

## Recasting sculptural function: use and misuse in the work of Bontecou, Bourgeois and Nevelson

I always thought that the idea that you could make something that appears to be functional, but when you try and use it – it doesn't – you can't figure out what its function might be – and that's in the end what its function is, is for you to figure out what to do with it, I guess.<sup>1</sup>

Bruce Nauman, 2001

Nauman's rhetorical engagement with the language of function speaks to a sculptural preoccupation that has become increasingly prevalent over the course of the last five decades. While (usually) carefully distanced from the realms of production and consumption, contemporary sculpture often seems to have a function, or appears defunct, or appears to have a use that cannot be named, effectively placing the work in the realm of the social while blurring the categories of public and private by negotiating both terms at once.

Following the clearest expression of the issue – that of Rosalind Krauss in her landmark essay, 'Sculpture in the expanded field' – we might say that sculpture has long been defined by its position in relation to function. In writing that '[the] logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument', Krauss set up a principal problem faced by sculptors in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The conventions of the monument were so intimately interwoven into sculpture's practice that extrication appeared inconceivable. And while Krauss's essay proceeds to propose the vexed terms of such an unravelling in its examination of the new trend towards site-specific art, it provides an outline for how such issues relate to sculpture broadly speaking. Historically, Krauss wrote, sculpture 'sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place'.<sup>3</sup> The rupture of that relationship, symbolized by the absorption of the base into the sculpture, rendered it 'nomadic', its 'meaning and function' left autonomous and self-referential.<sup>4</sup>

This symbolic loss of place left the greater number of sculptors reproducing the conditions of monumentality, indoors and out, despite the absence of any necessary connection between meaning and function. Evidence suggests that both critics and sculptors found the situation problematic, as for instance when Clement Greenberg, in one of his few essays devoted to sculpture, remarked that it was sculpture's 'literal' nature and adherence to the monolithic form that comprised the cap on sculptural expression.<sup>5</sup> But it seems also to have been a generative one, the limiting condition of functionality eventually providing a new subject for sculptural consideration.

What follows here is, first, an analysis of the framework of monumentality and its re-examination by sculptors increasingly attuned to its persistence in conventional practices. In the moment just prior to sculpture's renegotiation of the terms of its relationship to its 'site', there was a pointed questioning of, and increase in the possibility for, the use and misuse of the concept of sculptural function. With a view to initiating a gendered framework for this discussion,<sup>6</sup> this essay will then advance a brief analysis of three American artists in the mid-twentieth century, who renewed an engagement with the language of utility while explicitly initiating a challenge to its conventional form. While recent retrospectives have tended to recognize the individual efforts of such mid-century sculptors as Lee Bontecou (2002), Louise Bourgeois (2007) and Louise Nevelson (2007), looking across their 1950s' and 1960s' production highlights their various, concurrent means of overturning conventional notions of sculptural utility.<sup>7</sup> What is striking when looking at these artists is the way that such issues were given expression through a practice that mobilized the terms of both figurative sculpture and abstraction to produce a sculptural language that was neither securely one nor the other. Moreover, the surprising result of such an insecure visual position within the broader field was a viable, noteworthy critical position for each.

Sculptural function was narrowly defined for most of its history, being nearly always prescribed by church or state, and the limited variation in sculpture's historical production acted in turn to constrain its form and guarantee easy legibility.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that its reformulation was partly initiated by a turn away from legibility. Legibility had centred upon a depiction of a natural embodiment of ideals, which necessitated that form and function remain intimately connected and mutually held to be at the service of a very public conception of worth. The weight attributed to the issues of legibility and function in the 1950s and 1960s came largely from the sculptors themselves, and led in many cases to a direct address of both features. Use, and just as often uselessness, became the subject of the work; objects were produced that appeared to be at once possibly functional – without making that function clear – and also defunct or otherwise useless. Monumentality, in turn, became the touchstone of sculpture's public identity and hence the quality to be avoided most conscientiously.

By contrast with Europe, the American discourse on sculptural value at mid-century was, for the most part, relatively circumscribed, deriving largely from two theoretical sources – Clement Greenberg and Herbert Read. Greenberg's sculptural theory, it has long since been realized, derived almost entirely from his painterly theory, and so, in its terms, 'opticality' was the exclusive touchstone by which to assess sculptural merit. What seems to have become a more generative position derived loosely from the more substantive, if equally self-serving, views of Read as presented in *The Art of Sculpture* (1956), the outcome of a series of lectures given in the United States. In that study, he proposed an analysis of the genesis of sculpture based on an inherent split at its origins that produced the bisected trajectories of the amulet and the monument. The amulet, which had all but fallen out of use until its altered resurgence in the form of fetishistic surrealist sculpture, was that object that one carried or wore for some protective or

ritualistic purpose, and so is the prototypical object to be touched.<sup>9</sup> Its work was performed when it was held, carried, or otherwise in contact with the body.

