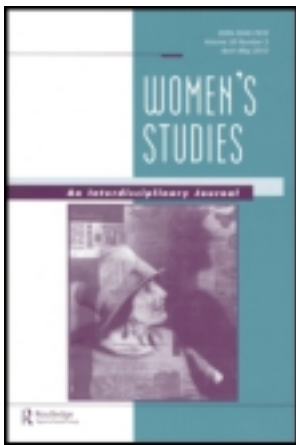


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Space, Gender, Sculpture: Bourgeois, Nevelson, and the Changing Conditions of Sculpture in the 1950s

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**SPACE, GENDER, SCULPTURE: BOURGEOIS, NEVELSON,
AND THE CHANGING CONDITIONS OF SCULPTURE
IN THE 1950s**

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The Promise of American Sculpture

American sculpture was in a contradictory position in the 1950s. Only recently declared to have “returned to the foreground,”¹ the increasing academicism of its seemingly most innovative and widespread practice, metal construction, appeared, concomitantly, to threaten its demise. Sculpture’s presence as the durable, dominant art form that it is today hung on changes that only began to take hold in the second half of the 1950s. It was then that formats and values associated with contemporary sculpture—a larger scale, the use of ephemeral, non-art materials, and assemblage techniques—began to earn a viable critical foundation.² Wayne Andersen, who wrote one of the few histories of sculpture of the period, linked that sea change to

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¹Clement Greenberg’s “The New Sculpture” first appeared in *Partisan Review*, 1949; edited and revised, 1958. *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon P, 1961), 140.

²Other sources suggest the same type of timeline. For instance, where a winter 1956, special issue of *Art in America*, that declared sculpture to be the future of American art focused on contemporary sculptors that worked in welded metal, a 1958 issue of *Arts Magazine* also dedicated exclusively to contemporary sculpture presented an expanded profile. The cross-section of works pictured, produced largely in 1957, revealed a new diversity of materials and techniques, which appears to have led the magazine to include a more thorough critical examination of artists who were working just outside of the scope of contemporary sculptural convention. This included a profile on the sculptor Louise

three artists—Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), and Richard Stankiewicz (1922–83).³

Drawing substantive connections among the artists, Andersen noted their interest in real world, found materials as well as Nevelson's and Bourgeois's exploration of space, their new "environmental" strategies (Andersen 101).⁴ In this article, I sort out these shared terms and read Nevelson's and Bourgeois's explorations of space against an interest, inflected first in their use of found materials, and second in the experience of the particular and everyday. In another context, one might draw further comparisons of their work to the concurrent return of ordinary content and subject matter that motivated the painting, sculpture, and assemblages of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg's and Johns's work reflects overtly the more oblique investment shared by Bourgeois and Nevelson in countering the universality and generic emotive element of expressiveness—contained in the energized "line" common to both paint and metal—that had so pervaded the abstract practices

Nevelson. This trend was preceded by a general growth in interest in contemporary American art. For instance, *Art in America* began running an annual issue dedicated to new American artists in 1954. The year that they dedicated an issue to sculpture (1956), was also the first year that sculpture was included in both annuals at the Whitney Museum, which had (since 1946) been divided into the Annual Painting exhibition and the Annual Sculpture, Drawing and Watercolor exhibition. In 1957 and 1958 there were only sculpture annuals.

³Wayne Andersen, *American Sculpture in process 1930/1970* (New York Graphic Society: Boston, MA, 1975). Stankiewicz was an important figure for many reasons, having expanded one strain of the practice of metal, incorporating found scraps and junk materials into his work in ways that added humor and something like irony to the increasingly serious and staid field of metal sculpture. He would become a key figure among the so-called "assemblage" artists of the late fifties, a group whose experimentation with discarded materials and a junk aesthetic earned them a place in the critical imagination as a new Ashcan school. But his distance from Bourgeois and Nevelson was remarked upon even upon publication of Andersen's book. See Kirk Varnedoe, "American Sculpture in Process (book review)," *Art Bulletin* 60.2 (1978), 384–389.

⁴Andersen briefly linked a third woman, Blanche Dombek, to these ideas as well. For three women to gain visibility making sculpture in the fifties was surprising given both the only very recent resurgence of wood as a viable medium and the minority position that women sculptors held at the time. Other sculptors that began to work with wood—fine woods and found—included Sidney Geist, William King, Israel Levitan, Gabriel Kohn, Raoul Hague, and, a bit later in the late fifties and early sixties, H.C. Westermann, George Sugarman, and Mark Di Suvero, but, among these, only the latter three artists hold substantial critical reputations today.

of both abstract expressionist painting and metal sculpture at the time.

While their status as innovators of environmental sculpture is well established, the elliptical nature of the relationship that Bourgeois's and Nevelson's work has to terms like the "everyday" and the ordinary is partly due to the nature of their work. That relationship relates not to straightforward content, *per se*, so much as their choice of materials and means of deployment. But, especially when approached together, such connections elucidate the artists' mutual embrace of an alternate ethic, one aligned with the sensate and experiential—terms that characterize the means by which we experience routine life. In turn, this redirection of their techniques and final results amounted to a devaluation of the visual or optical in favor of the spatial and the tactile, and, so, a radical break with the values of 1950s abstraction. Opticality had emerged as the paradigmatic aesthetic value in response to the dramatic rise in popularity and critical acclaim of abstract expressionism. In combination, Nevelson's and Bourgeois's working methods, symbolic sources, and spatially invested practices invoked a new framework of values for sculpture, as well as art more broadly speaking, which would redefine sculptural practice and its reception for the next generation of artists, including Lee Bontecou and Eva Hesse.

From very early points in their lengthy careers, Bourgeois and Nevelson both seemed invested in drawing upon engagement with daily life, particularly as derived from those elements related to their European backgrounds and childhood. Nevelson was born in Kiev, Russia, in 1899 but grew up in the U.S. where she moved in 1905; there her family established itself in Maine as a prominent European family with a successful trade in lumber. The business seems to have given wood a priority of place in her imagination; it was her working material of choice from the 1950s on. Together with her love for collecting, her tendency to amass mostly manufactured, treated wood from various sources placed a commitment to found objects at the foundation of her practice. The two allowed Nevelson to draw on the everyday, a particularized sense of place (contained in the object's history), and her own life (biographically, but also domestically, as discussed below) as the substance of her sculpture.

Louise Bourgeois, too, began working with found wood at a very early point in her career, and it came to play a very similar

role during the 1940s and 1950s, allowing Bourgeois to draw connections to the realms of family, home, and routine events in her work. Bourgeois, born in 1911, grew up in and outside Paris, and held onto the fascination and tragedy of her childhood home and environs all the more firmly having left them behind for New York in the 1930s. While homesickness and biography are two of the motivating forces that Bourgeois often cited in relation to her earliest sculptures, the end results bear little resemblance to the kind of autobiographical production that one expects to derive from such impulses. Instead, there seems to be some less traceable record of the known that clings to her final results.

In the following sections, I consider the work of Bourgeois and Nevelson in turn. After looking at how their practices relate to issues of gender and an alternate set of values, I then compare the two artists more directly in order to highlight instances of confluence. But the article's organization is somewhat artificially compartmentalized; I see the two as rivals, but also as working in tandem throughout the 1950s, building on the practices of the other, and together executing work that at once became foundational to their own individual practices and to the larger field of sculpture throughout the 1960s and 1970s and into today. Their shared means of making, which has so many echoes in contemporary practice, might best be understood as having introduced the domestic everyday into sculptural practice in ways that re-gendered its subsequent terms.⁵

Bourgeois—The Sensate and the Everyday

A fine line, often elided, separates drawing from life from working autobiographically, yet it is crucial to seeing how Bourgeois and Nevelson worked. Thinking through that distinction might seem more easily done in the case of Bourgeois, in part because she so often invoked life experiences and biography in discussing her work. Yet such statements have more often acted to give biography too weighted a place in approaching her sculpture. Here I will try to redirect attention away from the matter of specific biographical

⁵On divisions in the everyday, see for instance, Ben Highmore, "Questioning Everyday Life," *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 1–38, esp. 14–17.



