HYBRID SPECIES:
LEE BONTECOU’S SCULPTURE AND DRAWING, 1958–1971

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Abstract

Though known today for being forgotten, sculptor Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) was broadly recognized in the early and mid-1960s as one of the leading artists of her generation, having earned critical praise, institutional recognition, and commercial success with her large-scale, abstract metal and fabric wall reliefs. Tapping into art historical debates of the 1960s that turn on the question of the medium, in particular medium specificity and specific objecthood, drawing on Jacques Derrida’s theory of the “law of genre,” and mining the etymology of the term hybrid, I argue that Bontecou’s reliefs are hybrids of painting and sculpture: they are paintings generically and sculptures specifically. I show that medium hybridity divests of the dominant histories and criticisms of this period that pose sculptural or otherwise three-dimensional practice as a logical elaboration or corrective repudiation of modernist painting. In the late 1960s, Bontecou discontinued the wall reliefs altogether and turned to vacuum-forming figurative, if otherworldly, sculptures of fish and flower forms in translucent plastic that were poorly received. I propose that the plastic sculptures hybridize the categories of the organic and the mechanical: clad in screwed-on armor and gas masks, her plant and marine forms are post-apocalyptic mutants outfitted for and by a violent ecology. They position specificity in relation to evolutionary, survivalist specialization and modernist medium specificity—both to endangered natural species and to sculpture in the face of extinction. Critics were unable to receive the ecological concerns of these sculptures when Leo Castelli Gallery showed them in 1971, but the current preoccupation with
“going green” provides the opportunity to finally receive them. My dissertation also
treats the soot, graphite, and charcoal drawings Bontecou made in this period,
considering how they give coherence to and pry open Bontecou’s sculptural practice.
Following the 1971 exhibition of her plastic sculptures, Bontecou withdrew from the
New York art world, refusing to sell or show new work until 2003 when a major
retrospective brought about her second meteoric rise to fame. My dissertation is the first
book-length study of Bontecou’s oeuvre during the period of her most active public
production. It offers a narrative of Bontecou’s sculpture and drawing, homing in on
hybridity and constellating around the terms of the specific and the general; it analyzes
her reception; and it negotiates her place/non-place in the field of postwar American
sculpture, arguing that her work tracks, and resists, the shift from the modernist emphasis
on the specific medium to the postmodernist, post-medium notion of art in general.
# Table of Contents

List of Illustrations vi

Acknowledgements xi

Introduction 1

Chapter 1. Worldscapes: Soot and Pencil Drawings
  - *Getting the Black* 44
  - *The Depth of Space* 52
  - *Environment* 65

Chapter 2. Going into Space: Metal and Fabric Wall Reliefs
  - *Medium Hybridity* 84
  - *The General as Genre* 104
  - *Generalized Gender* 113

Chapter 3. Plastic Arts: Vacuum-Formed Fish and Flowers
  - *Species Hybridity* 129
  - *Monumentality* 138
  - *Plasticity* 164
  - *Gallery as Worldscape* 171

Conclusion 176

Bibliography 184

Illustrations 197
List of Illustrations


Figure 2. Eliot Elisofon, *Leo Castelli*, 1960.


Figure 4. *Lee Bontecou in Skowhegan, Maine*, 1954.

Figure 5. Ugo Mulas, *Lee Bontecou, Wooster Street*, 1963.

Figure 6. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1957. Private Collection.

Figure 7. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1958. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.


Figure 17. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1962. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles.
Figure 18.  Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (57)*, 1961. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.


Figure 21.  Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1960. Rhode Island School of Design Art Museum, Providence, Rhode Island.


Figure 27.  Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961. The Menil Collection, Houston.


Figure 29.  Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1969. The Art Institute of Chicago.


Figure 37. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1960. The Art Institute of Chicago.


Figure 40. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 41. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail; pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 42. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail; pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 43. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail; pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Figure 44. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail; pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.


Figure 46. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Figure 47. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (1964)*, 1964. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York.

Figure 48. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (1964)* (oblique view), 1964. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York.

Figure 49. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (pictured in storage crate), 1961. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.


Figure 52. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961. Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.


Figure 55. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1970. Collection of Valerie Giles.


Figure 60. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail), 1969. Collection of the Artist/FreedmanArt Gallery, New York.


Figure 63. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1969. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles.

Figure 64. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail), 1969. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles.

Figure 65. Lee Bontecou’s eight-foot-tall vacuum-formed plastic sculpture, 1969, location unknown.


Figure 68. Lee Bontecou, *Grounded Bird*, 1957. Private collection.


Figure 71. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1969. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Figure 72. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (rear view), 1969. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Figure 73. Sy Friedman, *Installation shot of Leo Castelli Gallery*, 1971.

Figure 74. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1969. Collection of Michael Rosenfeld and halley k. harrisburg, New York.

Figure 75. Eva Hesse, *Hang Up*, 1966. The Art Institute of Chicago.
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Introduction

Though known today for being forgotten, Lee Bontecou was broadly recognized in the early and mid-1960s as one of the leading artists of her generation. Over the course of a year’s experimentation, Bontecou developed a practice by 1959 in which she scavenged for canvas, muslin, and burlap, then patched the found materials over a large welded metal framework; she used twists of rusty and copper wires to sew the pieces of fabric around sections of steel rod. A consistent motif quickly emerged: a central, circular cavity, or sometimes multiple cavities, built up from the rectangular frame of the metal skeleton, projecting a foot or more off the wall and opening onto the blackness of a layer of velvet (see Fig. 1). Two fortuitous discoveries in 1958 led Bontecou to the form of large-scale, abstract wall reliefs: the production of seemingly infinite black space, which she first achieved by drawing with the soot generated from her welding torch, and the ready availability of discarded industrial cloths in downtown Manhattan. Her own discovery quickly followed—Bontecou was signed to Leo Castelli Gallery, and catapulted to art world fame, in the very year that she hit on the form of the metal and fabric wall reliefs. Only twenty-eight years old, she had had one previous solo show.

Dealer Ivan Karp, former Assistant Director of Leo Castelli Gallery, recounts first seeing Bontecou’s metal and fabric wall reliefs in her East Village loft. According to Karp, on his way down from a studio visit on the top floor of a building on Sixth Street at Avenue C, Dick Bellamy of the Green Gallery spied through an open door “these incredible tent-like apparatuses” (since the building was not heated, tenants kept their
doors open to draw in heat from the steam laundry on the first floor). Afterwards, Bellamy encouraged Karp to try to see “these strange things.” Karp sought them out and met Bontecou, whom he initially mistook for the artist’s daughter (“I am looking for the artist who works in this studio, a certain Miss Bontecou, I believe it is. Is she at home?…Is she your mother?”). Bontecou’s delicacy, petite stature, and paleness so dramatically contrasted with her “fierce,” “terrifying,” and psychologically “shattering” structures as to “unsettle” Karp for a week. He soon brought Leo Castelli, who had opened his gallery on East Seventy-seventh Street in 1957, Ileana Castelli, and Michael Sonnabend to Bontecou’s loft while touring downtown studios on a talent search, all of whom were “astonished” and “shocked” by Bontecou’s “scary” sculptures. In his recounting, Karp equivocates as to whether it was despite or because “they really seemed terribly alien from anything we had ever seen” that Bontecou was signed to the gallery, joining a stable that included Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella (besides Marisol, Bontecou was the only woman on a roster that would also come to count Richard Artschwager, John Chamberlain, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Joseph Kosuth, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Larry Poons, James Rosenquist.

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1 The artist was painter Marcia Marcus.

2 Ivan Karp, as quoted in Oral history interview with Ivan C. Karp, 1969 Mar. 12, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Leo Castelli’s version of the story is slightly different than Karp’s. He recalls that after Karp visited Bontecou’s studio upon Bellamy’s recommendation, Ileana Sonnabend went to see Bontecou’s work on a separate visit (Ileana was named Ileana Castelli at the time, as she was married to Castelli; she would later marry Michael Sonnabend, becoming Ileana Sonnabend). Castelli recounts that Ileana’s “report was in a sense enthusiastic; but, in another sense, it seemed almost impractical to show an artist like that.” About one month later, Castelli made his first visit to Bontecou’s studio, and was immediately convinced that he wanted to represent her, according to him: “When I went in, my first reaction was to feel that Ivan and Ileana were just mad not to rush me down there; because I found it so fantastically interesting. I got her right away; I didn't hesitate for a moment.” He sums up, “So this I consider a discovery. That was Lee Bontecou.” See Oral history interview with Leo Castelli, 1969 May 14-1973 June 8, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
Salvatore Scarpitta, Richard Serra, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, and Lawrence Weiner). In an often reproduced 1960 photograph by Eliot Elisofon originally published in *Life* magazine, Castelli poses in a corner of his gallery surrounded by five works: a Stella black painting, a Johns flag painting, Rauschenberg’s 1955 *Bed*, a sculpture by Edward Higgins, and a Bontecou wall relief (Fig. 2). Bontecou was not merely in Castelli’s stable—she was one of his most prized artists. Karp recalls that the first two wall reliefs delivered to the gallery were purchased immediately—within seven minutes of being brought into the back room, he estimates—by two museum officials who happened to be visiting the gallery, Alan Solomon, a curator at Cornell University’s Andrew Dickson White Museum, and a curator from the Smith College Museum of Art. They concluded the deal right there, and for years after that, “everything that came into the gallery, all the objects were immediately purchased, you know.”

Karp’s narrative of Bontecou’s discovery invokes the three major tropes of the early critical literature on Bontecou: her overnight success, the strangeness of her sculptures, and her gender. Her first reliefs were bought by museums and collectors “as fast as she could turn them out,” so much so that she had to stop selling them in order to assemble enough work for her first solo show at Castelli’s in 1960. Not only were Bontecou’s reliefs successful commercially, they were critically praised and institutionally recognized, too: received fantastically in Leo Castelli Gallery shows,

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3 Another example of Bontecou’s rank within Castelli’s gallery is, in honor of the tenth anniversary of the Leo Castelli Gallery, his top ten artists contributed prints and multiples to a portfolio published in 1967 in an edition of 200 by Tanglewood Press and titled *10 for Leo Castelli*; they were: Bontecou, Johns, Judd, Lichtenstein, Morris, Poons, Rauschenberg, Rosenquist, Stella, and Warhol. For more on the history and culture of the Castelli Gallery, see Annie Cohen-Solal’s biography, *Leo and His Circle: The Life of Leo Castelli* (2009), trans. Mark Polizzotti with Annie Cohen-Solal (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).
4 The Andrew Dickson White Museum has been since renamed the Herbert F. Johnson Museum.
5 Karp, as quoted in *Oral history interview with Ivan C. Karp, 1969 Mar. 12, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*
championed by artist-critic Donald Judd, who anointed her “one of the best artists working anywhere” in 1963, commissioned by architect Philip Johnson for Lincoln Center, and exhibited widely in the United States and Europe.7 In the sixties, Bontecou’s reliefs were included in prestigious and landmark shows, such as 1960’s *New Forms—New Media I* at Martha Jackson Gallery; *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1961; the *Pittsburgh International Exhibition* at the Carnegie Institute in 1961; Pierre Restany’s 1961 *Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York* at Galerie Rive Droite, Paris; the *Sixth São Paulo Biennial* in 1963; Dorothy Miller’s *Americans 1963* at MoMA; *Documenta III* in Kassel in 1964; and Whitney Museum of American Art Annuals in 1961, 1963, 1964, 1966, and 1968; as well as dozens of group shows in major museums, university museums, regional museums, and prominent galleries in Buenos Aires, Chicago, London, Los Angeles, New York, Paris, and Toronto, among other cities. Bontecou had four solo shows at Castelli Gallery (in 1960, 1962, 1966, and 1971) and a solo show at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend in Paris in 1965. Her first museum retrospective traveled to Berlin, Rotterdam, and Leverkusen, Germany, in 1968, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago hosted her second museum retrospective in 1972. Bontecou was declared the “find of the year” by *Art in America* in 1960 and was profiled in popular magazines, such as *Life, Time, Vogue, Look*, and *Mademoiselle*, in the latter of which the “sculptress” was named one of the Ten Young Women of the Year 1960.8 In 1963 Bontecou won second prize at the Twenty-eighth Biennial of American

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Art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and in 1966 she took the National Institute of Arts and Letters’ first prize.