In direct contrast to Greenberg's emphasis on opticality, as recently discussed by David Getsy, tactility became the primary operational value at issue for Read, which brought him to highlight the amulet's role in sculptural history.<sup>10</sup> The monument, in contrast, transformed more dramatically throughout time, but its incarnation in the 1950s was the conventional, large, architecturally scaled object used for commemorative and memorial purposes. Together, these legacies constituted a complete history of sculpture based on utility: those objects that were of use to their individual owners and those of use to a collective body. What is most relevant here in Read's analysis of the monument is that in describing its prior forms as tomb and cathedral, he carefully retained his ideal of tactility by characterizing their shared spatiality through a bodily translation of the haptic, as performed through their mutual enclosure of a body or represented body. Where its owner held the amulet, the space of the monument held or contained the entire body of its inhabitant.<sup>11</sup>

In concluding his discussion of the monumental ideal, which carried the most weight in his view of the sculptural ideal, Read discussed spatiality and contingency: those properties that, together with a haptic quality, were necessary for the liberation of sculpture from the constraints of painting and architecture. The first, spatiality, was lost and regained again at various points in history: 'the most powerful impulse in the disintegration of the classical idea of construction was . . . the subjective need for expressive space: for space itself as a significant symbol'.<sup>12</sup> It was crucial that space recover the ability to bear significance, and in turn rectify the detrimental effects of detachment and distance. Read claimed that the best sculpture, contemporary sculpture especially, was spatially or contextually engaged such that its significance and expressiveness were borne through its dynamic with the spectator, and not simply contained discretely within its form. Moving around the work, for instance, guaranteed a more complete experience than remaining in a stationary position.

Spatial engagement also promoted contingencies, especially those related to movement and light. The new sculpture exploited its surface features and materials in order to solicit temporal engagement with its context and, so, promote contingent effects that isolated the individual experience from any intrinsic properties in the works. In part such contingencies were linked to the possibility of an imaginative tactile experience.<sup>13</sup> Together, tactility and contingency made for an encounter that was less like the impersonal, over-prescribed relationship one had to the monument and more like the personal, individualized relation to the amulet.

Despite the emphasis that Read placed on the work of Henry Moore, he set up terms and solutions that appealed to a wholly distinct group of artists. His conception divests sculpture of its ideological, commemorative or monumentalizing aspects while retaining as ideals some of the properties that were used to serve such purposes. The language and tenor of Read's account find their way into the writings of American critics such as Hilton Kramer, as well as American sculptors such as Robert Morris, who, in his influential series of essays

*Notes on Sculpture* (1966–69), likewise promoted a dynamic sculpture that related to its environment on an architectural scale, yet which did not psychically and physically distance its viewers as a result. While Morris did not suggest that sculpture return to an explicitly functional capacity, he seemed to want to restructure its relationship to the viewer such that it would perform a role, rather than simply be wholly self-contained and independent from both viewer and environment.<sup>14</sup>

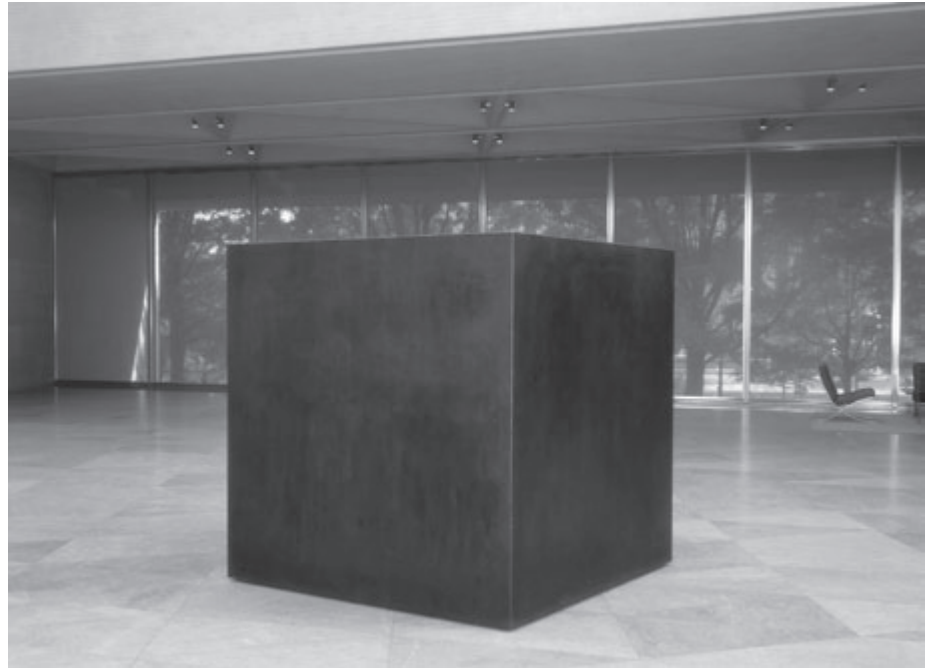
Both Read and Morris imply that what the best new sculpture shared with its historical form was that the *for* of the work, its function, was primary at the work's inception, and therefore at least partly responsible for dictating its form. What had changed was that this became a personal and contingent choice made by the sculptor rather than one dictated externally. Yet Morris at least was quite clear, and here his views were widespread, that the danger faced in this was that such sculpture would once again become public and monumental, qualities to be avoided at all cost.<sup>15</sup>