FIGURE 1 Louise Bourgeois
FORÊT (Night Garden), 1953
Painted wood
37 × 18 7/8 × 14 5/8"; 93.9 × 47.9 × 37.1 cm. (color figure available online).
Photo by: Christopher Burke, Courtesy Cheim & Read and Hauser & Wirth

events and toward an understanding of her investment in articulating daily experience. For example, remarks worth revisiting persist throughout her diaries and written statements that characterize her experience of the phenomenal world rather than the facts of her family history. Take, for one, her characterization of the 1953 construction, *Night Garden (FORÊT; Figure 1)*:

Garden at Night is related to "nature" in the sense that I have in the past walked in a garden at night and have looked down at plants crowded together. Even under a clear sky at night, the darkness that surrounds those plants near the ground has always seemed to me attractive and frightening. . . .

It is not nature, but an experience at a given time and place that affects me; not that the experience was really exceptional, but that it repeated itself when the conditions repeated themselves. It was a resistance to habit—to becoming accustomed—in the sense that the experience was repeated and became hostile.⁶

While walking in a garden at night qualifies less as a common experience in New York than it would have in pre-war France, it is nonetheless a type of experience that straddles the line between a personal memory and one that has broader associations.

Bourgeois's sculpture often insinuates the past into the present, usually (in more recent works) by summoning a feeling or sense through an assemblage of clearly used, worn, old objects. In *Garden*, the forms are predominantly abstract and not recognizably old. Her statement is what reveals the strategy; in constructing the form, she drew on a past moment of "dailiness," an activity that might be consigned to the inattention of routine. And to render that moment palpable, she relied on familiar elements of place and spatial dynamics. Using place or space to manifest something usually unthought, even unseen, addresses a problem that Ben Highmore, among others, links to the difficulty of articulating the terms of studying the everyday, which seem transparent, and, so, inarticulable.⁷ The means by which one registers the everyday might require a complex approach, as anthropologist Michael Taussing has observed:

... what sort of sense is constitutive of this everydayness? Surely this sense includes much that is not sense so much as sensuousness, an embodied and somewhat automatic "knowledge" that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational. (Taussing, as quoted in Highmore 19)

In recounting Taussing's thoughts, Highmore posits the apt nature of the aesthetic realm to treat such problems, noting its history of drawing on the everyday, and potential for form and structure to address the sensate. *Garden* is an example; space and

⁶Louise Bourgeois, statement for group show, Stable Gallery (1958), Louise Bourgeois files, Whitney Museum of American Art Archive.

⁷See Highmore, "Questioning," esp. 18–19.

tactility are foregrounded over and above the visual through the near monochrome color of the “night” garden and proximity of the forms. Their intimacy is felt, and we sense their poised potential to draw closer, grow higher, or otherwise mobilize.

Bourgeois’s manner of construction—her materials and basic technique of assemblage—lends to the overall sense of an investment in the sensate. Using found wood that is somewhat crudely rendered—not highly refined, not entirely shaped—the forms seem to act more through half-associations, just as they might if we were on our daily walk and recalling the path and markers we have taken before. There is a way in which their rough, undefined and quasi-abstract shapes suggest that they are still to be in the process of becoming, continually re-forming for the viewer. Proximity aids the suggestion; their collective huddling lends to their nascence. One installation photograph shows the work’s base to rest on four spheres that mimic the shape and position of wheels, further destabilizing the work.

Bourgeois shows how sculpture can translate an experience so that it might, first, retain the quality that it had in a routine encounter, and second, dynamically materialize or make such an encounter known. An essay by art historian and Bourgeois’s husband Robert Goldwater provides a framework for such an idea. Written in 1945, contemporaneous with Bourgeois’s earliest works in wood, the essay treats the theme of realism in nineteenth-century French painting by outlining the changing relationship between art and nature; it contends that central to the shift in aesthetic values from the “natural” to the “real” was an increased investment in “experience—” the translation of nature as “lived” (Goldwater, “Art and Nature in the 19th Century,” 104–111).

As with Bourgeois’s own tendency to cite her past, part of what was at stake in both instances was the articulation of a *translation*, an idea that relies on some familiarity. To this end, Bourgeois’ work has often relied on spatial enactments derived from common thematics, relationships, and everyday moments. While we might think first of more recent works like *Cells (Clothes)* (1996), based rather frankly on the space and stuff of domesticity, precedence can be found in the 1940s and 1950s, as in the group of tall, totemic wood sculptures collectively referred to as the personages. With titles like *Brother and Sister* (1947), *Pregnant Woman* (1947–9), and *Paddle Woman* (1947; Figure 2), these mobilize imagery and



FIGURE 2 Louise Bourgeois

Paddle Woman, 1947

Wood and stainless steel

58 3/4 × 12 × 12"; 149.2 × 30.4 × 30.4 cm. (color figure available online).

Photo by: Christopher Burke, Courtesy Cheim & Read and Hauser & Wirth

relations rooted in the everyday, most often drawing on familial relations and mundane utilitarian objects.

Many of Bourgeois's personages were shown in two exhibitions held at the Peridot Gallery in New York, in 1949 and 1950. Both exhibitions were comprised entirely of the quasi-figural forms, rendered in a roughly figural scale (hovering mostly around 60" tall with one or two being either much smaller



FIGURE 3 Installation photograph of “Louise Bourgeois: Sculptures” at the Peridot Gallery in New York in 1950.

Photo by: Aaron Siskind, Courtesy Louise Bourgeois Archive

or much larger), and placed on very flat plinths (Figure 3).⁸ Eradicating the base, a practice that would become widespread among minimalists in the 1960s, was instrumental in fashioning a spatially invested practice; integrating the works into the space of the room created a sense of place the characteristics of which were broad and contradictory.

That sense of place was informed by what little there was of iconography and symbolic content to the sculptures. While the titles suggest that the sculptures were conceived as figures, their explicit formal features related them more to architectural structures such as pillars or tombs, craft tools such as sewing shuttles or needles, and weapons such as spears. The composite suggested, at once, city, factory, and battlefield, among other things. When the personages were conceived of as a group they evoked for critics a dual set of terms. On the one hand, they were seen to court

⁸The “bases,” moreover, appeared only after the dealer prohibited Bourgeois from drilling the works directly into the gallery floor, her preferred method of support.

the austere verticality and repetition of the urban landscape of the skyscraper, New York being Bourgeois's home by that time. At the same time, critics noted the various ways that the objects appeared tribal or artifactual, as, for example, in a 1950 review that noted: "When the sculptures are grouped together, [a] totemistic aspect is heightened. They seem ready for use in some primitive rite" (P.L. 16). Such a description initiates a set of terms entirely distinct from those of the present, everyday life of the city, calling up, instead, the anterior, the primitive, and the ritualistic. Yet both function around a spatialized rhetoric, thereby "locating" the viewer outside the gallery. In this, there is a decided shift in the stakes of Bourgeois's practice, which prioritizes activation of the sensory as a whole and was foregrounded by the conjunction of the works' rhetoric, iconography, and means of construction. The connection between the two—the everyday symbolisms and the rudimentary techniques she employed—was what made these works feel decidedly domestic.

Many works, as in *Woman carrying packages* (1949) and *Quarantania* (1947–53), referenced domesticity through relational means; others, especially those that resembled houses or apartment buildings like *Portrait of Jean-Louise* (1947–49), did so *via* the structures of daily life. Some, like *Woman in the shape of a Shuttle* (1947–49) conflate Bourgeois's own history—the shuttle being a tool that Bourgeois grew up working with in her parents' tapestry reparations workshop—with a traditional form and function of women.