The popularity of Bontecou’s reliefs was exceeded only by the perception of their strangeness, which in the early criticism was noted by references to the “mystery” of their black holes, their multiple and shifting allusions and associations, and their unsettling menace. Critic Dore Ashton, a longtime advocate of Bontecou’s work, views the black holes as metaphors for a fundamental mystery or secrecy. Other critics describe them as “pitch dark and unfathomable,” “mysterious vortices”; and “mysterious constructions.” While these critics correlate the quality of mystery with the dark voids—“she manages through her voids…to instill in the viewer a sense of mystery, fantasy and even fear”—others deem them mysterious overall: “structures that suggest huge spidery objects, as mysterious in content as they are brilliant in execution,” or “wall constructions, hanging dumb, like secret, unfulfilled wishes, having burned before fruition.” Annette Michelson submits that the sculptures defy description and even

9 They are described as “strange” in L. C., “Lee Bontecou,” *Art News* 61, no. 9 (Jan. 1963): 11. Bontecou also uses the word mystery, commenting that her work reveals a mystery to her in which she wishes viewers could also partake: “I wish one could, through my work, partake in the mystery my sculpture reveals to me.” Bontecou, as quoted in *The Artist’s Reality: International Sculpture Exhibition* (New York: The New School Art Center, 1964), unpaginated.
language: “None of these works, reliefs, objects, things, has a title, or moreover, has a name, they are essentially unspeakable.”

The mystery and unknowability of the reliefs was sometimes figured, oppositely, as an excess of points of reference. New York Times critic Stuart Preston writes that the reliefs “could be almost anything,” from “models of Leonardesque airplanes to the ‘sabot’ bathtub in which Marat was reclining on the occasion of Charlotte Corday’s fatal visit,” and elsewhere refers to them as potential “models for 1984 housing.” A writer for Newsweek ponders of a relief, “Is it a pterodactyl? A Flash Gordon spaceship? An outsize artichoke or a monstrous whorl of giant flower corollas?” For some, the polyvalence of their references secures their broad appeal: “They suggest blowers with adjustable nozzles, furnaces, extinct volcanoes, eyes, mouths, in fact, so many things one can understand their popularity.”

For still other critics, the reliefs’ presence was startling and, more dramatically, sinister. Irving Sandler describes them as “macabre,” reminiscent of Surrealist grotesquery, “at once mystical and violent.” Preston’s account of a 1962 exhibition addresses the “air of menace” of these “marvels of ingenuity”: “sawed off gun barrels and sinister apertures that look like flame throwers make an alarming impression on the visitor to the Castelli Gallery….He instinctively reaches for his Beretta [gun].” But by

1963 they were already considered “familiar contraptions,” and by 1966 their shock was neutralized; as one critic explains, “it is probably our own familiarity with it which is to blame if her work has stopped looking powerful and horrible and started looking powerful and venerable.”

For Karp, Bontecou’s femininity constituted another kind of strangeness, not only because Bontecou struck him as so girlish (“a girl-like creature”) as to seem to be the daughter of the woman he was looking for, but also because of the dissonance between her presence and that of her reliefs. Indeed, many critics contrasted Bontecou’s youthful, tomboyish appearance with the reliefs’ methods and effects. About this “kleines Mädchen,” Lil Picard wonders “where she takes the strength from to solder together her strange constructions of steel, canvas, and velvet.” Elsewhere, Bontecou is declared “a petite and charming young lady who has created some very controversial and difficult works for some people to accept.” The Cosmopolitan profile begins, “Looking like a pert teen-ager, Lee Bontecou is thirty,” and concludes by speculating, “Perhaps the black holes, the boxlike forms, and the mysterious textures in her work are visual metaphors for the secrets and complications of the eternal Eve.” Without overt mention of Bontecou’s gender, other critics characterize the reliefs according to vaginal iconography and female

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sexuality. Sandler names them “volcano-vaginas,” and later resumes the landscape/body metaphor, assessing that they “resemble burnt out, terraced volcanoes and wombs—abstract symbols of fertility goddesses in a wasteland where nothing can grow.” Labeling her work “psychotic art,” Edward T. Kelly claims, “Miss Bontecou exposes the great female archetype in its most ugly, destructive aspect. With this imagery, the noble earth mothers of Renoir, Maillol and Moore become matriarchs ex machina.” Judd addresses the band saw blades within the mouth of one relief as a “redoubt” that is a “mons veneris” (a female pubic mound). Udo Kultermann interprets a relief as a “symbolic expression of the basic sex wish.” None makes a stronger claim for the reliefs’ vaginal imagery than Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, who place Bontecou in the legacy of “central core” imagery: “The large, velvet lined cores of Bontecou’s work deal exclusively with defining the central cavity of the female and thus the female herself.” Only Michelson argues for the reliefs’ androgyny, claiming that “the erotic principle is used as a generalizing agent, absorbing, sublimating” and that “by virtue of its generalizing nature…this art is neither feminine, nor feminist.” John Ashbery alone associates them with masculinity, affiliating them with “bachelor machines” (Marcel Duchamp’s machines célébataires).

30 Sandler, “In the Art Galleries,” 12.
35 “…dans ces reliefs le principes érotique est utilisé comme agent généralisant, absorbant, sublimant”; “…en vertu de sa nature généralisante…cet art n’est ni feminine, ni feministe” (my translation). Michelson, “Lee Bontecou,” unpaginated.
36 Ashbery does not expound on this reference to Duchamp or on the gender of Bontecou’s reliefs more broadly, except through his dismissal of the “erotic connotations” which some critics have read in Bontecou’s work: “It is hard to feel very erotic about something that looks like the inside of a very old and
Together these tropes of the early critical literature on Bontecou portray an artist who is both insider and outsider—a woman in a prestigious cabal of male artists, a sculptor whose work is critically and commercially successful but is deemed mysterious and aggressive. Bontecou’s insider/outsider status is never more invoked than in a trope in the recent literature that, by definition, Karp could not have anticipated at the time of his interview: Bontecou’s disappearance from and eventual return to the art world.

Nonetheless, it is telling that, though Bontecou was the topic of much discussion in Karp’s 1969 oral history with the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art cited above, Karp does not mention her name once in his 1986 oral history interview.37 For in 1967 Bontecou discontinued the reliefs altogether and began to produce figurative, if otherworldly, sculptures of fish and flower forms in translucent plastic (see Fig. 3). A 1971 show of the plastic sculptures at Castelli’s flopped, and in that year Bontecou proceeded to drop out of the New York art world, eventually settling in western Pennsylvania, where she currently lives and works. Though she continued to work consistently and taught at Brooklyn College from 1971 until 1991, she refused to sell or exhibit new work for more than three decades. Bontecou only returned to “the scene” in 2003 on the occasion of a highly publicized and overwhelmingly positively received full-

37 See Oral history interview with Ivan C. Karp, 1986 Apr. 17-1988 Oct. 18, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Likewise, Bontecou is not mentioned in Leo Castelli’s 1997 oral history interview with the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art, despite him having named her one of his great discoveries in his 1969–1973 interview. Already in his 1969–1973 interview, though, Castelli indicates that, following her early creativity, her pace slowed, and that Bontecou had changed as an artist, as indicated by her transparent plastic work: “Bontecou has also been lying low for several years now. That first spurt of great invention she did not really continue. She got stuck. Maybe she got stuck for internal reasons. She got married and had a child… She changed around and became gradually a very different artist, as was indicated by that transparent piece…” However, Castelli concedes that the plastic work “seems quite promising.” See Oral history interview with Leo Castelli, 1969 May 14–1973 June 8, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; see also Oral history interview with Leo Castelli, 1997 May 22, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
scale retrospective jointly organized by the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; it traveled as well to the Museum of Modern Art at its temporary location in Queens, New York (MoMA QNS). Presenting Bontecou’s old and recent, never-before-seen work, it brought about her second meteoric rise to fame. If not for that exhibition, because it returned Bontecou to the limelight, this dissertation probably would not have been written.

Exhibition reviews of the 2003 retrospective and related press rehearse the sensational narrative of Bontecou’s massive success, subsequent disappearance, and prodigal return. But it receives little play in this study for two reasons, aside from the fact that it does not require recapitulation. The first is that I take Bontecou at her word when it comes to her account of the reasons she left the New York art world: she was tired of the gallery system that demanded that she produce new work for shows every couple of years and that pressured her to continue to make more of the same (i.e., the eminently successful wall reliefs) rather than innovate; and her life changed—she had a baby with her husband, artist William (Bill) Giles, she took in her ailing father after her mother’s death, she found that downtown New York had become an untenable milieu for her art practice (in 1962 she moved her studio to Wooster Street in SoHo, which transformed

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38 The exhibition was curated by Elizabeth A. T. Smith, then Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, in association with Ann Philbin, Director of the Hammer Museum. Following its debut at the Hammer Museum, where it ran between October 5, 2003 and January 11, 2004, the exhibition was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago from February 14 through May 30, 2004, and at MoMA QNS, where it was curated by Lilian Tone, from July 30 through September 27, 2004.

39 This new work was comprised of drawings primarily, plus a body of sculptures that hang from the ceiling by wire and are made of various materials, including steel, porcelain, wire, wire mesh, and silk, composed into galactic forms.

40 Bontecou told Elizabeth A. T. Smith that her withdrawal from the art world amounted to a decision to walk away from a successful career in order to preserve her own artistic needs and creative energies: “You have to let it go. What I saw happening to Pollock’s work was that it was being explored by everybody but himself and I thought: he doesn’t have a chance.” Bontecou, as quoted in Smith, “Abstract Sinister,” *Art in America* 81, no. 9 (Sept. 1993): 87.
into a busy, fashionable district, and she “felt like throwing bricks at the boutiques”).\textsuperscript{41} Likewise, in the face of speculation that negative reviews of her fourth solo show at Castelli Gallery prompted her exit from the art scene, I trust Bontecou’s claims to a genuine lack of interest in criticism.\textsuperscript{42} Bontecou commented recently, “Bad reviews really don’t bother me. I just saw one [review of her 1971 solo show at Catelli Gallery] and everyone told me about them. People thought I stopped working because of that. I didn’t. My life just changed at that point. My plastic pieces were terrific flops but I had a good time making them.”\textsuperscript{43} In fact, only retrospectively is it clear that Bontecou’s 1971 show at Castelli Gallery would be her final show there, for her break with Castelli was gradual rather than definitive. Further, the reviews of her vacuum-formed plastic sculptures are more accurately characterized as tepid than negative; but there are only a handful of reviews in the first place, meaning that, above all, the work was barely received. Finally, it is not fair to say that Bontecou left the art world, given that in 1971 she began a twenty-year-long teaching career in the Art Department at Brooklyn College, just a borough away.\textsuperscript{44} If turning one’s back on fame and fortune is exceptional, growing a family, dedicating oneself to teaching, moving to the country, and working in the privacy of one’s studio are reasonable and admirable.

\textsuperscript{41} Bontecou, as quoted in Karen Wright, “(Re)Birth of a Star: Lee Bontecou is Back With a Bang,” \textit{Modern Painters} 17, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 69. Bontecou moved her studio from the East Village to 147 Wooster Street in 1962, and in 1965, when she married Giles, she moved into his apartment on Greene Street, a loft where he kept his own studio, while retaining her Wooster Street loft as her workspace. Valerie Giles, their only child, was born around late 1966 or early 1967. After Valerie’s birth, Bontecou and Giles began to spend time in western Pennsylvania with friends Tom and Jane Doyle, where they would eventually settle.

\textsuperscript{42} Still others speculate that it was Giles’s jealousy of Bontecou’s success that drove her out of the public eye.

\textsuperscript{43} Bontecou, as quoted in Wright, “(Re)Birth of a Star,” 69–70.

\textsuperscript{44} Bontecou’s colleagues in the department included Ann Arnold, Lois Dodd, Morris Dorsky, and Tom Doyle.
The second reason I do not heed this narrative is methodological, as my approach is not biographical (or psycho-biographical) or reception-based. Hence, this study does not treat the topic of Bontecou’s gender, though gender remains an important term. No doubt, being a woman—or, the social and historical circumstances of being a woman—materially shaped Bontecou’s career, but I do not analyze art market forces, conventions of sociability and hierarchies in the art world, or traditions of artistic training, or otherwise decode the visible and invisible power structures that are the architecture of gendered privileges, disadvantages, and biases. This dissertation proceeds from the supposition that gender in an artist’s work is not necessarily identical to the artist’s own gender.

For related reasons, I do not impute intention to Bontecou. I use her words in several key instances: her phrase “illusionary depth” is especially pivotal; I develop her term “worldscape,” her notion of getting sculpture on the wall, and her explanation that her plastic flowers “say” “this is all we’ll have to remember what flowers used to look like”; and I am compelled by her self-identification as a sculptor specifically rather than an artist generally. 45 But this dissertation does not speak on behalf of Bontecou, who rarely positions herself in relation to other artists or art practices. By her reckoning, her influences are the natural world; the Greek vases and African Halls at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the fossils, bones, and panoramas at the Museum of Natural History, and the sculptures by Brancusi at the Modern; her personal friends, many of whom were not artists; and Abstract Expressionism, not because of its techniques or forms but because it “gave young artists a burst of energy and a desire for boundless freedom to break away

45 Perhaps we could also say that Bontecou is a woman specifically and an artist generally, or a woman generally and an artist specifically.
individually and find new paths.” Bontecou values this freedom above all else, writing to curator Elizabeth A. T. Smith in the early 1990s:

My most persistently recurring thought is to work in a scope as far reaching as possible; to express a feeling of freedom in all its necessary ramifications—its awe, beauty, magnitude, horror and baseness. This feeling embraces ancient, present and future worlds: from caves to jet engines, landscapes to outer space, from visible nature to the inner eye, all encompassed in cohesive works of my inner world. This total freedom is essential.