Artists turned to a variety of traditions, surrealism and primitivism among them, in searching out solutions to this potential danger.<sup>16</sup> Primitivism offered more than a stylistic alternative to conventional academic sculpture; it presented a different notion of sculptural utility. In particular, artists began looking more regularly at objects that had decidedly mundane or personal functions, in opposition to the public functionality of monuments. Whether consciously or not, the tradition of the amulet is at play here – tactility and other more individualized sensations are more likely to play a role when an everyday object is taken as a prototype. That these objects were perceived as *useful*, rather than simply as formally interesting, is also significant. Take Picasso's investment in the ethnographic object as an example; of his interest in the Trocadéro Museum, Jack Flam wrote that Picasso 'understood that African art was meant to be used rather than merely looked at . . . so that the process of making a work of art could be conceived as an integral part of its function.'<sup>17</sup> Primitivism, then, opened the doors to revisiting the relationship between sculpture and personal, even domestic, use. Domesticity – with all of its feminine and private associations – forms an immediate foil to the public, masculine language of conventional Western sculpture.

Display of the domestic object was not entirely out of place in museological history; present as a convention of ethnographic museums, it was also already active within the tradition of the readymade. The rhetorical game of the latter tradition – undercutting use value with an infusion of aesthetic value – proliferated in the fifties and sixties, as for instance in Jasper Johns' sculp-metal objects such as *Light bulb I* (1958). But greater variations in materials and construction techniques increasingly encouraged play with the idea of utility, which in turn enabled new means of frustrating legibility.

Outlined here are some of the potential motivations for American artists to make function or utility the express subject of sculpture, on the one hand, and on the other hand to refer to an anti-monumental rhetoric as instrumental to their aims. A conventional notion of public utility increasingly seemed to act as the counterpoint against which new values were fashioned. Take, for instance,

1. Tony Smith, *Die*, model 1962, fabricated 1968, steel with oiled finish, 182.88 × 182.88 × 182.88 cm (72 × 72 × 72 ins). Gift of the Collectors Committee, National Gallery of Art, Washington  
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
(photo: courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)



Tony Smith's discussion of *Die* (1962) (fig. 1), one of the most commonly cited passages on sculptural form from the 1960s:

Q: Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?

Smith: I was not making a monument.

Q: Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?

Smith: I was not making an object.<sup>18</sup>

We can surmise that what Smith meant here was that *Die* was no more a functional object than it was a monument, or functional sculpture. These fixed poles of sculpture's identity, and the problem of negotiating that closed terrain, are implicit in the wholly negative tenor of his response. The desire to avoid simply returning to any of sculpture's previous forms provoked an intense recasting of utility so that it did not resemble any historic or conventional version. Both the monument and the amulet seemed too close to forms of use that were universal and fixed.

A mutual view seems to motivate the careful negotiation of terms present in Morris's *Notes on Sculpture*. Here Morris attempted to advance a theory of sculpture that avoids the overly intimate experience of personal sculpture while prioritizing the haptic; and that concurrently avoids the monumental, while remaining architecturally or environmentally active. His description seems to depart directly from Read's characterization of the monument in its emphatic combination of the architectural and tactile. Such a hybrid object would embody a sculptural ideal that makes viewership – the experience of viewing the work – its defining feature and ultimate function.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the highly specific sculptural practice that Morris himself might have endorsed, his concerns and emphases were broadly applicable, and an

individualized, contingent and engaged viewing experience was often the principal effect achieved by a diverse group of artists. Sculptors drew from sources that cast function as explicitly anti-public, and employed construction methods that highlighted tactility; they seemed to prioritize materials and forms with precisely these associations.<sup>20</sup> While working on a relatively large scale, sculptors such as Nevelson, Bourgeois, Bontecou, Eva Hesse, Marisol and Yayoi Kusama, but also men such as Claes Oldenburg and H. C. Westermann, substituted wood, plaster, canvas, fabric, latex – materials that had decidedly utilitarian or artisanal affiliations – for marble, stone and metal.