In such cases, where the tool or building overtakes the person, gesture and expression are suppressed even as the work conveyed something similar. *Woman in the shape of a Shuttle*, for instance, embodied the stiff, rote, even anonymous experience of the artisanal workshop and worker, but this was delivered through our knowledge of the object, the shuttle, and its transformation. Rendered here, the tool's shape feels compacted, its scale grandiose, and its material, unrefined and rough when it should be smooth, delicate and finished.⁹ The missing material—the gouges in the wood that form the figure's eyes—is equally evocative, lending a kind of palpability to all of those holes that

⁹In this they prefigure something of the operation at stake in Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures.

required filling at the original site of labor (the repair shop). In this re-rendering of the object, which seems more ghostly than tool-like, one senses something of the work originally performed and the nature of that enterprise.

In the personage exhibitions, the emotional tenor of the gallery space seemed primarily to be one of sobriety, even loss. Recalling that the work was made just as the war ended, and exhibited as domestic relations were renegotiated in its wake, the space of the battlefield becomes as likely a reference as the space of her past. But, as has been suggested by art historian Ann Gibson, the battlefield referenced was as likely a gendered one as it was a site of international conflict. Bourgeois has insinuated as much; of one personage sculpture, she said, “*Sleeping Figure* is a war figure that cannot face the world and is defensive. The face is a kind of mask and the arms are lances” (Bourgeois as quoted in Pels 53). The rhetoric used here is common to many of Bourgeois’ statements throughout her career, but at times these ideas pointed directly to her specific position in the world. The above ideas were connected by Bourgeois, for instance, to gender politics. In the 1950s, she continued, “The art scene belonged to the men and I was invading their terrain” (Bourgeois as quoted in Pels 53).

Nevelson’s World Architecture

For her viewers, as Bourgeois seemed to intend, employing contradictory methods, terms, and imagery often elicited awareness of dissonances and sites of conflict. Among the personages, for instance, jarring juxtapositions between the modern and the primitive seemed to critics “melancholy” and “emaciated” even as the spaces appeared unified. It was as if her use of such methods was a Brechtian method of resistance—unsettling and vivid, yet able to belong to the everyday and the ordinary. When Louise Nevelson began making “environments,” around 1957, her relationship to the everyday was made more oblique. The spaces were seen as amalgamated and abundant, mysterious but alluring. Such overarching qualities preempted awareness of the everydayness of the space, which appeared only to emerge as the works—their parts, their construction—were inspected, as time in the space passed. Her politics were all the more diffuse, tied to a kind of globalism

that took hybridity as a means toward a pluralized practice that was, concomitantly, rooted in the personal and domestic.

Nevelson's remarks at the time suggest that her more holistic ethos may have contributed to such an aesthetic practice; for Nevelson, constructing environmental sculpture was a means to amplify the presence of "life," as contained in the "architecture" of the world. "[T]here is an architecture, there's an architecture about our bodies, there's an architecture about the place we're in," Nevelson explained, "there's an architecture about the things we build (it doesn't have to be a house). If you think in terms of that principle and if those principles of that architecture flow together—that's beauty . . ."¹⁰ Where Bourgeois was invested in a kind of personal dailiness, Nevelson always tended to operate with a broader framework, attempting to harness universal principles and manifest invisible, symbiotic forces that related to a collective body. This made her less inclined to make direct references to biography, always subsuming any derivations under more general terms—"weddings" and "voyages" replace specific references to her own experience with such things.

That the structure and substance of life itself as felt through interconnections was the subject of Nevelson's work is further suggested in a taped interview from 1965, given after her complete move into environmental sculpture: "Since art, particularly sculpture, to me is so very living, naturally you want all of life, so you would make an environment, but that environment is sculpture too . . . I am giving the world to the world. . ."¹¹ To make "life" materially palpable, around 1957 Nevelson initiated her signature method of stacking, piling, and overlapping repetitively structured monochromatic works together, in effect producing what reviewers called "walls" and "sculptural architecture," as in *Sky Cathedral's Presence I* (1959–62; Figure 4) and *Black Wall* (1959). The works themselves were metonymic embodiments of the same. In the mid- and late fifties, the works were comprised

¹⁰Louise Nevelson, as quoted in Tal Streeter, Unpublished interview with Louise Nevelson (November 25, 1959), 8. Martha Jackson Gallery records, Archives of American Art.

¹¹Nevelson, "Meet the Artist." Taped interview for an NYU course (Spring 1965). Nevelson file, Whitney Museum of American Art Archives.



FIGURE 4 Louise Nevelson
Sky Cathedral's Presence I, 1959–1962
 wood painted black
 107-1/2 × 101-1/2 × 20-3/4" (including base)
 Photo by: Bill Jacobson, Courtesy The Pace Gallery; © 2011 Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

of an accumulation of small, usually rough pieces of recognizably used wood fragments; these were increasingly mundane and under-refined found materials including toilet seats, milk crates, bowling pins, kindling, tools, floor and fence planks, and other domestic architectural embellishments. First all painted (black for most of the fifties), then nailed together in a crate or box, or on a wood plank, or in some combination of the two, the repetitiveness of the arrangements lent cohesion to the various pieces. Individually, the final sculptures often invoked personal architectures and objects—abused furniture, shelves, bureaus, and tables that had been broken, shattered, and reassembled to prevent

further use (Figure 5). They seemed, that is, to cancel or invert any conventional affinities with their own self-evidently domestic origins; comfort, order, and ease are lost.¹²

Together the works ignited more fantastic responses. The terms that began to circulate repeatedly around Nevelson's exhibitions by the end of the 1950s resembled those applied to Bourgeois's in that they likewise suggest a negotiation between the awareness of "real," materially present forms, and the invocation of more mysterious, imagined realms, from ancient forests to caves and crypts. This was largely an effect of the juxtaposition of Nevelson's materials with her means of construction. Her tendency to "house" mundane, used objects within stacked crates and shadow boxes produces over-saturated spaces that appeared to emanate an excess of cryptic materiality. The persistent use of monochrome—first black, and eventually white and gold—increased the distance from the everyday. It also induced a dynamic that Arthur Danto has recently referred to as "alchemical," intended as it was to directly affect "work and viewer together" (39). Danto undoubtedly means for the term to refer to contemporary reviews of Nevelson of the kind I discuss below, but it also captures the kind of composite nature of the works' impact, intended as it is to act upon the space around it and the viewer, rather than simply to inhere to the work itself. And while it seems correct to address the works' double impact, the same process might also be thought of as one of resistance, a means of pulling back from that very materiality that the works so readily assert, in turn diminishing any historic weight the individualized objects might have had, and instead turning them into collective "prompts for the imagination" rather than the eye, even as they read as very real, domestic artifacts (Danto 41).

Her means of making, in other words, which were rather crude—based largely, at the time, on a can of paint, a hammer,

¹²In this, they recall something of the feel of Rauschenberg's combines from just a few years earlier, works like *Bed* and *Interview* (1955), both of which seem to embody a kind of domesticity-gone-wrong, sullied, dirtied, or wrecked. I would like to acknowledge Tom Folland for drawing my attention to this view of Rauschenberg's combines at a conference entitled "Revisiting the Art and Craft Divide," Sacramento State (March 2010). Tom Folland, "Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration," *The Art Bulletin* 92.4 (December 2010), 348–365.



FIGURE 5 Louise Nevelson
Sky Cathedral/Moon Chapel, 1957–1959
wood painted black
94" × 56" × 14" (238.8 cm × 142.2 cm × 35.6 cm)
Photo by: Ellen Page Wilson, Courtesy The Pace Gallery; © 2011 Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

nails, and glue—seemed designed to make the sculptures difficult to *see*; there was an express devaluation of the visual attached to her practice of the kind that set her work as remotely apart

as possible from the highly linear, welded metal sculpture so dominant at the time. Critics seemed implicitly aware of this, rarely discussing individual works and compositional structures, and, so, rarely appealing to a conventionally formalist framework in defense of her work.

