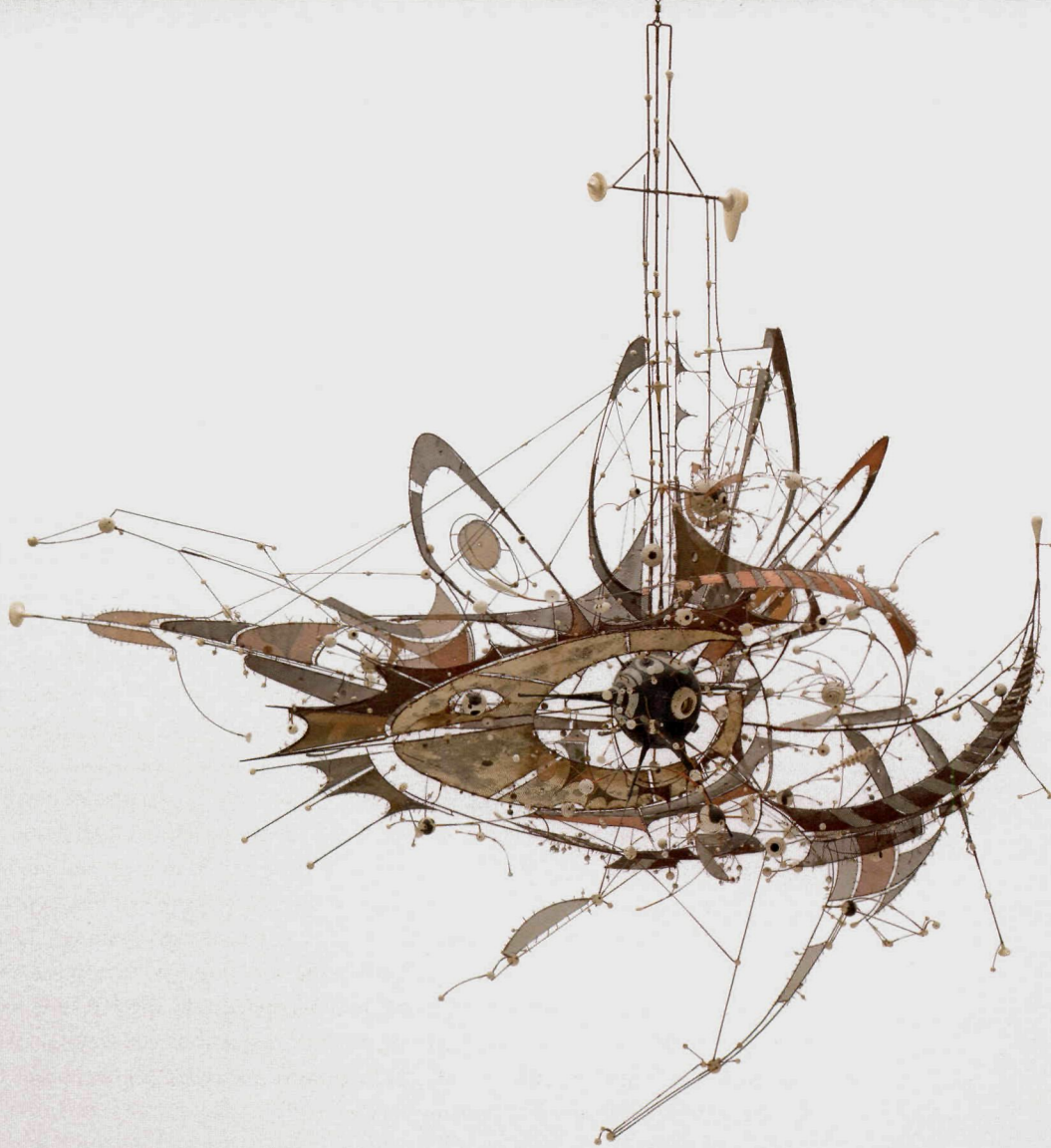
Making in the Everyday

To return briefly to the terms of Bontecou's reception, critical responses implied that Bontecou's methods of making lent something specific and object-like to the production. What is surprising is that she managed to invest a wholly innovative form with the feel of a thing in the world. It seems right that the framework of craft resides at the crux of such objecthood, particularly in bearing responsibility for the works' persistent materiality. As Glenn Adamson has noted, "Craft always entails an encounter with the properties of a specific material. . . . The normative idea of modern art, by contrast, involves the transcendence of just this encounter."⁴⁰ There is no transcending the materiality of Bontecou's sculptures; their intricacy binds attention to their substance and propels awareness of their labor, their investment with personal time and energy that does not readily translate to the rhetoric of "professionalism." It is in an acceptance of uselessness and unproductivity, themes that find their home in the pursuits of the amateur, that such values can be achieved.

38. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, "Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts," in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, Hierarchy, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 67–68.

39. It is interesting to consider that Claes Oldenburg explored similar interests at nearly the same time in, for instance, the installation *The Street* (1960).

40. Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford, UK, and New York: Berg, 2007), 39.



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled, 1980–98*, welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, canvas, grommets, and wire, 7 x 8 x 6 ft. (213.4 x 243.8 x 182.9 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Philip Johnson (by exchange) and the Nina and Gordon Bunshaft Bequest Fund (artwork © Lee Bontecou; photograph © Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY)

41. See, for instance, Smith, esp. 174.

42. A term that finds expression in a range of aesthetic practices in the 1960s, play has been productively related to the practices of a number of artists, perhaps most notably the early Happenings and performances of Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg. Adaptations of the notion of play ranged from a conceptual means of producing chaos and random participation by observers to various means of producing a type of useless work. The early Happenings, specifically those produced contemporaneously with

Such pursuits might be productively linked to Herbert Marcuse's formulation of freedom, a term that has a very particular resonance for Bontecou.⁴¹ In his *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Marcuse draws on Friedrich Schiller's conception of play as that principle that needs to be rediscovered in order to liberate humanity from its repressive constraints.⁴² This has largely to do with the distance at which play stands from productivity and labor in the service of a larger governing principle. By enabling a state in which life is manifested as existing "without fear and anxiety," play is aligned with freedom itself.⁴³ Marcuse links the idea directly to the realm of aesthetics, implying the artist was the closest practitioner of such an ideal. Yet as distinctions stood when Bontecou was making her reliefs, and given the subsequent rise of professionalism in the art world, Marcuse's language more closely approximates the attitude of the hobbyist or amateur. The ability to choose freely the values and terms with which one approaches a task actively invokes a position apart from the realm of professional labor.

Amateurism is usually understood to stand in opposition to the professionalism of work by operating as a realm of pursuits that act as ends in themselves,

whether or not they actually are, precisely because it is deprofessionalized. Implicitly, it is seen to promote a type of activity associated with play, one distinct from the rigid constraints of a given field, arena, or structure. Sociological studies have used this distinction to characterize amateurism by this opposition because it is a “temporary sphere of activity with a disposition of its own.”⁴⁴ Its self-contained status, in other words, allows for a self-directed manipulation of a set of familiar principles.

Recalling the role that hobbies held in the 1950s and 1960s points to how such an attitude or framework often informed art making at the time. In Bontecou’s reliefs in particular, it is the emphatic nature of the disposition toward play—via their nonconformity, wide-reaching imagery, and hybrid methods of making—that invokes the pursuits of the amateur. Yet it was those very principles, and the uncompromising individuality to which they amounted, that held her work critically apart from craft as conventionally understood. In a way, the great purchase of Bontecou’s approach is its intractability in the face of both terms, craft and art, which was sustained even as the work managed to collapse such distinctions.

Bontecou’s views of work in general seem rooted in an integration of pursuits that blurs any firm boundaries. In 2003, for instance, Bontecou’s husband, the artist William Giles, remarked, “Lee’s life is seamless. . . . Gardening, making sculpture, cooking dinner—it’s all part of the same process.”⁴⁵ For Bontecou, this profeminist attitude might be read as initiating a view of the self as worker rather than professional (a gendered distinction no doubt), and labor as bound to a very material form of innovation, produced through construction, detail work, and material experimentation. More precisely put, she was (and remains) invested in finding methods of construction, materials, and conceptual approaches that promote a palpable sense of work and innovation through construction and making. In doing so, Bontecou enacts a role that ties process and product more directly to the routine activities, work, and creations that court affiliation with the everyday, without ever fully inhabiting that realm.

Elyse Speaks is a postdoctoral fellow in gender studies at the University of Notre Dame. She completed her PhD in art history at Brown University, and writes primarily on contemporary sculpture and gender. Recent publications include essays in *Art Journal*, *Sculpture Journal*, and *Women’s Studies*. She has also contributed an essay to the anthology *Sculpture and the Vitrine* (Ashgate 2012).

Bontecou’s reliefs, embraced the former conception. In Kaprow’s *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* (1959), variations on role-play and rudimentary theatrical performance structured the event, which was otherwise rather unscripted and random. The multimedia presentation included slide shows of children’s art, readings, dance, and sound. Rituals and stereotypes informed the roles that were assigned to participants, and a form of instruction constrained the performances. The event, we might say, took an amateur attitude toward both theater and ritual, willfully adapting its principles to ends that could not be anticipated or fixed.

43. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 187.

44. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1938), as quoted in Bryant and Forsyth, 206.

45. Giles quoted in Calvin Tomkins, “Missing in Action” *New Yorker*, August 4, 2003, 42.