As early as 1943, Bourgeois and Nevelson began working with painted wood constructions, implicitly rejecting any dictum of ‘truth to materials’, which had become, via Henry Moore, the conventional rule of the day.<sup>21</sup> Both artists’ work also made multiple iconographic, material and metaphoric references to forms of use or utility that qualified as anti-public. First making objects that recalled the folk tradition of toy carvings, Nevelson increasingly combined her found wood scraps into structures that were themselves architectural, as opposed to architecturally decorative (fig. 2), prompting her advocates to refer to her work as ‘sculptural architecture’.<sup>22</sup> Despite their evocative, poetic feel, Nevelson’s ‘architectures’ were pointedly non-Western and ambiguous in their functionality. They were felt to prioritize a sensory awareness that led critics to liken them to the cave, crypt and other elementary spaces; the works were not only seen, but entered, the gallery ‘entirely transformed into a continuous sculptural enclosure’ that appeared to wrap around the body in a new and exciting manner.<sup>23</sup>

It is significant that, for many of these artists, such work appeared to issue from their own domestic spaces. Nevelson was an avid collector and filled her domestic spaces with folk art, African objects and other found scraps. Stacked and stored haphazardly (fig. 3), these objects seemed at once to inspire her construction methods while also reconfirming the reformed, personalized and de-academicized values that were implicit in the initial process of collection. These found objects seemed to hold a status that guaranteed their distance from the monument.

2. Louise Nevelson, *Sky Cathedral's Presence I*, 1959–62, wood painted black, 272.1 × 257.8 × 52.7 cm (107 × 101½ × 20¾ ins, including base). Courtesy the Pace Gallery © Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York (photo: Bill Jacobson)



In Nevelson’s earliest large-scale assemblages from the late 1950s and early 1960s, the found wood objects court reference to utility in multiple ways. There was a careful negotiation present in Nevelson’s method, one that skirted total eradication of the objects’ original utilitarian identities but also de-emphasized their pasts. Paint obscures, but does not erase the various parts’ references to their past existence as architectural decorations, tools, toys, crates and other utilitarian objects. Through over-painting, which is combined with a tendency towards rhythmic formal repetitions within the assemblage, Nevelson promoted an awareness of the *objet trouvé*, but eluded clear and systematic symbolism. The aggregates prompted critics to cite a host of



3. Louise Nevelson's living room, 29 Spring Street, early 1960s  
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
(photo: courtesy of the Pace Gallery)



4. Martha Jackson Gallery installation of Louise Nevelson's *Sky Columns Presence*, New York, October–November, 1959. Louise Nevelson Papers, c. 1903–79, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution  
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
(photo: Oliver Baker)



utilitarian or craft-like traditions – folk art, children's art, African and Native American art – without enabling secure meanings or identities to be afforded to the spaces. There are numerous examples of this in the criticism of Nevelson's work, each reviewer coming up with a different metaphor for the space. Take, for instance, this description of her 1959 installation *Sky Column Presence* (fig. 4): the atmosphere

is hushed and almost compels one to whisper, as if there were concealed listeners behind the open and shut doors of the columns or in the dark recesses of the boxes. It gives an impression of having survived something in time – not the remains of primeval forests or the landscapes of other planets, but the relics of a civilization . . . or its charred vestiges in a depopulated world . . . The almost intangible quality of unreality . . . pervades the room.<sup>24</sup>

Spatiality itself became the focus, the sum of such references evoking a mysterious ambience that seemed principally antithetical to the ideal, open, and official space of public sculpture.

In these environments Nevelson's process intervened to introduce a plurality of metaphors, which in turn produced a sense of enigma in works decidedly resistant to legibility.<sup>25</sup> Her environments refused to uphold any clear ideal, and circumvented the kind of rational comprehension that established public sculptural language. But what was new here – and where Nevelson's works . . . moved beyond, for



5. Louise Bourgeois, *Needle Woman*, 1947–49, painted wood, 143.5 × 6.3 × 3.8 cm (56½ × 2½ × 1½ ins). Courtesy Cheim & Read, Hauser & Wirth and Galerie Karsten Greve (photo: Christopher Burke)

instance, David Smith's *Agricola* series – was that they did so while courting the terms of sculpture's useful past. Their spatiality bred a perception of the works as mysterious, but also as familiar and utilitarian.<sup>26</sup>

Beginning in the 1940s, Louise Bourgeois pursued an aggressively anti-public sculptural language that was in dialogue with Nevelson's own engagement with wood, legibility and use. She first constructed wood sculpture that by looking to African art alluded to utility, blending its iconography and structural framework with biography and a form of personal domestic utility. By drawing on object forms with personal significance, including tools such as needles, shuttles and knives, and making reference to architecture such as skyscrapers, pillars and towers, Bourgeois interrupted, even derailed, the figural language of her vertical forms (fig. 5). Then, in displaying them in various alternative places around her own domestic spaces during the 1940s and early 1950s, Bourgeois seemed to re-employ the sculptures, enlisting them for personal use as 'her domestic objects, using them as tools with which she confronted and redefined her inner world'.<sup>27</sup>