Around 1958–59, Nevelson increasingly capitalized on such shifts in value, which amounted to an assertion of haptic values—the period critical term for that quality of touch so closely associated with modern sculpture—over and above visuality. In a series of exhibitions titled after the natural world, e.g., “Moon Garden + One,” “Sky Column’s Presence,” and “Dawn’s Wedding Feast,” to name a few, Nevelson increased the works’ scale, blocked windows to rely only on dim, theatrical lighting, and utilized unconventional spaces of display including the ceiling, window sills, and corners, which altogether acted to enhance a somatic form of address. With the introduction of such an approach, Nevelson’s reputation reached new heights (she was hailed as David Smith’s equal) as critics enthusiastically read the environments as caves, crypts, and other elementary spaces, spaces traditionally not “seen,” but “entered.” The implication was that transport was not symbolic, but physical, the gallery having been “entirely transformed into a continuous sculptural enclosure . . . ” that appeared to wrap around the body (Kramer 27).

Embracing materiality and foregrounding rudimentary tools like a hammer, glue, and nails raised references to craft, enacting a cycle whereby “craft” reaffirmed the work as material artifact.¹³ At times, Nevelson formalized this analogy by choosing to incorporate such objects into her work or by making objects that directly recalled African and South American artifacts, pottery, carvings, and other objects classed alongside craft in western museologies, as with *Bride of the Black Moon* (1955). But more often than not, no overt references were made; it was simply the unusual, ad hoc feel of the works’ appearance that associated it not with fine art, but instead with an exaggerated version of folk sculpture, one that far surpassed that tradition in their naïveté. If the fifties work resembled anything from the realm of art, it was the rough Dada

¹³On the relationship between materiality and craft, see below. Glen Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (London and New York: Berg in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2007).

constructions of Kurt Schwitters. As in Schwitters's most vivid constructions, and most notably his *Merzbau* environments (1920–36), Nevelson's ad hoc, additive approach could be read as failures, unable to register in the conventional terms of sculptural making, instead effecting an alternate framework of value as aesthetic acts of bricolage.¹⁴

Such an inversion of priority becomes clear, for example, if we examine her early forays into the realm of folk and handmade objects, which began in the 1940s. Comparing Nevelson's *Seals* or *Menagerie Animal* (Figure 6; 1942) to a folk object like *Duck Decoy* bears out the analogy.¹⁵ *Decoy* is a pared down representation of a duck, and Nevelson's *Seals* and *Animal* appear to have been produced using similar principles. The former was constructed out of minimally manipulated wood; its purpose governed its construction, and since it was planted to attract wild fowl from a distance, no great attention to detail was necessary to obtain a likeness. The circus animals were made within a conceptually analogous—functional—framework. The scale of Nevelson's *Seals* in particular, which were much smaller than the other works with which they were exhibited, also mimics the distant viewpoint of a decoy. Finally, the addition of furniture casters on some pieces finalized these effects. By suggesting that some of the sculptures be read as usable folk toys, the viewer was invited to consider engaging with the works, or at least to associate them with their prior use.

When wood was used in conventional sculpture, its "integrity," grain, and surface features, were drawn out or capitalized upon

¹⁴By using the term bricolage, I mean to suggest that there is an interesting relationship to Claude Levi-Strauss's theory of myth and the bricoleur here, if not a straightforward one. I am thinking not only of his definition of images of myth, the work of the bricoleur, which necessarily "had a use" from which they were detached in order that they "can be used again," but also of his analysis of certain mythical, functional objects like the Tlingit club discussed in *The Savage Mind*. He describes how this functional object had a structural connection between its symbolism and use, which were "inextricably bound up." See Levi-Strauss, "The Science of the Concrete," *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) esp. 26.

¹⁵The first public exhibition of American folk art was in February 1924 at the Whitney Studio Club. For a discussion of folk art in the U.S. at the time, see Tom Armstrong, ed. "The Innocent Eye: American Folk Sculpture," *200 Years of American Sculpture* (New York: David Godine in association with the Whitney Museum of Art, 1976).



FIGURE 6 Louise Nevelson

Menagerie Animal, 1942 (color figure available online).

Louise Nevelson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Photo by: John D. Schiff; © 2011 Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

to evoke a kind of truth about the “nature of the material.” As Danto recently noted (41–42), in Nevelson’s case it was not the properties of wood per se that were elicited. It was something less inherent to the material and more related to experiential familiarity, the sense of an unsorted accumulation of things that one half-recognizes, half-knows. Unlike the way we are asked to attend to “fine” materials, whose quality is rooted in their rarity, the materials utilized by Nevelson and Bourgeois—the kind of wood, the shapes and combinations—derive from the sensate world that we experience routinely. And both artists at once amplify and distort that experience with the persistent under-refinement of their

works. The results are less familiar, interrupted by a primitive quality that emanates from, rather than belongs to, the wood.¹⁶

Such reprioritizations of value invited the viewer to sense an abundance of materiality without concentrating on the worth of that material. The objects' facts of construction and utilitarian class are announced and even made responsible for the production of more fantastic associations or scenarios (a quality that increased dramatically in the late fifties and early sixties). And unlike surrealist sculptors who deployed analogous strategies just two decades prior—one thinks of the “disagreeable” works of Giacometti and Man Ray—Nevelson's works had a more diffuse sense of threat, little by way of the individualized bite by which to send the viewer off into an entirely *singular* dream narrative. Nevelson's works' scale, abstraction, and mundane, functionally defunct qualities, together interrupt that direct address.¹⁷ She often alluded to as much by stating her interest in recreating the “in-between spaces,” and “dawns and dusks” (as in the quote on page 1088 of this article). Places, not narratives, dominate her imagery, and these are unequivocally social or shared spaces, spaces that imply a greater world or body. In turn, such metaphors aptly capture the contradiction at play in her work, its immanence and distance. These associations place the viewer incontestably here, wrapped and secured in the present space of the gallery, and also elsewhere, in some anterior, distant, and half-material other space.

Intersecting Sites—Gender, Space, and Value

What Nevelson shared with Bourgeois was that the experience of the *spaces* themselves felt prioritized. Much like Bourgeois's work in the late forties and early fifties, Nevelson's wood sculpture was subject to a host of non-western descriptions, which

¹⁶This is particularly so when examining the works of both artists from mid- to late 1950s, and for Bourgeois into the 1960s (although the material then is plaster). For Nevelson's part, she began using wood fragments, then metal, in the early sixties that have cleaner edges, producing an overall smoother, more refined style.

¹⁷On the utilitarian operation of the works of Giacometti and Man Ray, see, for instance, Rosalind Krauss, “A Game Plan: The Terms of Surrealism,” *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT P 1977), esp. 114–120.

again included references to the “tribal,” as well as the primeval, lunar, and magical;¹⁸ the more sensational reviews even conjured imagery of a witch-like Nevelson who practiced a form of alchemy. And if little contradiction was seen in this experience—at once mundane and rooted in the material and the present, and yet also fantastic and transportive¹⁹—it is partly because of the way viewers experienced the space—their sensate awareness of its elements. That is, like one’s awareness of daily life, Nevelson’s work prioritizes one time and location, the present and the here, even as it draws upon anterior associations.

To draw on our sensate knowledge of the world, Bourgeois and Nevelson made an appeal to its material components, and this is where the gendered terms of their practice comes in. Both artists produced finished products that showcased naïve and unrefined methods of construction that bore a strong mark of the handmade, a kind of labor that asserts affiliation with the realm of the domestic, or perhaps the preindustrial. Such “feminized” methods of making readily inspired association with spaces—including premodern, anti-rational, enigmatic, and personal spaces—that likewise carried a gendered affiliation.

In assessing both the impulse toward eliciting such associations, and their critical viability, we might recall the updated framework for reading feminist aesthetic practice laid out by Helen Molesworth. In her 2000 essay, “House work and art work,” Molesworth argued for the reassessment of feminist artistic practices as examined through their constitution of the notion of labor (Molesworth 71–97). By focusing on the issue of different types of “work,” she elicits continuities among works that are usually considered divisive when appealing to a conventional constructionist/essentialist line, one which defines gender as a product of social construction or a product of biology, respectively. Noting how such diverse works as the maintenance art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* (1970–79), and

¹⁸Such references abound; see, for example, Stuart Preston, “The Rising Tide of Exhibitions” *New York Times* (1 Dec. 1957), 11; Anon., “Nevelson’s ‘Moon Garden + One,’” *Time* (3 Feb. 1958), 58; M.S., “Reviews: Nevelson at Martha Jackson,” *Arts Digest* (Dec. 1959), 57; Martin Craig, “Notes on sculpture in a mad society,” *Art News* 59 (Jan. 1961), 29.