And what Bontecou demands, she also gives to her viewers: since the early 1960s, Bontecou has insisted that she does “not want to tell others…what to see or experience in [her] work,” that the “individual is welcome to see and feel in them [her works] what he wishes in terms of himself,” and that she leaves her work untitled because titling “would be like making you think my way, binding you….Or me. This way I have some kind of freedom.”

My work is focused on the concerns of mediums, materials, and genres, and my method involves repositioning these inherited ideas. My research on Bontecou has led me to elaborate the constellation of the hybrid, the specific, and the general in her work by mining their etymologies, and to do so in terms of medium specificity, specific objecthood, species, and specialization and of genre, art in general, gender, and gene,

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48 Bontecou, as quoted in The Artist’s Reality: International Sculpture Exhibition, unpaginated

49 Bontecou, as quoted in Americans 1963, ed. Dorothy Miller (New York: The Museum of Modern Art with Doubleday, 1963), 12. This constituted Bontecou’s first artist’s statement, and it was based on a handwritten letter she wrote to Miller, a copy of which, stamped “received” on August 10, 1960, is located in the Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Painting and Sculpture collection files.

while navigating her work’s place/non-place in the field of postwar sculpture. My method is art-historical in its investments in the historical development of forms, such as mediums, but I also place art objects discursively, as within scientific discourse in my exploration of ecological paradigms, and theorize conceptual ideas, such as hybridity. In practice, this means that I attend to the material specificities of Bontecou’s work, to its categorical classifications, and to the terms that the work offers through formal analysis. Yet the objects do not stand alone; they inform and are informed by other, largely American sculptural practices and critical, art-historical, and interdisciplinary discourses, both contemporaneous and recent.

Thus, among the tropes of the critical literature so cannily captured in Karp’s recounting of Bontecou’s discovery, only the strangeness of the reliefs motivates and is developed by this dissertation—how the reliefs fit and do not fit and refuse to fit into categories and histories of sculpture, how it was both because of and despite being unlike anything Castelli had seen that he signed Bontecou to his gallery, how the terms they offer are of a piece with the most crucial debates and developments in 1960s discourse and practice but cannot be circumscribed by any dominant narratives of art history, how they are both painting and sculpture. (Bontecou’s overnight success matters to the degree that it measures her work’s centrality to and resonance within sculptural practice in the 1960s, and because it stands in contrast to the critical neglect of her second major body of sculpture of this period, the vacuum-formed plastic work.) In negotiating the position of her work in the field of postwar sculpture as both marginal and central, I argue that her work clarifies, without itself exemplifying, the 1960s phenomenon of the shift from the modernist emphasis on the specific medium to the postmodernist notion of art in
general—the post-medium probing of “Art” rather than the essence of a medium—
through its hybridizations of the specific and the general.

Though I do not explore Bontecou’s own private position or public persona as
insider/outsider, for the purposes of introduction it is necessary to outline Bontecou’s
biography. Born in 1931 in Providence, Rhode Island, and raised in Westchester County,
New York, Bontecou spent her summers with her maternal grandmother on Cape Forchu,
Nova Scotia, an island off the port of Yarmouth. She often describes this landscape where
she swam, fished, and played—its mudflats and tide pools, its roaming chickens and
cattle—to illustrate her intuitive and intimate upbringing alongside nature. After high
school, Bontecou attended Bradford Junior College, a women’s college in Bradford,
Massachusetts, for two years, determining that she wanted to study art and mollifying her
parents’ minor misgivings about this choice by disingenuously promising to pursue a
commercial art career. In 1952 she arrived in New York City to study at the Art
Students League, an atelier school with no curriculum, grading system, or degree
program that trained students in academic techniques. Bontecou took drawing and
painting courses for a year before trying her hand at sculpture and discovering her métier:
“And then, one day I said, ‘I’ll just take a look down in the sculpture department.’ And I
went down. It was in the dungeon, we used to call it. And I just thought, ‘This is for
me.’…[S]o the next month I changed, and went down, and then never came up again, you
know?” She studied under William Zorach, a figurative sculptor who primarily worked
in direct carving techniques, especially stonecutting, though there was no stonecutting or
other carving instruction at the League. In her student years Bontecou worked in plaster,

51 Bradford is now known as Haverhill, Massachusetts.
52 Bontecou, as quoted in Oral history interview with Lee Bontecou, 2009 Jan. 10, Archives of American
Art, Smithsonian Institution.
clay, and cement—that is, in modeling. In 1954 Bontecou won a prestigious summer residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, where she learned to weld. In the only published photograph documenting her time at Skowhegan, the young Bontecou stands on a car fender—she is barefoot, wearing goggles but not gloves—in order to raise her torch to the top of a thirteen-foot-tall abstracted human figure sculpture that appears to be welded with cast iron, sheets of pounded out metal, and used scraps (Fig. 4). (This image is echoed in an often reproduced photograph taken by Ugo Mulas of Bontecou in her Wooster Street studio in 1963 outfitted with her welding helmet and torch, wearing flip flop sandals over white socks, looking tough and nonchalant [Fig. 5].)

Bontecou put her welding skills to use building metal armatures for freestanding, abstracted bird and mammal form sculptures in Rome, to which she traveled on a Fulbright Scholarship for the academic year 1956–1957, staying until 1958. In the city’s Trastevere neighborhood she lived above a terracotta factory, and she made sculptures by welding internal iron armatures overlaid with wire mesh and slabs of terracotta or thin sheets of metal cast at a local foundry through lost-wax; some of these sculptures, made in parts, were also cast as single editions in bronze (see Fig. 6). At this point, then, Bontecou had worked through signal techniques of sculpture: modeling, casting, and welding. Further, the sculptures she made in Rome work through key traditions of modern sculpture: the wrapping and twisting slabs of striding figures recall the

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54 This work was shown in two exhibitions in Italy: 1957’s *Sculture nelle citta* for the *Festival of Two Worlds* in Spoleto, Italy, and in a show of the work of Fulbright awardees at the Robert Schneider Gallery (a.k.a. Galleria Schneider) in Rome.
Constructivist sculptures of Antoine Pevsner and the Futurist sculptures of Umberto Boccioni; the highly stylized, geometric abstractions of animals recall Henri Gaudier-Brzeska’s Vorticist sculptures and Raymond Duchamp-Villon’s Cubist sculptures; the method of welding and working in parts recalls the collage-aesthetic constructions of David Smith.\footnote{Unfortunately, while Germano Celant and Anna Costantini’s rich reference volume details artistic exchanges between Rome and New York in the decades following the Second World War, it includes no references to Bontecou. See Celant and Costantini, Roma-New York, 1948–1964: An Art Exploration, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Milan: Charta, 1993).} When she left Italy, Bontecou shipped her sculptures back to New York as “ironworks,” and they were shown at G Gallery (a.k.a. Grippi Gallery or Gallery G) in 1959. On the basis of this work, she was awarded a Louis Comfort Tiffany Award. Presumably, it was this monetary grant that enabled Bontecou to work at her practice full-time, quickly developing her metal and fabric reliefs.

Towards the end of her stay in Rome, Bontecou made drawings by spraying thick black soot discharged from her oxy-acetylene welding torch onto sheets of paper and muslin tacked to the walls (see Fig. 7). The discovery of the dense black indicating an ever expansive outer space in these drawings constituted a developmental breakthrough, for it initiated her endeavor to give sculpture the “illusionary depth” she associated with painting (even if she realized it in drawing).\footnote{Bontecou, as quoted in Eleanor Munro, Originals: American Women Artists (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 384.} When Bontecou returned to New York she figured out how to “harness” that cosmic black space in sculpture—by spanning the irregularly shaped sections of welded armatures with bits of found cloth, while leaving open the metal skeletons’ circular apertures so that they revealed sheets of black velvet strung across the back of the frames and offered an illusion of endless depth.\footnote{Bontecou, as quoted in Mona Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” Art Journal 53, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 56.} With this
form, in which she would work through 1966, Bontecou hybridized the mediums of painting and sculpture.

In the first phase of the reliefs’ reception, the 1960s, critics routinely pointed out that they call up painting and sculpture. An incomplete list: Cosmopolitan magazine, profiling Bontecou in an editorial titled “The Amazing Inventiveness of Women Painters,” describes them as “neither sculptures nor paintings in the strict sense of the words”58; “the Bontecou creations seem half paintings, half sculptures,” according to Life Magazine59; the 1963 Women in Contemporary Art exhibition catalogue maps her constructions at the point where “painting and sculpture meet”60; Sandler argues that “the line between painting and sculpture becomes so blurred that the Neo-Dada construction-collages are most fittingly called ‘objects’”61; and George Heard Hamilton sets off painting in scare quotes, as in “her new metal and canvas ‘paintings.’”62 But the most cited, influential formulation of the relationship between mediums in Bontecou’s reliefs belongs to the Minimalist Donald Judd: they are “specific objects,” that is, three-dimensional work that is “neither painting nor sculpture.”63

If Judd’s definition of Bontecou’s reliefs is negative (neither/nor), it is also the case that so much of situating Bontecou’s sculpture and drawing requires saying what they are not, of which conventions and lineages they are not part. As for the reliefs: they are not Duchampian readymades, though they use found materials and objects; while their forms refer to bodily parts and open onto metonymic chains (breasts, eyes, bellies,

anuses), they are not Brancusian objects, part-objects, or fetish objects; unlike Tatlinian counter-reliefs mounted on the wall to occupy real architectural space, Bontecou’s reliefs are raised to the wall in order to partake in painting’s illusionary space. So, too, they are abstract and “heroic” in scale, but they are not arenas for action or drawings in space; in spite of being made from found, cast-off materials (detritus collected on Canal Street), they are not deskillled, and they do not describe the mass media or mass consumption; while their means of construction are self-evident (wires, fabric, metal armature are all exposed), process is not aleatory, nor does material determine form; though they insist on their own literalist objecthood, they offer a pictorial illusion of deep space. Likewise, the plastic sculptures are chemical-age flora and fauna that demonstrate Bontecou’s prescient ecological concerns, but they are not environments, earthworks, or land art; they interrogate the site of the gallery, but do not abandon the white cube for the so-called expanded field; they are autonomous and they are not medium hybrids, but neither are they medium-specific in the conventional sense; they use traditional techniques of carving, modeling, and casting, but by means of synthetic materials. (Though Bontecou uses industrial and synthetic materials, all of her work is made by her, by hand; she has never employed studio assistants or fabricators.)

This pertains to her works on paper as well, for her drawings are working drawings that are not independent of her sculpture, but they are not studies or sketches either; and they were produced at a time when drawing became an independent medium as never before, but they are not made in defiance of or in the absence of the traditional sculptural object.

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64 The exceptions to this are the obvious ones: the bronze casting of her mid-1950s bird and mammal form sculptures was executed at a foundry, and her lithographs and etchings were printed by master printer Donn Steward at Universal Limited Art Editions.
Despite this differential positioning, I reject Judd’s neither/nor construction, and I strive to prove that Bontecou’s work assumes a both/and condition and to reveal why this demands rethinking the field of postwar American sculpture. I ultimately argue that the reliefs establish positive relationships to painting and sculpture through their structure of medium hybridity, that the plastic sculptures affirm the value of medium-specific sculpture in the face of its obsolescence by rendering hybrid species in a hybrid material, and that the drawings complement, not supplement, sculptural practice.

I develop the concept of hybridity as a structure of the relationship between the specific and the general and as a condition of the relationship between the organic and the mechanical. That the term hybrid initially emerged with regard to plants and animals in the realm of biology is not negligible to my thinking about Bontecou’s work. In fact, the first English-language use of the word hybrid occurred in a 1601 translation of what is regarded as the first history of art: Pliny the Elder’s first-century, encyclopedic *Naturalis Historia*, in which naturalism (in the sense of art’s reproduction of nature) was esteemed the paradigm of good art, fundamentally joining nature and art and natural history and art history. Philemon Holland, in his seventeenth-century translation of the text, titled *The Historie of the World. Commonly called, the Naturall Historie of C. Plinius Secundus*, writes of the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar, “There is no creature ingenders so soon with wild of the kind, as doth swine: and verily such hogs in old time they called Hybrides.” More historically particular is that the art-historical classificatory terms of the specific and the general, by which Bontecou adopts positive relationships to sculpture, were coeval with the taxonomies of natural history: Linnaeus’s development of binomial

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nomenclature with his 1753 *Species Planatarum* was coincident with Lessing’s theorization of genre propriety in his 1766 *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, which also align with the modernist self-criticism and disciplinary self-reflexivity that Greenberg identifies with eighteenth-century Kantian aesthetics and with Herder’s investigations into the essence of sculptural and pictorial forms in his 1778 *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion’s Creative Dream*. Thus, the terms of the hybrid, the specific, and the general that Bontecou’s work proposes bear on the close relationships between eighteenth-century discourses on the natural sciences and genre propriety and mid-twentieth-century discourses, both environmental discourses on gene mutation, species survival, and nature’s autonomy and art-historical discourses on art’s autonomy and mediums, including medium specificity, specific objecthood, and art in general.