But the larger format in which Bourgeois displayed the *Personages*, as she did in 1949 and 1950 at the Peridot Gallery, anticipated a greater departure from convention. By exhibiting these repetitive

works with minimal bases, spread across the gallery, Bourgeois created a unified environment that asked viewers to read the works collectively (fig. 6). Combined with suggestive titles, the space recalled diverse sets of architecture, from the urban space of the skyscraper to the ritualistic space of an imagined primitive rite. Prefiguring the terms of Nevelson's most successful environments, Bourgeois introduced a language of utility, fashioned as the antithesis to the public functionality of the monument. Here was a functional mode that was neither public nor monumental; it was personal, non-Western, domestic and altogether de-masculinized. To critics the exhibitions registered as cohesive and ritualistic, even ready for use.<sup>28</sup> In this, their reception was positive, formative in establishing Bourgeois's reputation, and striking in their anticipation of critical response to her later installations.

It is the investment in a personalized version of functionality that connects the *Personages* to the otherwise strikingly different sculptural practice that Bourgeois initiated in the early 1960s. These latex and plaster works (figs. 7, 8), which were smaller, nearly abstract, and as distant from African form as they were from Western form, appeared entirely anti-utilitarian in their unshapely appearance. Critical response was characterized by perplexity bordering on



6. Installation photograph at the Peridot Gallery of *Louise Bourgeois: Sculptures*, New York, 1950. Courtesy Louise Bourgeois Archive (photo: Aaron Siskind)



dismay, based largely on their near illegibility.<sup>29</sup> Had these works been more decidedly abstract, analogies might have been drawn to the kinds of abstracted notions of force, dynamism and motion that were associated with the forms of post-war sculptors such as Theodore Roszak and Seymour Lipton. Yet Bourgeois's sculptures were equally equivocal in their abstraction; in most of the works, the formal language was too distant from shape and geometry, and too close to resembling something organic or nameable.

Though few secure readings could be made, those critics that did note the presence of organic form saw that these were nests, lairs and other forms of natural architecture, unusual subjects for sculpture at the time.<sup>30</sup> Although their scale might have suggested the realm of genre, they resisted categorization as such through their visual rhetoric, particularly when rendered in such a preliminary material as plaster. Moreover, this is sculpture that structurally refers to both architecture and function: these are spaces of refuge, meant to go unseen by predators. Architecture here is supremely functional – at the cost of aesthetics – and yet supremely unmonumental. As with the personages from the fifties, Bourgeois's materials and forms stake their distance polemically against public value and legibility.

Function in Bourgeois's work always holds a personal, private dimension, a feature that initially distinguishes it from the grand, mechanical functionality seen to reverberate through Lee Bontecou's 1960s' reliefs. Unlike the straightforward relationship to industrial form established through the spare, serial, geometric language and materials of minimalism, Bontecou's works referred to function in oblique, mysterious and disparate ways. Their look – they were constructed largely of industrial canvas scraps that were fastened with wires



7. Louise Bourgeois, *The Quartered One*, 1964–65, hanging piece, plaster, 158.1 × 60.9 × 50.8 cm (62¼ × 24 × 20 ins). Courtesy Cheim & Read, Hauser & Wirth and Galerie Karsten Greve (photo: © by Peter Moore)

to welded metal armatures – combined with their evocative quasi-abstract imagery seemed to suggest that works such as *Untitled* (1960) (fig. 9) might be functional, but not in any public, memorial, or otherwise beneficial sense.