¹⁹See, for instance, Dore Ashton, “Art,” *Arts and Architecture* 75 (Mar. 1958), 33; Anonymous, “Weird Woodwork of the Lunar World,” *Life* (25 Mar. 1958), 70–80.

Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* (1973–79), all propose labor as a *site* of intersection between public and private domains, by enacting or materializing this amalgamated site, each evokes the terms of such experiences.²⁰ Each work thereby negotiates seemingly distinct spheres in ways that demonstrate their overlap and firm imbrication.²¹

Prior to the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, there were only a few approaches to such issues that were made concrete in public discourse. In the 1940s and 1950s, women's magazines began to regularly run articles that discussed the relationship between public and private realms, and the proper means of negotiating the two. Always handled from a heteronormative position, which took marriage and family as the given goal for all women, questions about how to negotiate modern changes abounded: could a woman work and provide enough comfort and support for her family? Was it possible to regain the love and attention of a husband upon his return home from war?²² Such questions almost exclusively defined the possible range of approaches to the intersection of public and private. But any type of visibility signaled change; the strain of postwar gender relations was partly fed, of course, by women gaining more of a foothold outside the home in volunteer and paid positions.

This is not to say that Bourgeois and Nevelson consciously advanced a politics that engaged with shifting gender roles; there is a more oblique relation at stake here. To return to Molesworth's analysis of feminist art practices, I want to use it to suggest that Bourgeois and Nevelson enact or materialize spatial divisions and confluences, and their relation to the personal and public. One means of exposing the extension of the private into the public is to activate imaginary, anterior sensations while also drawing the viewer back to the terms of everyday life. What we think of as an

²⁰Maintenance art is a category of performance art often seen to have its roots in the work of Ukeles and other feminist artists working in the 1970s. It most often explores those everyday rituals and activities that contribute not to the realm of production, but to daily upkeep, such as housework, laundry, cooking, and child rearing.

²¹In using the term "imbrication," I mean to imply the significance of Brechtian strategies in these works.

²²See Nancy A. Walker, ed., *Women's Magazines 1940–1960: Gender Roles and Popular Press* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998), esp. "World War II" and "Women and the workplace," 23–87.

essentially individualized and closed experience is revealed to be one shared by many, with all of the responsibilities and interdependency that such awareness secures. In effect, the work is able to “actively produce everyday life as an entity” (Highmore 2), as well as to show the interpenetration of two everyday—the urban quotidian and the domestic—often held as distinct.

To spatialize experience is to re-place it outside the self, to make of it something not individualized, but potentially shared, and worthy of consideration and attention. Such spatial enactments prefigure feminist concerns by foregrounding subjectivity and asking the viewer to consider it in concretized terms. In producing an interface among disparate experiences—those of the domestic, and those of the aesthetic and the social—such works materialized spaces and situations that conventionally remained invisible.

But the linchpin that seemed to produce the critical viability of this approach for both Bourgeois and Nevelson was the veritable materiality of their sculpture, which in its *persistence* enabled such invisible connections to become manifest while, concurrently, collapsing the distance enabled through those anterior associations that place the viewer elsewhere. The results, to be clear, were *not* those of a postmodern split, whereby the viewer’s experience is intentionally distended; that would presuppose a conceptual thinking through of the work. But neither was the experience of their work meant to effect transcendence, to render one outside of time and place. That frank refusal to allow for the type of unqualified, degendered and disembodied suspension characteristic of modernism is key here. And instrumental in that refusal were those terms that announced a departure from the realm of conventional sculpture. By cultivating the sensate—through its imagery, its resemblance to an alternate tradition of handmade objects, and its spatialization—the works’ terms registered as decidedly distinct from the predominantly formal and visual properties of modern sculpture. And in crafting the work such that it seems made for the individual user, these objects were associated with a class of thing that was local or placed.²³

²³This is an argument best explored by Ann Gibson, as discussed in “Louise Bourgeois’s Retroactive Politics of Gender,” *Art Journal* 53.4 (Winter 1994), 44–47.

In order to further elucidate one aspect of what I am proposing—that Nevelson's and Bourgeois's spatialized, sensate practices actively resisted the conventional practices of sculpture—I would like to invoke another frame of reference, Griselda Pollock's analysis of the nineteenth-century painting of women impressionists. Pollock attends to the unconventional nature of the spatial devices in the work of Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, which she argues were aimed at effects entirely distinct from those associated with both conventional western painting and mainstream modernism. To rehearse briefly one of her main points regarding what she refers to as their mutual "misapplications" of space, Pollock proposes that, within an individual composition these artists often enacted the juxtaposition of competing spatial systems that, together, fashioned a "disarticulation of the conventions of geometric perspective which had normally governed the representation of space in European painting" (91). In place of those conventions, Pollock contends that we find space in their work as "experienced," invoking a phenomenological approach to sight and locatedness. She writes, "One of the major means by which femininity is thus reworked [in these paintings] is by the rearticulation of traditional space so that it ceases to function primarily as the space of sight for a mastering gaze, but becomes the locus of relationships" (124).

Drawing an analogy to the practices of Bourgeois and Nevelson, we might read their procedures for making and displaying sculpture to constitute a comprehensive "disarticulation" of those conventions of western sculpture that align it with both the optical (modernism) and the monolithic (conventional Western sculpture). Such a shift, in other words, can be understood to be aimed at the gendered conventions of *making* sculpture itself. The masculine act of carving or casting, which might be seen to correspond to the conventional use of perspective in painting, plays only one part here. Metal sculpture's dominance was likely even more apropos. Welding immediately insinuated one into a masculine tradition, Picasso, Gonzalez, Smith, etc., and was all the more singular in its de-spatialized, optical pursuits.

Invoking space and tactility as alternate priorities served well to promote a different set of values on two fronts. First, it announced a break with both the deep-seated conventions of the monolith and the modernist reign of visuality. Second, in their

place, we find in Bourgeois's and Nevelson's work affinities with the everyday and the proximate, values that registered through their connection to the sensate and known. Yet this is not to suggest that the works effect a series of simple substitutions, feminine for masculine, wood for metal, tactility for opticality. Rather, these new terms are prevented from remaining stable, placed constantly into competition, as they are, with other terms. The everyday, for example, is not allowed to remain habitual and fixed; it is destabilized, made to be dynamic, contingent, cryptic, and elusive. This makes it at once visible, able to be assessed, but also less familiar. These spaces, moreover, regularly drew upon overtly masculine associations with hostility (albeit of a less directed, more diffuse kind), refusing the viewer the kind of ease or comfort seemingly entailed by the realm of the everyday. A persistent unfamiliarity and dis-ease accompanied any *de facto* everydayness in the experience of their sculpture.

Environmental and Experimental Confluences—Domestic Sculpting

The timing of Bourgeois's and Nevelson's experiments is somewhat unresolved, but the overlap was clear enough that the two were regularly grouped together in exhibitions and critical writings. We know that Nevelson and Bourgeois were familiar with one another, and visited each other's studios during the 1950s, but it is unclear when their acquaintance was formed.²⁴ Early in their

²⁴It is unclear exactly how much Nevelson knew of Bourgeois's Peridot exhibitions since she likely missed them while abroad, but she would certainly have been familiar with her work. Bourgeois was in seven annuals at the Whitney in the 1950s: 1951, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957 (2). Of these, she exhibited wood sculptures at six. Nevelson was only in four annuals during the same time period, and did not show in wood until 1956. One small correspondence suggests that a tacit rivalry existed. Among Nevelson's papers, which primarily consist of press clippings and reviews, a few drawings, poems, and correspondences with gallery dealers, is an undated postcard that she received from Bourgeois. It is addressed to Louise Nevelson, but there is no stamp or address included—just her name along with the following cryptic note: "Bestwishes from Louise Bourgeois." Little exists to explain such a communication; only the image on the postcard presents some hint as to the nature of Bourgeois's intention. It is a detail from a narrative relief sculpture on the Cathédrale d'Autun, "Samson ébranlé la Salle du festin Chapiteau" (12th C.), and its boxed nature and shallow relief resembles a Nevelson box sculpture.

sculptural careers, both artists seemed to invest in a constructivist-derived materialism, choosing to work with materials taken from the real, workaday world rather than the isolated tradition and space of fine art. These found, often discarded or unused fragments seemed to be both an initial guarantor that the sculpture would contain life and an inspiration for it to do so.