I approach hybridity by plumbing its etymology, but my recourse to hybridity was propelled by two curious uses of the term in the contemporaneous critical literature on Bontecou’s work, both appearing in *New York Times* reviews. In 1963 critic John Canaday reviewed Dorothy Miller’s *Americans* show at the Modern in which a dozen of Bontecou reliefs and drawings were exhibited. He writes that Bontecou’s wall reliefs are like “Giant Flowering Hybrids” (capitalization his) and goes on to describe her constructions as “the happy results of cross-breeding industrial forms with birds’ nests.”

Canaday’s expression “Giant Flowering Hybrids” is conspicuous because in 1963 Bontecou was still four years away from making the work that it describes much better—namely, her vacuum-formed plastic flower forms, such as two eight-foot-tall, now lost sculptures of mutant flowers. Those sculptures were first exhibited in a 1971 show at

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Castelli Gallery, which was unfavorably reviewed by James R. Mellow. Mellow brings the plastic works to bear on Bontecou’s wall reliefs, recalling that the latter had been recognized as belonging to “a new class of art-object—‘specific objects’ was the term put forward for this new mode… a class of art object that was not quite painting, nor sculpture either but a hybrid that was intended to be more viable than each of the older, conventional forms.” However, in light of the new plastic work’s “reversion” to “an imagery very definitely drawn from nature and far removed from the unadorned boxes and cubes that were being evolved by her Minimalist colleagues,” Mellow suspects that her relationship to the Minimalists was largely tangential after all.67 Thus, Canaday in 1963 invokes hybridity to describe the iconographic or formal “cross-breeding” of the industrial and the natural in the relief work, improbably anticipating the plastic flower sculptures; and in a review of that plastic work in 1971, Mellow spells out a formula for mediumistic hybridity with regard to the wall reliefs, even as he rescinds the classification of those reliefs as Minimalist specific objects on account of their now manifest latent naturalism.68

This pair of discursive instances comprises one reason for the centrality of hybridity to my thinking about Bontecou’s body of work, as it ascribes coherence to these two phases of Bontecou’s career. For though Canaday’s and Mellow’s ascriptions of continuity are unwitting and dismissive, respectively, they are nonetheless exceptional.

68 There was a third instance of the appearance of the term hybrid in the contemporaneous critical literature. In a two-paragraph long review of Bontecou’s 1971 show of her vacuum-formed plastic flowers and related drawings at Castelli Gallery, Marjorie Welsh writes that the drawings in the exhibition “disclose some of these ‘eyes’ [the caverns seen also in the metal and fabric wall reliefs] growing into a meticulous complex of shapes—a head of a nightmarish fish or flower or hybrid of the two.” Here, then, hybridity pertains to the iconography within the fish and flowers body of work. See Welsh, “Art,” Manhattan East, June 1, 1971, 2.
Nearly all the literature on Bontecou presents her plastic fish and flower work as a precipitate and total departure from the earlier relief work. I argue that hybridity forms a crucial through-line in Bontecou’s oeuvre: while the reliefs hybridize categories of art (painting and sculpture, genre and medium), the synthetic flora and fauna sculptures hybridize the categories of the natural and the synthetic.

In the recent literature on Bontecou hybridity crops up frequently, and I would venture that this word is on the tip of our cultural tongue because of hybrid cars, the emergence of and demand for which is directly responsive to the irrefutable evidence of the anthropogenic nature of climate change.69 Crucially, Bontecou’s plastic sculptures’ evince environmental concerns (unrecognized in 1971), which have made hybrid a household word today.

Hybridity has also become a key term in academic discourse in recent decades. The most important theorist of hybridity is postcolonialist scholar Homi Bhabha. In “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” a 1985 essay republished in his 1994 volume Location of Culture, Bhabha reconceives of colonial authority by proposing that colonial discourse is hybridized. Hybridity undermines essentialism in the politics of culture, Bhabha avers.

Drawing on semiotics and psychoanalysis, he argues that hybridity “reverses the formal process of disavowal”—colonialist disavowal, where disavowal is “the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority”—so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority,” or its “rules of recognition.” When hybridity “intervenes,” the English book or text, including scripture and literature, “retains its presence, but it is no longer a representation of an essence; it is now a partial presence, a (strategic) device in a specific colonial engagement, an appurtenance of authority.” For Bhabha colonial hybridity is the articulation of an “ambivalent space,” also called a “third space,” which “enables a form of subversion.”

I do not elaborate upon Bhabha’s theorization of hybridity in the following chapters. What I do want to unfold from his work in this introduction is the notion of a “third space.” For the third space does not combine or resolve two different identities; it estranges those differences (cultural differences) so that they are “not simply there to be seen or appropriated.” In Bontecou’s work, the hybrid medium does not merely combine the two mediums of painting and sculpture; it redefines how we might think about possible relations between mediums and, by extension, about the stories we tell about how the sculptural medium reached a fever pitch in the 1960s.

In part, this explains why the designation “wall relief” does not shore up the significance of Bontecou’s early sculptural work, which is, undeniably, wall relief in a basic sense—sculpture on the wall that incorporates a pictorial illusion of depth. The

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71 Ibid., 163.
72 Ibid., 160.
73 Ibid., 163.
history of pictorial sculpture is primarily a history of wall reliefs, from the Parthenon friezes and the Pergamon Altar, to Lorenzo Ghiberti’s bronze doors and, in a moment of sculptural crisis, Auguste Rodin’s *Gates of Hell*. It is therefore tempting to name Bontecou’s metal and fabric constructions “wall reliefs.” However, beyond the fact that historically wall reliefs are decorative, as on a monument or part of a larger scheme as in an architectural program, whereas Bontecou’s reliefs are discrete art objects; beyond the fact that historically wall reliefs are figurative, narrative, or symbolic, whereas Bontecou’s are abstract; and beyond the fact that historically wall reliefs are carved or cast, whereas Bontecou’s are welded and sewn—beyond all that, Bontecou’s reliefs invoke the vexed discourses around mediums in the 1960s, principally those concerning the shift from medium-specific painting to the expanded field of sculptural practice, as well as illusion, the shaped canvas, non-art materials, and literalism. Bontecou does not search through the history of the wall relief to recover an old form as a solution to a modern problem. She constructs a hybrid medium that is a way out of the medium specificity/specific objecthood/art in general course of sculpture, but, importantly, it is a way out that is steeped in and reimagines the key terms of that course.

As Alex Potts reminds us, until the eighteenth century sculpture had been primarily thought of as a complement to architecture (exceptions to this rule include portrait busts and garden statuary or genre sculpture). The notion that sculpture should be autonomous and not just an adjunct to an architectural setting was largely a late eighteenth-century creation. In the touchstone nineteenth-century texts on sculpture, this autonomy was seen to only exacerbate the disadvantages of sculpture’s literal

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dimensionality. For poet-critic Charles Baudelaire, freestanding sculpture’s literalism is its downfall. In his famous 1846 Salon review “Why Sculpture is Tiresome,” Baudelaire assesses that, “brutal and positive like nature,” sculpture is simultaneously vague and ambiguous “because it exhibits too many surfaces at once.” Whereas the painter provides his own vision in his painting, the sculptor cannot “force himself to take up a unique point of view,” thereby leaving the spectator to revolve around the figure and to “choose a hundred different points of view, except the right one.” In fact, should the lamplight fall a certain way upon a sculptural figure, Baudelaire wagers, the spectator might catch a better viewpoint than the one the sculptor intended, which would amount to a humiliation for the sculptor.75 Baudelaire insists that sculpture functions best as a complementary art within an architectural or garden setting, that is, when the environment negates its literalism.76 If for Baudelaire the painter retains control over his expression to a degree that the sculptor cannot, theorist and sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand tried to wrest back the sculptor’s control by fixing the viewpoint, thereby removing “the disturbing problems of cubic form.”77 Sculptural relief would be the solution due to its implementation of figure-ground relationships and its orientation towards a principal viewpoint akin to a painterly central composition, as he explains in his 1893 The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture. According to Hildebrand, the picture plane accords with the two-

76 Ibid., 111–112. Speaks offers that when the studio, rather than the cathedral, became the reference point of sculpture, photography reinforced this contextualization, so that photographs by Brancusi of his sculpture in his studio almost answer Baudelaire. See Speaks, The Architecture of Gendered Reception, 11–12.
dimensional nature of vision, and volume is but “a plane continuing into the distance.”

He declares, “So long as the chief effect of any plastic figure is its reality as a solid, it is imperfect as a work of art. It is only when the figure, though in reality a solid, gains its effect as a plane picture, that it attains artistic form, that is to say, perfection for our sense of vision.”

If sculpture’s literal dimensionality was seen as its handicap, then in the mid-twentieth century that literalism was utilized as its advantage. For Clement Greenberg sculpture could do what medium-specific painting could no longer do: supply “figurative allusiveness.” Because the medium’s concreteness meant that it was inherently less illusionistic, it could afford to be as pictorial “as it pleases.” For Robert Morris that former liability became a responsibility: “The relief has always been accepted as a viable mode. However, it cannot be accepted today as legitimate. The autonomous and literal nature of sculpture demands that it have its own, equally literal space—not a surface shared with painting.”

The humiliation that Baudelaire saw in “industriously carv[ing] portable figures,” demoting sculpture to the status of the primitive fetish object, and the barbarity Hildebrand found in “rendering an idea of action through figures in the round” were transformed into sculpture’s virtue in the 1960s, when the medium’s literal dimensionality was mined for its coincidence with that of the commodity, the body, and

78 Ibid., 58, 80.
79 Ibid., 96.
82 Baudelaire, “Why Sculpture is Tiresome,” 111. He speculates that, in the hands of modern sculptors, the tombs at the medieval cathedral of St. Denis would be “cigar- or shawl-boxes” and Florentine bronze sculptures, “three penny bits.” See ibid., 112.
83 Hildebrand writes, “This barbarous mode of rendering an idea of action through figures in the round rather than expressing it naturally in a relief is often met with nowadays.” See Hildebrand, The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture, 116.
the site. Yet, if Baudelaire put forward that sculpture’s three-dimensionality had too much to do with everything, and if Bontecou’s contemporaries maximized that dimensionality because it had just enough to do with everything (everyday objects, viewers’ bodies, real space), Bontecou rather curiously felt that sculptures sitting on the floor in the middle of the room “don’t have anything to do with anything.” She counteracted this by hybridizing sculpture with painting, aiming to make it “go into space,” and producing relief work that was both painting and sculpture.

In the critical literature spurred by the 2003 retrospective, it is customary to cite Judd’s taxonomy of specific objecthood (“neither painting nor sculpture”), too often assuming that it is self-explanatory or self-sufficient. Recent scholarly literature also invokes Judd, though with much greater nuance and with more emphasis on his peculiar vocabulary than on his definition of “specific objects.” In her 2003 article “‘Like War Equipment. With Teeth’: Lee Bontecou’s Steel-and-Canvas Reliefs,” Kirsten Swenson offers a social history of Bontecou’s sculptures in the 1960s, proposing that an investigation into the circumstances and reception of the wall reliefs provides clues to the relationship between art and politics in the period and asserting that the reliefs “correspond to an extreme moment in Cold War tension that is reflected in their incorporation of gas masks, helmets, and other military paraphernalia.” For Swenson, what is most important about Judd’s writings is not their assessment of Bontecou’s reliefs’ medium status but Judd’s assertion that the reliefs do not represent instruments of

86 The catalogue accompanying the show reproduces Judd’s 1965 profile of Bontecou, which announces in its opening line, “Lee Bontecou was one of the first to use a three-dimensional form that was neither painting nor sculpture.” See Judd, “Lee Bontecou” (1965), in Complete Writings: 1959–1975, 178.
87 Kirsten Swenson, “‘Like War Equipment. With Teeth.’ Lee Bontecou’s Steel-and-Canvas Reliefs,” American Art 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 74.
dread so much as they are themselves powerful and fearful presences. In this sense, Swenson takes seriously the notion of the reliefs as explicit objects, which we “deal with” as we would “any strange object,” according to Judd. Rather than emphasize the roles of painting and sculpture (or the refusal of them), she highlights Judd’s lexicon of the erotic and militaristic to claim that Judd was sensitive to the references to “high psychological and societal anxieties” in Bontecou’s reliefs. Swenson seeks to point out the war themes in Bontecou’s work, which had not been so systematically analyzed previously. (Swenson also has recourse to Joseph Cornell’s notes on Bontecou, an early freestanding sculpture of Bontecou’s that recalls a gun, and Bontecou’s inclusion of the Plexiglas turret of a World War II bomber jet in her 1964 commission for Lincoln Center.) She maintains that those war themes are presented complexly: the collusion of fear and fantasy and of sex and weaponry; a defiant, ironic attitude towards nuclear threat; and the appropriation of war-like materials that are used decoratively, elegantly, even humorously.