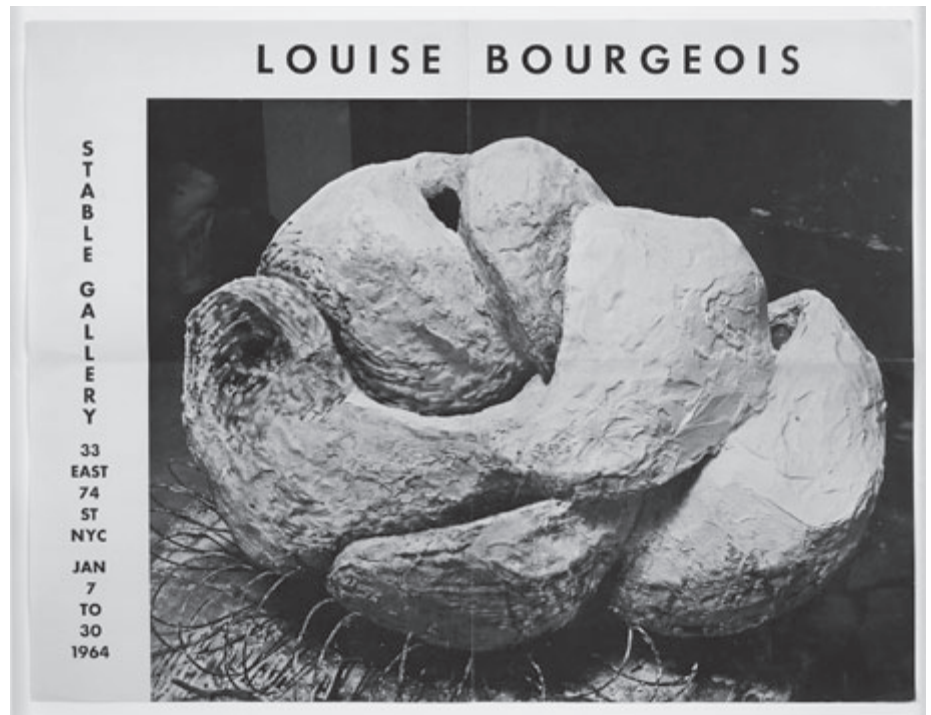
Donald Judd, Bontecou's most enthusiastic advocate in the 1960s, implied that this functionality was at least partially present within the singularity of shape, structure and image in her reliefs, which he argued amounted not to symbolic representations, the conventional *modus operandi* of sculpture, but to literal objects (fig. 10). Judd was comfortable with this ambiguity, which led him to include Bontecou's works under the appellation 'specific objects', and to characterize them as 'threatening and possibly functioning'.<sup>31</sup> As Jo Applin has astutely pointed out, what Judd's description suggests is that part of what was at stake in Bontecou's work was the activation of a symbolic language that obscures meaning, making the works difficult to read.<sup>32</sup> One can name *many* possible uses, and that multiplicity is precisely what prohibits interpretation.

Sometimes it was a matter of crossing metaphoric references, between, for instance, objecthood and organicism. At other times, it was one of giving off contradictory signals between objects that looked resolutely material, even thing-like, while concurrently appearing symbolic or expressionist, raising tensions in how to see them. Judd saw this as

their strength, claiming contentiously that literal objects (as opposed to sculptures) could be expressive in ways that symbolic representations could not; other critics emphasized their anxiety upon encountering such expressiveness. Often, these critics seemed intent to assign a use to the objects, to reduce them to something knowable, and, consequently, found it difficult to know how to interact with them upon failure to do so. Such an effect is quite singular; the imagery in Bontecou's reliefs, as even Judd could see, is both more menacing than in the average sculpture and yet less definite.

Bontecou's primary method of construction contributed largely to this effect: the structure and tenor of the objects spoke of functionality in such a way as to invert the terms of a public rhetoric. As reliefs the works necessarily enter into a dialogue with conventional form, yet the method of construction and resulting object could not be more distant from the clear, legible and contained stone or bronze surfaces of their historical predecessors. They not only fail to respect their method of support, the wall, they violate it by both projecting awkwardly beyond it and appearing to recede indefinitely into it. They also continue in the anti-sculptural tradition – one largely initiated by Rodin – by allowing the mark of

8. Poster for *Louise Bourgeois: Recent Sculpture* at the Stable Gallery, New York, 1964. Reproducing *Lair*, 1962–63, plaster, 46.9 × 73.9 × 54.2 cm (18½ × 29 × 21 ins) Courtesy Louise Bourgeois Archive (photo: Christopher Burke)



their maker to supersede their presence as vehicles of communication. Though no imprint of the thumb is visible on their surface, their aggregate compositional construction emphasizes a handmadeness or craftwork, thereby highlighting their private undemocratic origins.

At the same time, Bontecou seemed engaged in downplaying, or de-legitimizing, the place of skilled labour. Always fabricating the works herself, she worked laboriously, if somewhat haphazardly, finding through trial and error a material and form that would not pull away from the wall, finally settling upon welding massive, bulky steel frames and painstakingly grafting the canvas fragments to each section. Such impulses persisted among other women sculptors, among them Nevelson (at least in the 1950s and the early 1960s), Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, in opposition to the growing trend towards industrial fabrication.

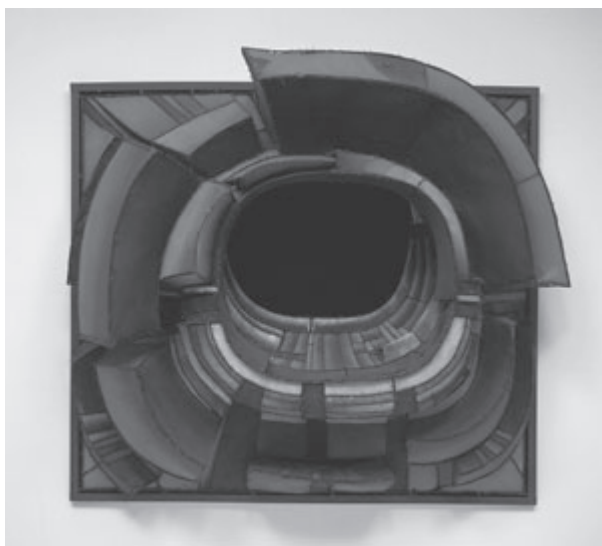
The highly personalized, almost esoteric results that often accompanied such a process were reiterated in Bontecou's case in the failure of the objects to remain as industrial, weapon-like or web-like as they might first appear. Their patched, sutured quality has the effect of forcing the viewer into a prolonged engagement with the parts, and such attention eventually evokes their fragility as awareness grows of those twisted metal wires that bind the fabric to its frame.<sup>33</sup> The reliefs transform from hard-shelled foolproof military machines into slices of canvas sewed by hand, a point emphasized at the time through descriptions and photographs of Bontecou tying wire (fig. 11).<sup>34</sup>