The confluences present between their daily lives and their work, moreover, seemed both to issue from *and* be informed by the blended spaces they built within and around their own homes. The physical location of Bourgeois's "Stuyvesant's Folly" apartment, for instance, became central to her early terms of production. Redwood, the obdurate, unusual material that Bourgeois chose to construct most of her personages, was also the most common material used to build those water towers "for high buildings," as Bourgeois specified, made *en masse* by carpenters in her neighborhood (Kirili 72). Bourgeois claimed to choose the wood because there was a surplus to be had nearby, but by doing so, and by using it to produce thin, vertical forms, she at once physically related the sculptures to her present, her physical location in the modern city of New York, and her position as a worker among many in her neighborhood. At the same time, the choice seemed mutually to dictate the forms she produced and the locations of their display. Bourgeois made reference to the routine location of their utilitarian counterparts when she first exhibited the sculptures on her own rooftop (Bloch 106) (Figure 7).²⁵

As a subject, water towers also form an odd complex of materiality and immateriality, presence and absence, given their tendency to be nearly invisible in the eyes of the city dweller. Of sculptor Rachel Whiteread's more recent resin *Water Towers* series (1998), Lisa Tickner has written: "What's worth remembering is under our noses and over our heads: the labor and ingenuity of ordinary people and the unpredictable beauty of functional things" (101). Whiteread's works elucidate Bourgeois's own investment in drawing on and materializing those repeated experiences of the phenomenal world that serve as sensate records of knowledge. Yet, for Bourgeois, the point seems less one regarding

²⁵On this topic, see also, Josef Helfenstein, "Personages: Animism versus Modernist Sculpture," *Louise Bourgeois*, Frances Morris, ed. (New York: Rizzoli in association with Tate Publishing, 2007), 207–209.



FIGURE 7 Louise Bourgeois with her sculpture on the roof of her apartment building in NYC in 1944.

Photo: courtesy Louise Bourgeois Archive

the “beauty of functional things” than the way that spatiality and place shapes our knowledge of the world as well as our means of interaction with it.

One source for this functional emphasis was likely Bourgeois’s awareness of the principles of African or “primitivist” sculpture.²⁶ Her husband Robert Goldwater was steeped in

²⁶I will retain the terms “primitivism” and “primitive art” in this article despite their pejorative connotations based both on their period use and for the sake of simplicity. For a recent discussion of the historical use and meaning of “primitivism,” see the introduction

non-Western art; not only had he written his doctoral thesis on it (which Bourgeois read and commented on), but he continued to work and teach in the field, eventually becoming the director of the first public collection, the Museum of Primitive Art, which opened in New York in 1957.

But Bourgeois's interest was less in co-opting forms and iconographies than in thinking differently about her approach to sculpture. The personages, which straightforwardly draw on allusions to certain art forms from Africa, appeared to be composed on non-Western precepts of form and function, and founded on non-Western values. Unlike the conventional autonomy expected of modern Western sculpture, the dynamic that was created among the works was uncharacteristically allowed to supersede the relationship between sculpture and spectator. As in the titles and imagery of the personages, Bourgeois often initiated confluences between objects designated as craft, other utilitarian objects, and those as art. Without consciously invoking the conventional hierarchy, her tendency to treat her early personages as artifacts, as well as her own deep engagement with the rhetoric, forms, and practice of needlework, demonstrated an early disrespect for the easy Western categories that privileged fine art over and above craft.²⁷ Something about their rough appearance, scale, and imagery, when read against concurrent references to domesticity and tools, gave the work a personal air, of the kind that seemed to speak of the realm of craft, that class of objects made by and for an individual user.

Such rhetoric approaches an alternate framework of value. As Glen Adamson recently 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" (39). However, the analogy is not entirely precise; the combination of paint with the minimization of the presence of work or labor involved in producing the objects,

by Jack Flam, ed., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003).

²⁷Bourgeois's own statements on craft at the time may be seen to suggest a hesitation on her part about this element of her work. In 1969, she reviewed an exhibition of fiber-based work at the Museum of Modern art that expressed a concern regarding the "decorative" dangers of abstract, materially based sculpture. For a discussion of this exhibition and review, see Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2010), xi.

obfuscates such a direct “encounter.” We might say, instead, that Bourgeois’ personages, and Nevelson’s wood works after them, enacted a halfway point *between* these frameworks. While paint defused interaction with the specificities of the wood, instead redirecting focus toward a less-defined but nonetheless resolute materiality of the objects, the effects—though not intended to issue “transcendence”—also did not encourage appreciation for or elevation of the inherent nature of the wood itself.

That middle ground might be more compatible with that of non-Western art in its ties to function and pragmatics. Mid-century art historians of “primitive” art like Goldwater were busy reorienting the field toward a more contextual understanding of non-Western art objects. Goldwater’s work emphasized the active, utilitarian role of sculpture in the life of tribes (*Primitivism*, 41–43). And his work aided in renewing attention to earlier scholarship as well; for instance, Carl Einstein’s foundational work, *Negerplastik* (1915), was gaining a newfound currency. Einstein emphasized the connection between form and function in “African art” (as opposed to western art) as one that should be understood contextually. He argued that most African sculptures, for example, were categorically intended to immediately assert their autonomy because they represented gods, which were entirely autonomous and did not need acknowledgment of any kind of physical support from, or connection with, human beings (82–83).

That autonomy, Einstein claimed, is asserted literally (or visually) in the most basic sense through the absence of a base, but also through the entire form of the sculpture, which was not based on naturalism but instead asserted an independence from natural laws of motion (83). The base or support was unnecessary because the work did not need to be visually connected to (or separated from, for that matter) its context in the way that a Western sculpture would. Nor did it need the metaphorical support that the base represented. The opposition was based on the distinction between this type of full spatiality and the much more two-dimensional, flattened space of European sculpture, a view derived from Adolf von Hildebrand’s “optical naturalism.”²⁸

²⁸Yve-Alain Bois discusses the distinction between Einstein and von Hildebrand at length in his essay on cubism and African art, “Kahnweiler’s Lesson.” Reprinted in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge and London: MIT P, 1990), 65–97. Einstein’s discussion was based on the African expression of “cubic” values, which are the primary sculptural values lost

The point of contrast being drawn was with sculpture that solicits a direct and specific relationship with its viewers from a single point of view; in such cases, Einstein explained, “the viewer was woven into the sculpture, becoming an inseparable function. . . .” (81).²⁹

What Bourgeois seemed to absorb was that this alternate model did not establish an analogous or reciprocal relationship between viewer and object (Zeidler 43). In Bourgeois’s adaptation, which likewise refuses naturalism, the works establish an autonomy (from the viewer) that allows (paradoxically) for a more environmentally integrated spatial situation. It is as if, rather than establishing parity with the viewer, the object is meant to act as a piece of furniture or other object intended to define the space of the room. Moreover, at stake here in both cases is a central distinction, made formally in Einstein’s essay, in the attitude behind construction; the form of the sculpture is derived from its function, its use, which was tied to the everyday needs of the maker.