Elyse Speaks’s 2005 dissertation, “The Architecture of Reception: Sculpture and Gender in the 1950s and 1960s,” is reception-based, focusing on Bontecou, Louise Bourgeois, and Louise Nevelson. Speaks posits the relevance of two trends in the 1950s and 1960s, the devaluation of the assumptions that historically founded sculpture and the rise in sculpture made by women. In her chapter on Bontecou’s reliefs, Speaks sets out to consider the terms of the critical reception that contributed to Bontecou’s successful reception in the 1960s and the circumstantial factors that allowed her visibility. She structures these terms around three different positions: Bontecou’s contextual position in the early 1960s vis-à-vis her contemporaries, especially assemblage artists; the

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Minimalist position that Judd renegotiated; and the perception of her position as a “woman artist.” Speaks does not set out to elaborate on the relationship between painting and sculpture in Bontecou’s reliefs so much as to analyze “the strong purchase” that Judd’s analyses have on Bontecou’s work. It is in pursuit of the aim of revealing how Judd enabled Bontecou’s reception as a Minimalist (and what his promotion of her necessitated obscuring) that Speaks argues that Judd’s writings on Bontecou betray his engagement with allusion and part-by-part composition in her work, despite his own insistence on the values of exclusion and non-hierarchical composition.

Jo Applin contends in her 2006 article, “‘This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object’: Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void,” that Bontecou’s reliefs stage the encounter between the object and the space of the viewing subject. Her approach combines psychoanalytic theory and phenomenology. Applin concedes that the wall relief is “no longer painting, but not quite sculpture either,” calling up Judd, and goes on to suggest that the wall relief is “situated on that pressure point between the two.” For Applin, this hinges on the central void in Bontecou’s reliefs, which moves the mode of looking from “‘ordinary’ looking to a libidinal gaze, imbued with psychic

89 Ibid., 138.
90 Speaks has also published an article on this trio of sculptors, titled “Recasting Sculptural Function: Use and Misuse in the work of Bontecou, Bourgeois, and Nevelson,” in which she examines the framework of monumentality and its reexamination by sculptors attuned to its persistence in conventional practices. Her central question concerns sculptural function, and she proposes that Bontecou, Bourgeois, and Nevelson engage with a language of utility but challenge its formal conventions. Regarding Bontecou, Speaks contends that “craft” was a vehicle for complicating any secure reading of her reliefs. She argues that the handmade fabrication of the works downplays skilled labor, that the reliefs’ patched and sutured qualities diminish the sense of the industrial, and that their labor is feminine, while their scale and imagery are masculine. Ultimately, Speaks sees Bontecou’s reliefs as refusing to hold public meaning, for their highly personalized formal language confounds the appearance of a grand, functional, meaningfully loaded monument. See Speaks, “Recasting Sculptural Function: Use and Misuse in the Work of Bontecou, Bourgeois, and Nevelson,” Sculpture Journal 19, no. 2 (2010).
91 Jo Applin, “‘This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object’: Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void,” Art History 29, no. 3 (June 2006): 483.
phantasies” and through which the spectator becomes incorporated into the object.\textsuperscript{92} What she mines in Judd’s writing on Bontecou are his descriptions that position the relationship between object as aggressor and spectator, rather than his formulation of specific objecthood, though she does take the reliefs to be “objects.” If, in a crude schematization, sculpture in the 1960s shifted from the specific object to the dematerialized object, then Bontecou’s reliefs, Applin writes, demonstrate that the war on sculpture is “a war waged on the very space of subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{93}

Applin’s article emerges from a chapter in her 2004 doctoral thesis, which examines the work of Bontecou, Lucas Samaras, and H. C. Westermann through the rubrics of secrecy and encryption. Informed by the psychoanalytic work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, she reconsiders the traditional, Oedipal model of influence as kind of “haunting,” developing this idea particularly in her chapter on Bruce Nauman’s sculptural homage to Westermann (in her chapter on Bontecou, “haunting” arises vis-à-vis Eva Hesse, who deeply admired Bontecou’s work). Her central thesis on Bontecou’s wall reliefs is that the void is disturbing and destructive, threatening to incorporate the viewer within its center and thus disturbing the spectatorial encounter, such that the space outside the object is not just activated but devoured. As Applin argues that what the objects do to the space of sculpture they also do to the liminal boundaries and psychical pressure of the viewer, she prizes the engagement of the viewer, so that she provides visual analyses as well as descriptive accounts of her personal encounters with Bontecou’s reliefs. Applin analyzes Judd’s writing on Bontecou at great length, as well as

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 491.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 499.
Lucy Lippard’s 1967 essay “Eros Presumptive,” concluding that for both critics what is at stake in Bontecou’s work is the phantasmatic return of the body.⁹⁴

Lesley E. Shipley’s 2011 dissertation upholds Judd’s categorization, as indicated by its title, “Specific Objects: Lee Bontecou’s Steel and Canvas Reliefs, 1959–1964.” Shipley explains in her introduction that “Judd’s view of Bontecou’s abstract reliefs as complex and ambiguous in meaning, yet simultaneously specific in their formal qualities and materiality” has influenced her investigation of Bontecou’s reliefs. Her stated interest is in how the abstract and “intensely material objects—objects that appear to have ‘specific’ meaning in terms of their physicality, shape and structure, and their incorporation of seemingly recognizable materials—have become both more and less specific through the language of interpretation.”⁹⁵ Her research is predominantly reception-oriented, dedicating the first two chapters to the initial critical reception of the reliefs in the early 1960s and to the feminist claiming of the reliefs from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, respectively; evaluating critics’ and scholars’ interpretations (and misinterpretations) of Bontecou’s statements and interviews in a third chapter; and, in a final chapter, offering her own reading of Bontecou’s reliefs as “ambivalent objects” that materialize and memorialize social and political events shaping the 1950s and 1960s, especially with respect to war, both the memory of the Second World War and the Cold War.

Robert Storr, in his essay for the 2003 retrospective catalogue, also provides a historiography of the literature on Bontecou, allotting much attention to Judd’s writings

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by quoting them at length, though not especially parsing Judd’s text. In fact, Storr professes, “Greatest honor goes to Judd,” owing to Judd’s early, enthusiastic support of Bontecou’s work and to his deep and clear understanding of her work’s “formal and poetic significance.”96 Storr mobilizes the notion of the grotesque to theorize Bontecou’s work, employing its meanings which center on the confrontation and fusion of ordinarily contradictory or incompatible things that encompass not only the classic hybridization of different aesthetic orders—the geometric and the organic, flora and fauna, man and beast, the decoratively abstract and the figuratively monstrous—but extend into the present by way of collage, montage, assemblage, and the ready-made.97 Storr notes that his essay is among a group that collectively forms a bid to reintroduce the category of the grotesque into art-historical discussion and that is also “an homage to Judd and a brief on behalf of the idea that it is time to rewrite the history of art and art criticism with Judd and Lippard as pivotal figures, and with their embrace of aesthetic opposites and keen understanding of the material and intellectual dialectics of studio process as a central issue.”98 No surprise then that the Juddian opposition of painting and sculpture is reduplicated in his essay.

The retrospective catalogue also includes two essays by critical figures in the current field of Bontecou studies, the first being Elizabeth A. T. Smith, the curator responsible for the return of museological attention to Bontecou. In 1993, Smith, then a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MoCA), organized a show of Bontecou’s work titled *Lee Bontecou: Sculpture and Drawings of the 1960s*, which traveled as well to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, and to the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York. Though Bontecou was not involved in

97 Ibid., 191.
98 Ibid., 193.
the organization of the show, it initiated a correspondence between Smith and Bontecou, who, after 1971, had moved around New York state with her husband and daughter, renting houses in Bridgehampton, East Hampton, and Rockland County before moving to Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, meanwhile keeping an apartment in New York City to facilitate her teaching in Brooklyn and ultimately settling on a farm in Orbisonia, Pennsylvania. According to Bontecou, a bout with aplastic anemia, a bone marrow disease that brought her near to death in the late 1990s, motivated her to finally agree to a full-scale retrospective with Smith as co-curator, along with Ann Philbin (it was titled *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*). Smith has published two closely related introductory essays on Bontecou’s work coinciding with her 1993 and 2003 exhibitions, “Abstract Sinister” and “All Freedom in Every Sense.” Drawing on Smith’s conversations and correspondence with Bontecou, these essays cover Bontecou’s biography, the developments in her career, and the sexual, military, and biological iconography of her work, and they position Bontecou within various art-historical contexts, including assemblage art, Judd-defined Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, and process art, while underlining her work’s striking and fierce originality and singularity and Bontecou’s own insistence on freedom. For Smith the “distinctiveness of Bontecou’s entire corpus of work lies in how it has consistently succeeded in mining the tension between a range of dualities: the biological and the mechanistic, historical reference and experimental impulse, objecthood and allusion, hardness and softness, simplicity and intricacy.”

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Mona Hadler concurs that dualities (or “oppositional language”) are key to Bontecou’s work: painting and sculpture, interior and exterior, organic and inorganic, sensuous and repellent, hand-worked and geometric.\textsuperscript{100} Having written four brief essays on Bontecou’s work between 1992 and 2007, including one published in the retrospective catalogue, and having interviewed Bontecou during a rare visit to Bontecou’s Pennsylvania farm and studio in 1986, Hadler counts as a second major figure in the field of Bontecou studies. Hadler’s overarching thesis is that Bontecou expresses social concerns formally—in “the grid of entrapment, the sharp edges and wires that appear in most of her work and ‘mentally scrape the viewer,’ the oppositions of materials that she feels reflect the dualities in society.”\textsuperscript{101} More than anything, Hadler emphasizes the social and formal significance of Bontecou’s use of black, figuring it is as a “heart of darkness” or a “conquering darkness” (citing Joseph Conrad). For instance, Hadler asserts that it is in the reliefs’ black holes that Bontecou combines her “anti-war” politics and her defiance of the passive female gaze (in making the hole an eye or camera eye that looks back and a “mouth of truth”).\textsuperscript{102} In “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” Hadler argues that Bontecou employs “the body as the site of social protest”\textsuperscript{103} by relating the reliefs’ bodily analogies (skins, skeletons, orifices) to “the political and social concerns of the sixties—the decade of social revolution.”\textsuperscript{104} However, Hadler’s claims here are suggestive or preliminary in nature; for example, she offers, “Bontecou’s progression, from small boxes that embodied her political conception of a worldscape to her large, sexualized

\textsuperscript{101} Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” 59.
\textsuperscript{102} Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” 56.
\textsuperscript{103} Hadler, “Lee Bontecou—Heart of a Conquering Darkness,” 43–44.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 57.
body-machine constructions...says a great deal about how the body can be politicized in a gendered way." Hadler’s first two essays on Bontecou were reworked and combined for the retrospective catalogue essay, and in a fourth publication Hadler traces culturally shifting attitudes towards plastic, from its mention in the 1968 film *The Graduate*, to its postwar militaristic associations, its treatments in the magazine *Modern Plastics*, and its role in Italian design, and their reflections in Bontecou’s oeuvre.106

Only curator Elisabeth Sussman has given sustained attention to Bontecou’s vacuum-formed sculptures of fish and flowers, in an essay for the catalogue accompanying the 2007 Knoedler & Co. Gallery exhibition of those sculptures and related drawings (it was the first show dedicated to them since their 1971 debut at Leo Castelli Gallery).107 In her essay, Sussman proposes that Bontecou’s turn to plants as subject matter indicates “her intense observation of the thing itself.”108 (In order to illustrate Bontecou’s observational inclinations, she has recourse to photographs from Mulas’s 1963 series of Bontecou in her studio bending to gaze into the fish tanks that she kept near the windows.) In addition to naming Bontecou’s interest in looking closely at nature in the studio, the garden, and botany books, Sussman identifies similarities between the plastic sculptures and the earlier wall reliefs, such as the creation of sculptural methods which bear the marks of their construction processes and the gas mask

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105 Ibid., 61. Hadler offers that “by constructing the body on a large scale” Bontecou “endowed her art with its power and its riveting effect upon the viewer” and developed an “abstract, monumental, bigendered language of social protest.” Though the ramifications of these proposals remain unpacked. See ibid., 61.
107 Knoedler & Co. Gallery represented Bontecou from approximately 2003 to 2010. She is currently represented by FreedmanArt Gallery, New York.
motif. Finally, Sussman discusses the fish sculptures with regard to their invocation of “the real,” as opposed to the surreal—both the reality of things in nature and of what they might become.\(^\text{109}\)

What is lacking, and what this dissertation offers, is an account of Bontecou’s work that theorizes the relationship between painting and sculpture in Bontecou’s reliefs, that seriously engages with Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures in the context of the expanded field of practice, and that elucidates the coherence of her various bodies of sculpture and drawing from the period of her most active public production, the years she lived and showed in New York, 1958 to 1971.