The works' 'craft' was often noted, if obliquely, in Bontecou's reception through persistent reference to the labour involved in their construction, even among her advocates, perhaps as much for its gendered associations as for its untimeliness.<sup>35</sup>



9. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1960 (oblique view), welded steel and canvas, 182.9 × 182.9 × 45.7 cm (72 × 72 × 18 ins). The Art Institute of Chicago; gift of the society for Contemporary Art. 1965.360. The Art Institute of Chicago (photo: Robert Hashimoto © The Art Institute of Chicago)

10. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961, welded steel, canvas, black fabric, copper wire and soot, 203.6 × 226 × 88 cm (80¼ × 89 × 34¾ ins). Kay Sage Tanguy Fund, Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo: © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY)



As with Nevelson's and Bourgeois's use of wood, craft widened the distance between Bontecou's works and conventional sculpture. But there was a way in which its role in her work was oddly displaced. In part by way of its assimilation into the notion of 'kitsch', and in part by way of its own historical associations with anonymity, craft signalled the absence of subjectivity. Yet Bontecou's works were, in spite of themselves, read as highly personal objects, a quality that formed part of their allure.<sup>36</sup>

This made the issue of craft less straightforward than might otherwise have been the case. Where the popular or aesthetic view of craftwork entailed association with an absence of meaning,<sup>37</sup> Bontecou's reliefs seemed to capitalize on an inversion of the gendered associations of such terms. It seems as if the visibility of their handwork – their refusal to efface the labour of their construction – was intended to register a reading of the objects as 'feminine', in turn further reducing their legibility. That is, such

marks of the feminine contested the rhetoric that derived from their decidedly masculine scale and imagery. Critics duly noted the problem, at times asking pointedly about the sex of their maker; or, as Michael Fried quipped in 1962, the reliefs demand an answer to the question of 'who would make such things?'<sup>38</sup> Like function, then, the question of gender was put on the table, only to be held at bay.

In its association with a hierarchically inferior form of utility, then, craft became a vehicle for complicating any secure reading of Bontecou's reliefs. The large, mechanical and violent aspects of the work seemed intended to throw the objects' craftwork into sharp relief, generating a tension within themselves, just as the biological and the mechanical seemed to compete or cross signals. Bontecou's

critics were stumped as to how to read the reliefs, and that air of mystery was directly connected to their appeal. John Ashbery remarked, 'someone 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'.<sup>39</sup> The result was a highly personalized language, one that was persistent and material in its refusal to hold public meaning. As Donald Judd explained, 'Bontecou's reliefs are an assertion of herself, of what she feels and knows. Their primitive, oppressive and unmitigated individuality excludes grand interpretations'.<sup>40</sup> Comprising a private and exclusive symbolism, the objects appeared as grand, vast and meaningfully loaded as any monument, but much more mysteriously encrypted.



When sculptors in the 1950s began more widely to vary their materials, sources and technical processes, sculpture's classification met challenges from within and without. From without, questions of labour, craft and use were brought to bear, making it necessary to re-evaluate any conventional understanding that securely distinguished sculpture from other objects, tools and commodities alike. From within, the unitary form of sculpture was split, multiplied and opened into space so as to disturb questions of form. The sum pressed the issue of sculpture's function; to disturb and uproot its classification from all sides was to break with its conventional form. And while this widespread change is not limited to the artists that I discuss here, what a collective look at just these artists highlights is the role that was played by women sculptors in affecting this transformation of the conventions of sculpture. By blurring references to primitivism, craft and architecture, American women sculptors at mid-century appeared to be trying out different means of recasting utility without establishing one clear and consistent strategy. The result was a practice that activated a more individualized form of engagement, one aimed not at the presentation of a fixed ideal, but at a more open-ended and contingent experience.

11. Photograph of Lee Bontecou working in her studio, 1963. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography © Hans Namuth Estate (photo: Hans Namuth)





1 B. Nauman, as quoted in 'Season Four: Identity', *Art*: 21: *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, PBS (television series), 2001.

2 R. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', *October*, 8, Spring 1979, p. 33.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

5 C. Greenberg, 'Sculpture in our time', in J. O'Brien (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 4*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 57.