Bourgeois’s remarks on her personages, which foreground personal use in conjunction with a material immediacy, mark the distinction:

I was less interested in making sculpture at the time [of the Peridot exhibition] than in re-creating an indispensable past. The motivation was extremely strong. I showed you photographs of the roof and the way [the works] were grouped together. The figures on the roof had nothing to do with sculpture, they meant physical presences. That was an attempt at not only re-creating the past but controlling it (Bloch 106).

The display to which she refers was the first instance (of many) in which the works were installed in a domestic or private space, in

in Western sculpture to “optical naturalism.” They have to do with the contingency and non-linearity of space (Einstein 86–87).

²⁹He supports his view of African art with a very complex argument based on the art object’s “totality” as expressed through its “twofold depth direction—the forward and backward movement,” which Sebastian Zeidler has explored at length. Zeidler’s emphasis lies less in the autonomy of the work than in its conception as an object that can “rupture the visual economy of the Western subject.” Our interest in Einstein’s model of African sculpture as an alternative to Western sculpture is similar. He argues for the act of “primitivization” (as opposed to primitivism) entailed in this rupture, explaining that this property is exhibited by African sculpture formally rather than metaphorically, and that one specific object, the Chokwe figure, among the many that Einstein pictures with his essay is most indicative of these general principles. Zeidler’s “Totality against a Subject: Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik*” *October* (Winter 2004) 14–46.

this case on the rooftop of her building clustered into a very tight-knit group. Joseph Helfenstein, who has written one of the most extensive analyses of this episode in Bourgeois's career, suggests that she tried out different situations of display for the works, all within the realm of the domestic, as if to enact different means of using them (Figure 8). "The figures," he wrote, "charged the space in which they were placed." They "demanded to be treated like artifacts. By integrating them into her daily life and moving them back and forth from one private environment to another,



FIGURE 8 Louise Bourgeois's wood personages in progress in the artist's studio, circa 1947.

Photo: Courtesy Louise Bourgeois Archive

Bourgeois brought them closer to life, appropriating them as her personal objects” (19).

What such negotiations suggest is that Bourgeois seemed to take inspiration for the form of her works from their intended use, even perhaps going so far as to enact the role of the African ancestor sculptor in their creation. For most of the twentieth century it was believed that there was not a distinct set of artisans who made ancestor sculptures; rather, an individual was told by a diviner to construct a shrine figure for his own purposes. The particular family member herself then carved the wood sculpture.³⁰

Such a conflation of maker and user fits more readily into the framework of the artisan than it does with the conventional relationship of artist to artwork.³¹ The gendering of sculptural practice was also addressed by performing as a quasi-artisan, an act that complicated and challenged its masculine professionalism. That is, she was working less within the strictures of “high” art than she was within a framework that privileged rule-following and personal use, as I discuss below. While such means of gender subversion became all the more widespread among women in upcoming years, for instance in the 1960s when it was consciously adopted by many sculptors including Lee Bontecou, Yayoi Kusama, and Eva Hesse, it was utilized almost exclusively by Bourgeois and Nevelson in the forties and fifties. In their case, however, unlike that of the next generation, such marks of the “feminine” were rarely intended to be straightforwardly legible as such; there was no implicit tie to a feminist cooptation of alternate values at stake, nor was there a claim to legitimate these other art forms.

As if in a sort of tag-team effort, just as Bourgeois began to retreat from wood construction (in the mid-1950s) and experiment with other materials, cue Nevelson to return to the scene

³⁰Leo Frobenius was the primary proponent of this view. He referred to the figures as *kikirri* (Kreamer 52–55, 82–83). Today it is believed that certain woodcarvers were commissioned to make such shrine figures, and these carvers occupied privileged positions distinct from carpenters based on their use of adzes as their primary carving instrument. Adzes, axe-like tools, were distinguished from saws, nails and hammers, considered Western tools (Kreamer 52).

³¹The persistent presence of the spider (with its ties to weaving/sewing) as a subject of her work throughout the 1990s and 2000s continues the reference of the artist/artisan conflation.

with new works in painted wood. At the time, it was undoubtedly seen as connected to Bourgeois's own more secure place working in wood at the time, as is implied by Nevelson's sporadic designation as "the other Louise" (Andersen 95.) Despite the vast distance at which they are held today, it made sense that the two artists would have been critically connected at the time. Not only were the two in and out of each other's studio in the 1950s, they were nearly of the same generation and included in many of the same Whitney annuals and other group sculpture shows.

It is probably not coincidental that in 1955 and 1956, when Nevelson returned to a quasi-environmental format with her exhibitions at Grand Central Moderns, the first two entitled, "Ancient Games and Ancient Places" (1955), and "The Royal Voyage" (1956), she was greeted with a warm reception by the critics. Both shows, which were comprised of discrete sculptures in constructed (found) wood that had been painted black, shared a great deal with Bourgeois's personage exhibitions, which had made a solid impact.³² Wayne Andersen, for one, proposed the link, remarking that Nevelson was effectively pursuing the broader implications of their mutual environmental impulses by "compos[ing] unified environments through the subordination of individual pieces to a single theme" (95). The claim pointed to Nevelson's thematic exhibitions, and her increasing tendency to present integrated views of the works, which eventually happened through near eradication of the space between sculptures.

Among the various reasons for thinking of the two artists together, what is most relevant here is the way in which Bourgeois's and Nevelson's interests both issued from their differing investments in the "domestic." Some of the implications of this term, like its connection to the everyday, the routine, and the artisanal, have been explored above. Another relates to the origins (rather than the sources) of their projects, an idea I have already introduced in relation to Bourgeois, citing the way she seemed to intend the personages as personal objects that moved about her home as if performing various roles. When examining

³²It seems possible that Nevelson appropriated Bourgeois's style and adapted it to "correct" her own critically- and self-proclaimed failures in wood. She destroyed almost all traces of that earlier production, made between 1941–42, which differed radically from the wood sculpture she began making in the mid-1950s.

Nevelson's early "environments," beginning around 1956, what is striking is how readily the gallery resembled photographs of her own home at the time. Like Bourgeois's use of her home as a source, Nevelson's "professional" aesthetic seems to have issued from her personal, domestic manner of using, storing, and displaying objects (as well as her own work and working pieces). The most well known example relates to her way of piling spare parts for assembly along the floor in crates and other boxes, which reputedly led to her practice of building "walls." But her private collections played a role here as well; the display of masks, pottery, painting, etcetera, seemed to promote awareness of the dynamic play of familiarity and fantasy, abstract shape and everyday function (Figure 9). By riffing on her own domestic space as staged sites within the gallery, it was as if she was using that public venue to transpose knowledge or the kind of experience rooted in the private realm into the public.



FIGURE 9 Louise Nevelson's living room, 29 Spring Street, early 1960s
Photo: Courtesy of The Pace Gallery, © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In other words, it seems important that Nevelson's domestic environment was instrumental in fashioning—as well as reflective of—her views about bringing life into art. Where eventually Nevelson would build a 20 foot sculpture, titled *Mrs. N's Palace* (1964–77), that resembled a dwelling space, but constructed entirely out of her monochromatic black wood assemblages, photographs and descriptions of her actual apartment as it looked in the early 1960s reveal it as a more straightforward precursor to her fifties works. One senses the origins of the disparate, hybrid spaces cultivated in her gallery environments:

Her living room was painted white, with the exception of one long wall that was left natural brick. African masks and early American tools, including curry combs and weaving tools of exquisite proportions and simplicity, were hung upon the brick walls. On a shelf, spanning the wall three feet from the ceiling, crammed closely together, her collection of American Indian pottery, pre-Columbian sculptures, African figures, and Puerto Rican santos was stored. . . . (Glimcher 138)

The room resembled an ethnographic museum, but one that equated dispersed cultures and times, as well as lived space and aesthetic space. These objects, when transformed into Nevelson's assembled constructions, lost their specificity, and became instead abstracted signs for the collection of such cultural artifacts. The domesticity of the exhibition space, then, was equally abstract; it did not resolve into an easy reproduction of a living room, but instead seemed obliquely to refer to something like a private “collection,” or storage, of diverse things that had lost their origins. Such a juxtaposition of art, artifacts, and tools, moreover, recalls Bourgeois's aesthetic confluences of art and craft, and seems to have been instrumental in precipitating their shared tendency toward locating experiential significance in material objects.