The first chapter, titled “Worldscapes: Soot and Pencil Drawings,” surveys the soot drawings Bontecou made in 1958 and the working drawings that she made in conjunction with her wall reliefs, considering how they at once give coherence to and pry open Bontecou’s sculptural work. Drawing is integral to Bontecou’s practice, always running in parallel and often intersecting with sculpture, and I frame her drawing as much as a sculptural process as a drafted product. Bontecou’s drawings range from doodle-like working drawings in graphite in which multiple small clusters of images and scenes wend around sheets of plain and graph paper, to so-called “worldscapes” rendered in soot on sheets of muslin and paper, and finished drawings in white charcoal on black paper that illustrate in detail the environments from which her sculptures are, ostensibly, extracted (the latter are analyzed in the third chapter). Black is a motif of these bodies of drawing, and it is through black that Bontecou explores the different types of space that her sculptures provide or in which they are situated: pictorial space, environmental space, and the space of the gallery. This chapter brings together key late 1950s and early 1960s

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 15, 19.
formulations of the space age—Yves Klein on being the painter of space, Hannah Arendt on the relationship between man’s conquest of space and nuclear holocaust, and an article in the journal Astronautics that first introduced the term “cyborg,” that modern hybrid of the organic and the mechanical. I show that, belying Bontecou’s own tendency to describe the world as a kind of mystical unity, the organic-mechanical hybridity in her drawings—and the medium hybridity of her wall reliefs and the species hybridity of her vacuum-formed plastic sculptures—holds on to both terms (the organic and the mechanical) while also giving visual form to their collapse.

Works on paper are marginalized in Bontecou’s already marginalized career and in histories of postwar art. Interestingly, even as drawing has been at the cornerstone of the Western art tradition, it did not emerge as an independent medium until the 1960s. Indeed, drawing came to the fore of art practice precisely when sculpture began to take the form of massive earthworks that required engineer’s plans, industrially produced objects that necessitated sketches and specifications for fabricators, and conceptual art pieces that promoted the written word, ephemeral paper works, marks on gallery walls, or other graphic expression. Therefore, my attention to the relationship between Bontecou’s two- and three-dimensional works—how they variously represent and handle space and matter, illusion and surface—finds traction within the broader history of the tangled relationship between the mediums of drawing and sculpture in the 1960s and 1970s in America, each of which was both prominent and elusive.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Here I must also mention that Bontecou has been an active printmaker since 1962, when she was invited to create her first lithographs by Tatyana Grosman, founder and president of Universal Limited Art Editions in West Islip, New York, the press often credited with the American revival of printmaking. In that year Grosman published Bontecou’s First Stone, an abstraction reminiscent of Bontecou’s relief sculpture. Second Stone and Third Stone, up through 1980’s Sixteenth Stone, followed. Bontecou also produced etchings with aquatint once the press acquired an intaglio studio in 1966. However, Bontecou’s prints fall outside the scope of this study.
In my second chapter, titled “Going Into Space: Metal and Fabric Wall Reliefs,” I examine Bontecou’s wall reliefs, which she made between 1959 and 1966. They are usually uncomfortably forced into a movement, such as assemblage art, Abstract Expressionism, (neo-)Surrealism, Minimalism, or feminist art. Instead of demonstrating the reliefs’ conformity or allegiance to any such category, I keep open the question of their place/non-place, for they do occupy an uncertain position in the field of 1960s sculpture.

Dominant art-historical accounts of the 1960s tend to conceive of sculptural practice as a means by which to bring art off the static pictorial wall and into the literal or phenomenological world. But Bontecou’s reliefs are sculptures hung on painting’s wall, rather than paintings unfurled into three-dimensionality. Further, those well-established accounts of 1960s art consider a shift from painting to three-dimensional art practices as a shift from the specific (the modernist precept of medium specificity) to the general (the expanded field of practice and the related postmodernist notion of art in general). Differing from these tendencies, Bontecou’s reliefs retain both the categories of the specific and the general. Drawing on postwar American discourses on the medium and the so-called post-medium condition and on Jacques Derrida’s theory of the “law of genre,” I argue that Bontecou’s reliefs are medium hybrids: paintings generically and sculptures specifically. In this way they model the medium anew and deviate from well-tread courses of sculptural practice and sculptural histories, which understand 1960s sculpture as modernist painting practice’s repercussion. Particularly, they stray from Judd’s formulation of them as “neither painting nor sculpture,” and Judd is my central interlocutor in this chapter as I explore that which his taxonomy suppresses or ignores in
Bontecou’s reliefs, including illusionary depth and the martial identities of Bontecou’s materials.

In the final section of this chapter I examine the biomorphic references in Bontecou’s reliefs, proposing that the human body is but a specific referent in a more general field of animal and plant forms. It is in this section that I articulate my most overt feminist argument for Bontecou’s reliefs, making use of historian of science Donna Haraway’s foundational 1985 text, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” and demonstrating that Bontecou’s transgression of medium and genre boundaries inheres with a transgression across other genre boundaries, like those of gender (male/female), as well as animal/human and organism/machine. It is the reliefs’ composition with the materials of industrial technologies, especially military paraphernalia, that intimates that Bontecou’s organic-mechanical hybrids (cyborgs) are post-nuclear creatures and, therefore, that hybridization occurs at the expense of the human species. The relationships between the generality and specificity of mediums and the hybridity of the organic and the mechanical is extrapolated in Bontecou’s post-apocalyptic plastic sculptures, which are the subjects of the third chapter.

111 As this first chapter focuses on wall reliefs made between 1959 and 1964, I must now mention the reliefs that I do not discuss: in 1963 Bontecou began the white painted “prisons” reliefs, which do not contain fabric and which are her most rigorously monochromatic and shallowest reliefs; and in 1966 she produced a handful of polychrome reliefs which are primarily made of Plexiglas and which are her most colorful and billowing reliefs. The “prison series” (so known because of Mona Hadler’s citation of Bontecou’s use of that term) replaces soft fabrics and twisted wires with fully metal surfaces—horizontal strips of steel stacked on top of one another. Recalling prisoners’ uniforms, they are painted in alternating black and white stripes. Square openings fronted with vertical metal rods also recall jail cell bars. For example, Bontecou’s 1966 Untitled relief in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum collection offers few points of visual access to the black fabric draped across the back of the frame, just a few inches behind the surface, and those few points themselves are very slight (the surface is nearly entirely filled in). Circular openings in this piece’s metal surface reveal convex “teeth”—gums of welded strips of metal coated in black, biting together with white painted “velvet hooks” or saw bands, the latter featured in previous reliefs. Three convex forms in this relief (two helmet-like hoods in the middle register and a semi-sphere at bottom left) are made of horseshoe crab shells. The folds and ridges in the shell forms distinguish them from the industrial metals that make up the rest of the piece, but the coatings of black and white paint homogenize
Titled “Plastic Arts: Vacuum-formed Fish and Flowers,” the third chapter claims that Bontecou’s plastic pieces hybridize the categories of the organic and the mechanical as the natural and the synthetic or chemical. Clad in screwed-on armor and gas masks, her plant and marine forms are post-apocalyptic mutants outfitted for and by a violent ecology. These sculptures, along with corresponding drawings, present hybridization as evolutionary survivalist specialization in the war on nature, advancing a specificity that is also positioned in relation to modernist medium specificity. Though they evoke Rachel Carson’s 1962 parable of a “silent spring,” Bontecou’s sculptures are not exactly warnings: the fish and flowers’ hypertrophy and prosthetics both signify anthropogenic environmental catastrophe and affirm the evolutionary adaptivity—and sculptural plasticity—that prevents their extinction. Indeed, I propose that the sculptures are monuments (or maquettes for monuments) that reveal that survival is at stake for both sculpture and nature. It is the specificity of their plastic material that sustains the analogy of the two outmoded autonomies. Drawing on Robert Smithson’s writings on entropy and on Roland Barthes’s meditation on plastic in his *Mythologies* of 1957—in particular on his suggestion that the ubiquity of plastic signifies a generalizing condition—I argue that as Bontecou’s creatures proclaim the specificity of their evolutionary design as species over and against environmental extinction, and as the medium specificity of an obsolete the varied surface materials. The billowing forms of the other set of reliefs, the polychromatic ones, evoke ship sails rather than sea creatures. Bontecou’s 1966 relief in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago is made of chamois, leather, and Plexiglas, and its palette is composed of deep blacks, buttery yellows, pearly whites, and blood reds, all dulled by a waxy finish. Tight as a drum, the undulating forms recall sails and kites, swelling dramatically, heaving with gale force winds. In addition, in 1967, after Bontecou discontinued the reliefs but before she began the vacuum-formed plastic sculptures, she made a handful of in-the-round sculptures from balsa wood, silk, wire mesh, and epoxy (they hang from wires attached directly to the ceiling or that are suspended in cubic metal frames). For these pieces, which take the forms of cocoons, chrysalises, or canoes, Bontecou employed the materials and methods required for making model airplanes, one of her pastimes. All of this work deserves recognition, but I do not discuss it in detail because it is primarily an extension or a conclusion of the forms, methods, and concepts that Bontecou so actively and urgently negotiated in her earlier wall reliefs.
technology, sculpture, articulates itself over and against the extinction of modernist autonomy, the material specificity of plastic does so, too, over and against the homogenizing sameness of plastic, deadening not least in the sense of its assault on the environment. Therefore, this chapter addresses itself to that moment in the postwar period when the meaning of plastic shifted from denoting sculpture (as in, the plastic arts) to denoting everything that is not-art, that lacks substance.\(^\text{112}\)

In the third chapter I briefly compare Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures to her bronze sculptures of wingless birds made in Italy. This demonstrates another order of consistency across Bontecou’s oeuvre: not the through-line of hybridity but the persistence of ecological concerns, as these early sculptures depict endangered species. However, I argue that the plastic sculptures succeed where the bronzes fail—on the basis of a hybrid materiality.

It would seem that Bontecou’s fish and flowers were poorly received in 1971 because of their anachronism—they were seen as “overly” illustrational, in the round, attached to traditional cubic pedestals, autonomous in conventionally modernist ways. However, I demonstrate that the art world was unable to receive Bontecou’s ecological concerns, for the environment in question in the well-received, avant-garde art practices of the early 1970s was not the environment of plants and animals, but the environment of art, from the phenomenological conditions of viewership, to the architectural or historical coordinates of site and the ideological space of the institution. I believe the current preoccupation with “going green” provides the opportunity to finally receive Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures. In my conclusion, I clarify that not only can we now perceive the criteria by which the art world welcomed environments, earthworks, and

\(^{112}\) I thank Michael Lobel for this insight.
land art circa 1970 but not Bontecou’s chemical-age flora and fauna, we can also take the measure of the academy’s traditional blind spots to environmental concerns.