6 An examination of the gendered conventions of sculpture lies outside the scope of this brief essay, but these conventions are unquestionably significant and, while they can only be briefly alluded to here, form one key component of the author's forthcoming study of this topic.

7 The Lee Bontecou retrospective was co-organized by the UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in 2003; Louise Nevelson's retrospective was organized by the Jewish Museum, New York, in 2007; the most recent Louise Bourgeois retrospective was organized by Tate Modern, London in association with the Centre Pompidou, Paris in 2007.

8 See A. Wagner, *Jean Baptiste Carpeaux: Sculptor of the Second Empire*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986.

9 H. Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1956, p. 5.

10 D. Getsy, 'Tactility or opticality, Henry Moore or David Smith', *Sculpture Journal*, 17.2, pp. 75–89.

11 This refers to Read's historical or idealized conception of the monument.

12 Read, as at note 9, p. 11.

13 On this topic see A. Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001.

14 R. Morris, 'Notes on sculpture', in G. Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 222–35.

15 *Ibid.*

16 I have retained the term 'primitivism' in accordance with period use.

17 J. Flam, with M. Deutch (eds.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003, pp. 4–5.

18 T. Smith, as quoted in Morris, as at note 14, pp. 229–30.

19 *Ibid.*

20 On the widespread engagement with tactility in the 1960s, see especially A. Potts, 'Tactility: the interrogation of medium in art of the 1960s', *Art History*, 27.2, pp. 282–304.

21 Moore did not produce monuments per se, but by the 1950s and 1960s his work held an 'official' status that aligned it with a *de facto* 'public' affiliation.

22 H. Kramer, 'The sculpture of Louise Nevelson', *Arts Digest*, 32, June 1958, p. 27. For more on this see E. Speaks, 'Experiencing Louise Nevelson's Moon Garden', *American Art*, 21.2, Summer 2007, pp. 96–108.

23 Kramer, *ibid.*, p. 27.

24 M. S., 'Exhibition at Jackson Gallery', *Arts Magazine*, 34, December 1959, p. 57.

25 There is a connection to the assemblage artists here as well. On their process, see A. Dezeuze, 'Assemblage, bricolage, and the practice of everyday life', *Art Journal*, 67.1, Spring 2008, pp. 31–37.

26 Many critical responses suggested this; one example surfaced in a poem about Nevelson's environments by Jean Arp: 'gray bottles filled with the dust of the catacombs', in other words, the remnants of a material armature devoid of function. J. Arp, 'Louise Nevelson', *XXe Siecle*, part ns. 22, June 1960, p. 19.

27 J. Helfenstein, 'Personages: animism versus modernist sculpture', in *Louise Bourgeois*, New York, Rizzoli, 2007, p. 209.

28 See, for instance, P. L., 'Louise Bourgeois', *Art Digest*, 25, 1 October 1950, p. 16.

29 On this topic see D. Wye, *Louise Bourgeois* (exh. cat.), Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1982; A. Wagner, 'Bourgeois prehistory, or the ransom of fantasies', *Oxford Art Journal*, 22.2, 1999, pp. 3–23; E. Speaks, "'We bring our lares with us": bodies and domiciles in the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois', *Art Journal*, 68.3, Fall 2009, pp. 88–103.

30 See particularly Wye, as at note 29.

31 D. Judd, 'Lee Bontecou' (1965), in *The Complete Writings 1959–75*, Halifax and New York, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975, p. 179.

32 J. Applin, "'This threatening and possibly functioning object": Lee

Bontecou and the sculptural void', *Art History*, 29.3, June 2006, p. 488.

33 See particularly Judd, as at note 31; and Applin, *ibid.*

34 See M. Craig, 'Notes on sculpture in a mad society', *Art News*, 59, January 1961, p. 27. Such photographs appeared in several places, including D. C. Miller (ed.), *Americans 1963* (exh. cat.), Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1963, p. 12; Anon., 'Art: the loft-waif', *Time Magazine*, 1 February 1963, p. 59; and *Lee Bontecou* (exh. cat.), Städtisches Museum, Schloss Morsbroich, Leverkusen, 1968; Archives of American Art, Washington, DC, Leo Castelli Gallery, reel N68-59.

35 See note 34. Allusions were made to the works' craftwork as well as their decorative quality; see W. Seitz, 'Eleven artists of the United States: Sao Paolo Biennial', 1961; I. Sandler, Review, *New York Post*, 26 November 1962, Washington, DC, Archives of American Art, Leo Castelli Gallery archive, reel N68-9.

36 See for instance Donald Judd, as quoted at note 31.

37 For a detailed and persuasive account of this association, see E. Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

38 M. Fried, 'New York letter', *Art International*, 6, 10 December 1962, p. 57.

39 J. Ashbery, 'Fire that burns in the heart of the void', *New York Herald Tribune*, Paris, 20 April 1965, p. 5.

40 Judd, as at note 31, p. 179.

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