The ever-increasing range of objects and fragments that made their way into her sculptural structures also suggests that Nevelson's passion for collecting, amassing, and displaying vast amounts of different types of objects in close proximity informed her sculptural ideals. As her scale increased, and the works shifted from discrete sculptures to architectural constructions, more and more mundane, utilitarian associations were allowed to emanate from her constructions, as for example in *Sky Cathedral* (1958).

Brooke Rapaport recently catalogued the parts and their varying effects (3–26). Kindling, chair legs, and fence posts are among the under refined components characteristic of the late fifties black environments that contribute to the rough, jagged, abandoned feel of the spaces. Their absence in the “white environments” that began in 1959 speaks to the experiential distance of shows like “Dawn’s Wedding Feast,” which appeared lacey, decorative, and icing-like (Figure 10). In both cases, the raw materials were

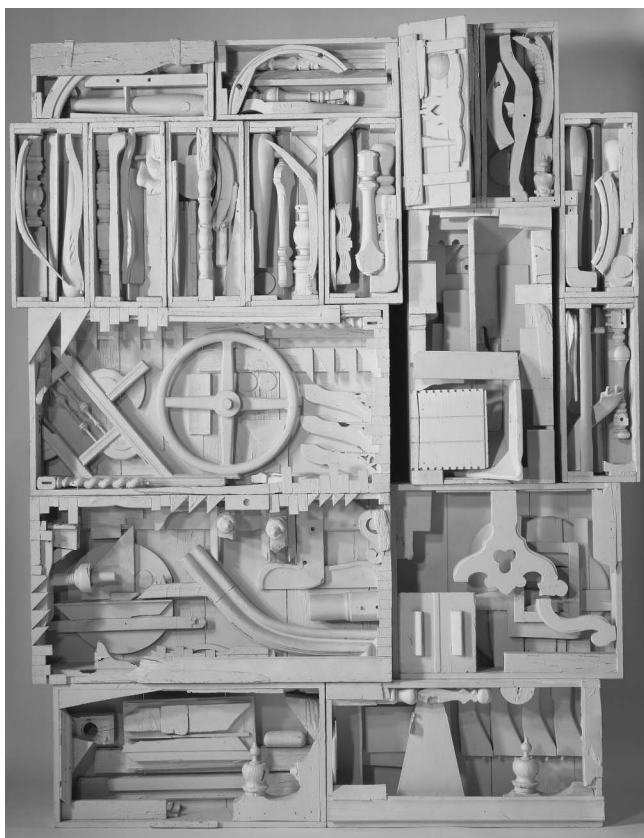


FIGURE 10 Louise Nevelson

Dawn's Wedding Chapel IV, 1959–60

wood painted white

9' 1" × 7' 3" × 1' 1-1/2" (276.9 × 221 × 34.3 cm)

Photo by: G. R. Christmas, Courtesy The Pace Gallery; © 2011 Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

able to contribute to fantastic alternate materialities—ruins or charred fragments in the case of the black environments, and the confectionery and heavenly in the white.

Despite their differing associations, both the white and black environments share an evolving structural relationship to the realms of the utilitarian and everyday. As Rosalind Krauss suggested, their scale and amalgamated manner of construction initiated a new functionalism by “meditat[ing] on architectural space” (“Grids,” rep. in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 21). Often comprised of decorative architectural embellishments, by 1958 the work resembled the scale and look of makeshift architecture, giving rise to the appellation “sculptural architecture” (Kramer 27).³³ When exhibited in galleries, the work thereby rewrote the space of the room and environment of the viewer, fulfilling the “role” that Nevelson persistently afforded art in her interviews and writings. One senses her persistent investment in an overarching, continuously retooled functionality, with the individual components designed to play their respective, interrelated parts:

I use the word “architecture,” you see—there will be different performances. The artist will somehow even be more of a composer, even more. He will take shadow, he will take reflection, he will take the objective or whatever he does and he will become an architect of this and he will give it his stamp of the way the sum total will come together . . . in science things have been very important, very valid, that have been discovered and used. We don’t return to them as such, we may return to them and use them in another way. So that means we won’t give up these things but I think we’re going to have to compose them in another way. We’re going to have to give a meaning in another way. Our structure will be another kind of a structure.³⁴

What her convoluted phrasing partly obscures is that this aesthetic repurposing prioritized the idea of adaptation. Such adaptations were materialized in her environments, which read at once as variations on a theme and as multipurpose spaces. The analogy that she draws to science seems to express an investment in experimentation and work of the kind that is intended to fashion concrete

³³For more on this see Elyse Speaks, “Louise Nevelson’s Art as Experience,” *American Art* (Summer 2007), 96–108.

³⁴Nevelson, Oral history interview with Dorothy Seckler, Archives of American Art, 1964.

results available for use by all. The results, which were always being reworked and recombined into new spaces, were thereby to be made available for a collective body.

As was the case in Bourgeois's personage exhibitions, Nevelson's ideals, construction methods, and results seemed to bear the marks of an alternate set of values. Of "Moon Garden Plus One" (1958), critics wrote that the gallery was "entirely transformed into a continuous sculptural enclosure . . ." the excessive materiality thus combating or transforming the cold, conventional, distanced space of the gallery into something else entirely. Nevelson soon began to echo such rhetoric in her own statements, emphasizing her investment in using architecture to produce experiences, as for instance in one of her most famous and repeated thoughts: "So the work that I do is not the matter and it isn't the color. . . . It adds up to the in-between place, between the material I use and the manifestation afterward; the dawns and the dusks, the places between the land and the sea" (*Dawns and Dusks*, 125).³⁵ Such remarks share a great deal with Bourgeois's own characterization of her *Garden at Night*, where her emphasis was on drawing the distinction between the natural world and an experience of that world. What is unusual here, and what places Bourgeois and Nevelson in the formative positions they hold in the 1950s, was the way that both artists relied so decidedly on materials and materiality, on the "world," to achieve such sensate, experiential effects. Neither artist qualifies their work as metaphor; they insist, rather on the concrete, real production of a site of interchange.

The type of site produced is what, finally, distinguished Nevelson's project so markedly from Bourgeois's own. Hybridity increasingly yielded to a more abstract sense of time and place in the later 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, such that her structures felt comprised less of the stuff of the material world, than of geometry and shape. Bourgeois, in contrast, has become all the more concrete in her allusions, imagery, and spatial designations. It is this characterization of their work, which corresponds more to the Nevelson

³⁵The phrase "the in-between places, the dawns and dusks" recurs in numerous places prior to this publication. See, for instance, John Baur, *Nature in Abstraction* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1958); Colette Roberts, "Timelessness and Timeliness of Nevelson," *Nevelson* (Paris: Editions Georges Falke/The Pocket Museum, 1964), 11.

of the later 1960s on, and to the Bourgeois of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, that today maintains a distance between them.

The increased distance relates to the different ways in which each seemed to conceive of experience from the beginning. Despite their mutual investment in finding a material locus through which to activate an immaterial enactment, Bourgeois persistently tended to speak singularly, not just about herself, but about individualized experiences of the world, while Nevelson spoke and thought universally, referring to grand concepts like “beauty” and “the world” that fashioned experiences shared by all. Likewise, Bourgeois continued to produce sculptures that refer to individualized spaces, experiences, memories—compressed for a maximally intense experience. At first these were a single flower/plant bed, or a nest, a den, a small family unit; then they became the bedroom, the tower, the cell. Nevelson, in contrast, always tended less toward individualized spaces and more toward “scapes”—theatricalized expressions of a space that constituted a ritualized, abstract expression of an event-laden stage—a wedding, an oceanic passage, a moon garden, an ancient ruin, a chapel—all filled with a surplus materiality, an excess of “life” and “world” such that it might overtake what the viewer knows and remembers, and instead “compose [it] in another way.”

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