In sum, my dissertation offers a narrative of Bontecou’s sculpture and drawing from the 1958 to 1971 period, homing in on hybridity and constellating around the terms of the specific and the general, and it suggests an alternative track of sculpture in the field of postwar American art that does not relinquish the medium.
Chapter One

Worldscapes: Soot and Pencil Drawings

Getting the Black

Bontecou’s soot drawings fortuitously emerged from her welding practice. She learned to weld during a summer residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in 1954. By 1958, Bontecou had been on a Fulbright Scholarship in Rome for two years, creating terracotta and bronze abstracted animal form sculptures internally supported by welded armatures; during this period she was also attempting, in vain, to mount welded structures on the wall. Utilizing her oxy-acetylene welding torch for these purposes, Bontecou accidentally discovered that if she turned down the oxygen on the torch, soot would “flow off of the flame in a plume” (when operated as intended, the oxygen and acetylene gasses mix to produce a hot, controllable flame fitting to welding steel).¹ She tacked sheets of muslin and paper to the wall and directed the thick settling onto those supports.² Though acetylene burns at a low temperature, Bontecou still had to move the torch quickly to avoid scorching the paper or muslin sheets; she was, after all, drawing with a heavily sooting flame.³ The process of creating the earliest soot drawings is the most gestural and quickest that Bontecou undertook. While constructing her wall reliefs demanded the precise, obsessive labors of welding an intricate armature,

¹ Linda Owen, “Fire and Paper: An Examination of The Materials and Techniques of Lee Bontecou’s Soot Drawings,” The Book and Paper Group Annual 27 (2008): 48. My understanding of the physical properties and processes involved in Bontecou’s soot drawing has benefited immensely from Owen’s indispensable study, and I am grateful to Ms. Owen for taking the time to discuss her findings with me.
² There are tack holes in the corners of the drawings.
collecting, fitting, cutting, and arranging scraps of cloth, and threading, twisting, and clipping wire at half-inch intervals, while constructing her vacuum-formed plastic sculptures required the tedious work of finely carving Styrofoam molds, casting parts in plastic in a vacuum-former, and assembling the complex and delicate structures with handmade plastic bolts and drops of epoxy, and while her other drawings, including even non-finished works such as sketches, exhibit an exact handling of the pencil or pen to produce fine, methodical detail and intricate composition, these drawings involved rapidly fanning the welding torch as material shot out its flaming end.

Bontecou built up her soot drawings in layers, applying a fixative between the layers and leaving the final layer unfixed so as to retain the soot’s velvety texture. From a conservation standpoint, this top layer remains quite sensitive to abrasion if touched; plus, when exposed, the strong charge of the soot particles attracts dust and fibers. Hence, these drawings must be handled scrupulously and constantly protected behind glass. But for Bontecou, this sensitivity was an advantage, for it allowed her to make marks and create forms within the field of carbon black. She removed soot using razor blades, brushes, and her fingers to reveal, variously, underlayers of soot and the white (now yellowed) support surface. As she became increasingly adept at manipulating the material, Bontecou masked off sections of the drawings that she wished to remain unmarked or partially marked with tape, creating increasingly complex compositions.4

Bontecou refers to her soot drawings as “worldscapes,” and, oriented in the landscape format, they suggest the distant horizon of a far-off planet, star, or moon.5

4 Ibid., 49.
soot drawing such as 1958’s *Untitled* in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art is covered entirely in thick settling, save for the spare horizon line amid a swath of gray (Fig. 8). This faint suggestion of a distant horizon is the chief factor in the allusion to a so-called worldscape in what is an otherwise pure abstraction, though I imagine that even without that line the plush black would indicate an ever expansive outer space—what Bontecou has described as the “dense, deep, gyrating space black can conjure.”

Thick in its application and powdery in its tactile presence, the soot performs as a material in the Modern drawing, as is characteristic of Bontecou’s use of soot during her Italian sojourn. Jo Applin deems this Bontecou’s use of black “as sheer colour or ‘matter,’” and observes that Bontecou uses the same black to demarcate space. The doubling of soot formally and materially narrows the distance between sign and referent as the floury soot takes form as moon dust or stardust. All at once then it is self-reflexive in its material specificity, and it is rendered both allusive (to an outer space “scape”) and illusive (of an expansive, deep space). The soot drawings comprise an early instance of Bontecou’s deployment of materials that do not so much yield to the illusion they offer as much as they simultaneously foreground themselves as materials and open onto another world (an “otherworld”).

wrote a poem inspired by his observation of Bontecou at work on her lithographs, *Fifth Stone* and *Sixth Stone*. The poem in turn inspired Bontecou and Towle to collaborate on a portfolio that paired his text in letterpress with six new intaglio prints, themselves a variation on the 1964 lithographs. This unbound portfolio, titled *Fifth Stone, Sixth Stone*, was produced in an edition of 33 in 1968; it features six copperplate etchings with aquatint, accompanied by Towle’s verse on facing pages. Towle’s interview with Bontecou was her first published interview.


The classification of Bontecou’s soot drawings as drawing is tenuous but generative. Since Bontecou used fabric supports for some drawings (paper for others) we do well to ask which aspects of covering muslin, hung on the wall, in soot with a welding torch count as drawing in terms of process; which aspects of a piece of muslin covered in soot count as a drawing in terms of material or form.

Her idiosyncratic use of soot allies it neither more nor less strongly with painting, drawing, or sculpture. Conservator Linda Owen, in an extensive analysis of Bontecou’s soot drawings, notes that while soot has been used for centuries as a pigment, Bontecou’s method of applying the soot produced by the torch directly onto the support was altogether novel. CHARCOAL, like soot, is a carbon black and its earliest uses include cave painting, but Bontecou did not employ a binder as ancient painters using charcoal did, nor did she impress the pure pigment onto the surface (the surface was rather a receptor). If Bontecou executed the additive process of applying the soot on a vertical surface, spraying the sooting flame across the surface of the support or positioning the torch beneath the drawing so that the soot blew upwards, presumably the subtractive processes were achieved on a horizontal surface. In this way, the production of Bontecou’s soot drawings calls up both the table associated with drawing and the wall associated with painting.

But the wall is also associated with drawing and with relief sculpture in a touchstone of art history: Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, which relates the story of a

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8 Owen, “Fire and Paper,” 47. Owen also notes industrial uses of carbon black, including for plastic and rubber manufacturing and by the tire industry.

Corinthian maid delineating the profile of her lover thrown on the wall by the light of a lamp. Pliny’s famous account of the woman tracing her departing lover’s shadow has been long interpreted as a myth about the origins of art, often about the dialectic of absence and presence at the core of representation. Deanna Petherbridge has recently reclaimed that myth specifically for the medium of drawing, reminding us that after the young lover draws the outline, her father, a potter called Butades, then fills it in with clay. Thus, Petherbridge claims, the outline is a “metaphor for the potency of the initial sketch,” which initiates a process culminating in another medium. Both accounts bear on Bontecou’s approach to drawing with soot, for her soot drawings of 1958 are inquiries into the materiality of negative space, and they are workings-out of the relationships between multiple mediums (drawing, painting, and sculpture). Especially important is Pliny’s organization of the myth of the shadow under the heading of “the plastic art,” for it is a story about the process of modeling in clay, then firing a relief on the (vertical) ground of the drawing. Bontecou’s soot drawings are conceptually, and nearly literally, the ground upon which she builds her wall reliefs, meaning that a compelling reason to count them as drawings is their foundational relationship to the wall reliefs.

The discovery of the black space produced with the welding torch in drawing while in Rome led to a breakthrough in Bontecou’s sculptural practice. Practically, “getting the black” in her soot drawings brought about the use of the black velvet backdrop in her wall reliefs upon her return to New York; the velvety texture of the soot

drawings inspired that choice of fabric. In addition, Bontecou applied soot to the reliefs’ canvas sections, varying hues according to optical laws to exaggerate their literal depths, and these markings highlight the gridded weave of the fabric in ways that echo charcoal picking up the grain of paper in drawing. More significantly, “getting the black opened everything up,” according to Bontecou. She identified the definitive feature of the soot as its appearance of endless depth, its capacity to convey “a feeling of outer space.”

Bontecou’s remarks on this include the following: “I like space that never stops. Black is like that”; the black “was so deep—it gave you a feeling of outer space”; “It was like dealing with the outer limits”; and her description of the “dense, deep, gyrating space black can conjure.” “Getting the black” crystallized her aim to give sculpture “illusionary depth,” and the soot drawings realized, pictorially, that which she did not yet know how to incorporate in sculpture, namely the painter’s ability to “go for miles into the surface.” While the form of formless depth belongs principally to painting, as these drawings both propelled and temporarily satisfied Bontecou’s wish to make sculpture pictorial, the fact that she created them using a welding torch, the modern sculptor’s instrument par excellence, is evocative. Triangulating three mediums, soot drawing enabled Bontecou to raise sculpting—and eventually sculpture—up to painting’s wall.

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12 Both are sheets, and both paper and fabric are woven. The type of velvet is that which is used as a theatrical backdrop in stage productions, one that is matte and light-absorptive rather than shiny and light-reflective.
17 Bontecou, as quoted in Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” 56.
18 Bontecou, as quoted in The Artist’s Reality, unpaginated.
Drawing is integral to Bontecou’s practice, always running in parallel and often intersecting with sculpture. She considers drawing a “fast fix” that allows her to “work out problems in a piece of sculpture” and classifies most as working drawings. She notes that drawing is an end as well as a means: drawing was for “pleasure, but also for engineering.” She underscores its convenience: “You can solve an awful lot of problems with drawing…I can’t stress drawing enough.” As a drawing can be made in a minute and then “ripped up” the “next minute,” it is “less final” than sculpture: “If I got tired [of sculpture], I would go back to drawing, which is such a pleasure because you can make a drawing in an hour, a sketch in a minute.” Bontecou’s remarks about drawing often inadvertently air grievances against the slowness of sculpture: lithography, she explains, “can give you ideas for sculpture, you can get a different kind of illusion…it’s free, it’s quick”; to this her interviewer interjects that lithography is not so very quick; and Bontecou rejoins, “It may be slow but it’s faster than sculpture! It’s like drawing in that way.” (Throughout the 1960s Bontecou produced lithographs, the planographic process of which—using a greasy crayon to mark the stone’s surface—is akin to drawing, unlike woodcut or intaglio techniques; Bontecou’s prints fall outside the scope of this chapter, however.)

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23 Bontecou, as quoted in Towle, “Two Conversations with Lee Bontecou,” 25.
24 Bontecou, as quoted in Karen Wright, “(Re)Birth of a Star: Lee Bontecou is Back With a Bang,” Modern Painters 17, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 68.
As Bontecou’s comments about drawing tend to compare it to sculpture and to reveal more about her three-dimensional than her two-dimensional work, as she moves “back and forth” between the mediums in her studio practice, and as her drawings and sculptures have been exhibited together since the beginning of her career, the relationships between her drawing and sculpture are defined by similarity and difference.\textsuperscript{26} While they are not independent of her sculpture, neither are her drawings strictly sketches or studies—drawings are not two-dimensional translations of three-dimensional sculptures, or vice versa. Rather, in drawing Bontecou stakes out the types of space that her sculptures provide or in which they are situated: pictorial space, environmental space, and the space of the gallery. What is problematic is not merely that these types of space take different forms and entail different effects in sculpture than they do in drawing, but that even in sculpture they are illusionary and imaginary spaces which are not identical to the literal or material sites—to the “real space”—of sculpture.

Bontecou’s drawings range from so-called “worldscapes” rendered in soot on sheets of muslin and paper, to doodle-like working drawings in graphite in which multiple small clusters of images and scenes wend around sheets of plain and graph paper, and finished drawings in white charcoal on black paper that illustrate in detail the environments from which her sculptures are, ostensibly, extracted.\textsuperscript{27} Black is a motif of these bodies of drawing, and it is through black that the soot drawings analogize illusionary depth to outer space, simultaneously dense and void; that the working drawings give form to an environment in which the organic and the mechanical are inextricably hybridized; and that the drawings related to the vacuum-formed fish and

\textsuperscript{26} Bontecou, as quoted in Wright, “(Re)Birth of a Star,” 71.
\textsuperscript{27} Bontecou, as quoted in Towle, “Two Conversations with Lee Bontecou,” 26.
flower sculptures suggest that the gallery is a post apocalyptic landscape. It is also through black that, while landscape is the genre to which the majority of Bontecou’s drawings belong, the drawings depict outer space, extraterrestrial, deep sea, and art gallery atmospheres that are inhospitable to human life. The subjects of this chapter are Bontecou’s soot drawings and working drawings; the white charcoal drawings that relate to her vacuum-formed plastic sculptures are treated in the third chapter.

**The Depth of Space**

The low-slung, white band stretching across the middle of *Untitled* of 1958 suggests an alien fog or dust storm roiling and rolling in, the subtle modeling evoking a rounded, smoky form emerging or receding (Fig. 9). The smudged lines bounding the form waver, so that no edges are hard, no shapes geometric. Above and below the light, bone-shaped band, gray strips of soot seamlessly fade into the field of black that covers the rest of the composition. Hazy and atmospheric, this soot drawing epitomizes the kind of space Bontecou aimed to achieve in her reliefs: opaque rather than transparent, capacious and empty, infinite but immediate, recognizable yet alien. It is in this last sense that Bontecou’s soot drawings capitalize on the double meaning of “dimension” as a measurement of depth and as “another dimension,” a parallel, alternate universe accessed by travel through a vortex-like portal.\(^\text{28}\) The space that Bontecou sought in her soot drawings and then conjoined to her reliefs has a twofold meaning: it concerns the pictorial illusion that modernist criticism, modernist painting, and early Minimalist

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sculpture pressured and which Bontecou negotiated in her wall reliefs as illusionary depth; and it is the spatiality of outer space. Bontecou explained that her earliest large-scale reliefs “are about space, or adventure, or freedom of one kind or another,” and the space beyond the opening in them was “like opening up into the heavens, going up into space, feeling space.” For example, the oblong proportions of the 1960 relief in the collection of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, recall a landscape (the width of the rectangular frame is twice its height; Fig. 10). At the base of the piece, an arched, heavily soot-tinted horizontal strip that spans from side-to-side establishes a kind of horizon line. Above it, nine concentric ovoid strips of canvas sectioned by spoke-like steel rods form the nearly tubular, jutting projection of the relief. Exemplifying Bontecou’s notion of “going in to space,” the eye-shaped form appears to float above the horizon line at the bottom of the relief, and the tremendously wide circular opening appears expansive, even dilated, and combines with the black velvet cloth stretched across the back of the frame to create a sense of deep, enveloping, and distant space.

If the universe is the soot drawings’ subject, they are not yet universal—not timeless, transcendent, or primal, as drawing is often conceptualized—for they give form to a historically conditioned imagination of outer space, as Mona Hadler has convincingly argued. She contends that Bontecou’s work attempts to “come to terms

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29 Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” 57. According to Hadler, in conversation Bontecou has stated that her interest in deep, gyrating black space—the outer space first obtained in the velvety soot drawings she made in Rome starting in 1958—complemented her excitement about Sputnik I, which launched in 1957. See Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” 58. Bontecou has explained that while she was enthusiastic about space exploration when Sputnik launched, the one-upmanship of the space race ultimately disillusioned her. See Towl, “Two Conversations with Lee Bontecou,” 26.
30 Bontecou, as quoted in Tomkins, “Missing in Action,” 40.
aesthetically and socially with the space age.” Hadler cites Bontecou’s comments
regarding her excitement about the Soviet Union’s launch of the first artificial satellite,
Sputnik I, in 1957 and her later disillusionment by the “colonizing” of the moon in 1969
by Apollo 11, and surveys the cultural, political, and scientific developments that
coincided with Bontecou’s coming of age as a child and as an artist—propeller planes,
missiles, space probes, popular science fiction literature, cybernetics, nuclear threat, the
space race, and America’s romance with the automobile and television, among others.

The self-declared “painter of space,” Yves Klein, too, likened the spatiality of the
picture to outer space. When Klein “leapt into the void,” he professed his wish to
overcome gravity like an astronaut, reminiscent of Bontecou’s aim to harness the
“painter’s ability to go into space”: “Today the painter of space must, in fact, go into
space to paint, but he must get there without trickery or deception, and not in an airplane,
nor by parachute, nor in a rocket….he must be capable of levitation.”

The frothy, chalky texture of his late 1950s pure pigment International Klein Blue paintings and their
intimation of an infinite spatiality resonate with Bontecou’s plush, matte soot surfaces
(see Fig. 11). Interestingly, the sentence that precedes this exclamation in Dimanche—Le
journal d’un seul jour is Klein’s third-person description of his longstanding aims: “To

33 In a brief essay on Bontecou’s drawings, Leslie Jones invokes painter-critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe’s
notion of the “techno-sublime” to propose that Bontecou’s rendering of the sublime is addressed to the
contemporary experience of warfare, nuclear anxiety, and space exploration, or what Jones summarizes as
“the dark side of technology and its potential impact on humanity and the environment.” Jones claims that
the tendency to consider Bontecou’s wall reliefs by the terms of either Minimalism or feminism occludes
the “existential nature” of her project, which she views as best exemplified by her drawings and which she
connects to the Abstract Expressionists’ occupation with the sublime. But it is, rather than absolute, a
sublime “relevant to contemporary existence.” See Leslie Jones, “Lee Bontecou’s Sublime Drawings,” On
34 Klein and Bontecou showed together in the 1960 exhibition at Galerie Rive Droite, Le Nouveau Réalisme
à Paris et à New York, and the 1962 exhibition Donner à voir no. 1 at Galerie Creuze, both in Paris.
35 Yves Klein, “Selections from ‘Dimanche,’” in Overcoming the Problematics of Art: The Writings of Yves
liberate sculpture from plinths has long been his concern.”36 This suggests that, like Bontecou’s, Klein’s effort to leap into the space of painting was propelled by his aim to get sculpture off the floor or pedestal (to make sculpture go into space). Further, Klein’s description of space as “what is both nowhere and everywhere” evokes not only the texture of Bontecou’s soot drawings but also their reiteration of the basic conceptual premise of drawing’s spatial surface.37 For Bontecou, the coincidence of pictorial space and outer space hinges on drawing’s spatiality, its paradoxical emptiness and fullness.38

Drawing and painting have always been ontologically related by the nature of their flat picture planes. The mediums can be difficult to distinguish; for example, the washes used in drawing and the charcoal used in painting each belong to the other medium. Typically, one of the few standards applied to differentiate drawing from painting is that the painter covers over the (canvas) support while the draughtsperson treats the exposed surface of the drawing as field, as ground, against which the mark is set off. Yve-Alain Bois reminds us that “the major difference between the space of painting and that of drawing concerns the nature of the support.” Since Alberti the “sine qua non condition” of painting’s transparency “is that the supporting ground be covered over without reserve.”39 Bois cites Walter Benjamin, who argues that the “graphic line designates the surface, and in so doing determines it by attaching itself to it as its

37 Yves Klein, “Overcoming the Problematics of Art,” in Overcoming the Problematics of Art, 64.
38 Stephen Petersen treats Yves Klein’s “astronautics” in his rich volume on the intersections between the popular and visual cultures of space exploration and the avant-garde, Space-Age Aesthetics: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and the Postwar European Avant-Garde. Through close study of Klein’s paintings and writings and of reviews of his work and photographs of Klein, he explores Klein’s belief that the appropriate medium for art in the space age is space itself (“L’espace, lui-même”) and, further, that being the “painter of space” required inhabiting space and broadcasting his ideas far and wide. See Petersen, Space-Age Aesthetics: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and the Postwar European Avant-Garde (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 153–202.
ground.” Indeed, he asserts, “a drawing that completely covered its ground would cease to be a drawing.” Benjamin writes of painting, “a picture has no ground.”

Because Bontecou completely obscures the white ground of drawing in black soot and removes soot in ways that present the exposed sheet as mark rather than ground, her drawings do not adhere to this principle. Yet they disclose this principle through inversion: since, seemingly self-contradictorily, the density of the opaque, matte soot conveys the emptiness of black, negative space, Bontecou coats her drawings in pitch-black soot to simulate the sparse density of outer space where there are no air molecules off of which light might bounce (outer space is nearly a vacuum). Though drawings customarily denote empty space by the untreated whiteness of the ground, because white or empty space is in fact quite dense (it is full of air which reflects light), light-absorbing black has a unique ability to suggest the infinite void of outer space. (Charlie Duke, an astronaut on Apollo 16, described his first encounter with the thick blackness of the moon’s sky thusly: “You feel like you can go over there and it’s a black velvet screen….that you can just reach out and touch it.”) In this way the black soot’s inky density suggests an expansive nothingness with which the rich, creamy, plush texture it offers is compatible, however counter-intuitively. It works as sheer matter and as void, and it exposes the logic of the traditional white ground of drawing which is treated

conventionally as a blank field but which, as far as the physics of empty space goes, is teemingly full.

Though the soot drawings productively enabled Bontecou to hybridize the mediums of painting and sculpture in her wall reliefs, the hybridity of Bontecou’s soot drawings does not concern their medium status. The wall reliefs polarize the pictorial space burrowing through the wall and the sculptural material pushing off it into real space, making unlocatable depth and precisely locatable materials diametric. For instance, the oval inner rim set inside the large, rectangular relief of 1959–1960 in the collection of the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art recedes back towards the wall (Fig. 12); from there the form emerges forward again, building towards two central holes wrapped in fabric rings stained with bleach and reading “LAU” and “DRY” in spots (presumably, the uncut cloth was stamped with the word “LAUNDRY”; Fig. 13). Through these two, wide twin apertures lurching towards the viewer, the black space beyond is cavernous and bottomless. By contrast, the soot drawings trouble the distinction between materiality and immateriality by taking space as their subject and black as their means (they likewise collapse the abstraction/representation distinction). The hybridity of soot drawing is staged in the soot’s double functioning as the specificity of sheer matter and the generality of the void. The soot drawings reiterate and invert the form and formlessness that is at the heart of the blank page—the conceit that the white surface of the paper is “the transparent carrier of an image” matched by the fact that empty “white” space is in actuality dense—by covering that very page.43 Coating the white ground of drawing in black soot gives form to the formlessness of outer space and

43 Anna Lovatt discusses the notion of drawing as a transparent carrier of image in “Dorothea Rockburne: Intersection,” *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 42.
to the formlessness of the white ground, opaque and transparent. In this regard, black outer space and white drawing space are illusionary, for that which appears full is empty and vice versa. Thus, while Bontecou’s achievement of illusionary depth in the wall reliefs developed from the soot drawings, the latter explore an illusionary density.

The wall reliefs articulate the relationship between (falsely) apparent and actual dimension as a relationship between the mediums of painting and sculpture, but in Bontecou’s soot drawings both the apparent and the actual cohere in a single substance, soot, and in two dimensions. In her reliefs the illusionary depth created by the circular aperture opening and the black fabric stretched across the back of the frame is the mark of painting (what I characterize in the following chapter as the genre of painting). Kept at bay by the reliefs’ protruding skeletons, the viewer cannot approach the velvet fabric, and the plush material gives way to an illusion of depth from a frontal viewpoint and from a traditional viewing distance (the large scale also facilitates the convention of viewing from a distance because a relief cannot be “taken in” otherwise). Of course, it is also true that viewers tend to get their faces as close as possible to the apertures, even pushing their faces into the wider apertures, to make sense of the constructions, to apprehend their physical limits. Those investigations do disclose the material realities of the reliefs’ illusionary depth, revealing the identity of the velvet fabric. (In the case of the 1959–60 Frankel Foundation relief mentioned above, close inspection reveals a somewhat unusual construction—the black velvet is not flush with wall; rather it is set back only eight to ten inches away from the rim of the opening at the deepest point, perhaps as few as six inches away.)

44 As Bontecou makes the materiality of velvet give way to the illusion of immaterial space, so too she subverts or misappropriates another modality of fabric on the surface of her reliefs: the softness of canvas is made taut in being stretched across the steel framework and also through sizing.
at the shallowest point.) Not only does the sculptural prominence of the constructions guarantee the inscrutability of the fabric—at least from a traditional viewing distance—it also obscures the edges of the velvet swaths, so that the success of the illusion of depth is predicated on the partiality of the view provided by the relief’s circular openings. For a rectangular sheet of black velvet hung against the wall might intimate deep space, yet it would not be seen to burrow through the wall. Unlike the sheets of velvet at the back of the reliefs, Bontecou’s soot drawings are pictures—flat rectangular surfaces hanging on the wall in frames, operating on the conceit of the “window onto the world” or, more accurately, a window onto another world.

If the soot drawings image an outer space-scape, the wall reliefs seem to offer us a glimpse of an actually expansive space. While no one would confuse the meter-wide drawings for the cosmos that they picture, the black space at the back of the wall reliefs initially seems to pierce the wall, to expose an abyss through and beyond the shadowy, unilluminated space behind the bulging surface. In the first instance of encounter, a relief seems to tear open onto an inky, infinite depth in a way that a soot drawing, or any picture, does not. The scale of the illusion in the wall reliefs strikes the viewer as actual, whereas the drawings provide a cosmic view in dimensions of twenty-seven by thirty-nine inches. The partiality of the view through a porthole opening in the metal and fabric skeleton, providing a glimpse of a seemingly infinite space, differs from the partiality of the drawings, which stems from the fact that they are rectangles of paper, edges of the sheet visible. In comparison to the elements of the relief sculptures that emerge from the wall in literal depth, the illusionary depth offered by the reliefs denotes the apparent (the definition of illusion centers on deceptive appearance); but in comparison to the soot
drawings’ representation of cosmic space, the illusionary depth of the wall reliefs signifies the actual, insofar as its scale is perceived as actual. By means of contrast, the soot drawings clarify that Bontecou’s reliefs engage in the phenomenon of “actual illusions” that artists and scholars nuanced in the 1960s. For example, Rosalind Krauss theorized “lived illusion,” adapting Merleau-Ponty’s “lived perspective” to the conditions of the illusion in Donald Judd’s objects; Dore Ashton insisted that illusion was a part of everyday life in “In Praise of Illusion”; and sculptor Fred Sandback distinguished between illusion and illusionism, claiming that “illusionistic art refers you away from its factual existence toward something else,” whereas his own work is “full of illusions” which do not refer to anything, so that “fact and illusion are equivalents.” These discourses do not turn on illusionary depth, Bontecou’s own key phrase (for instance, Krauss investigates the discrepancy between the appearance of hanging and the fact of cradling in elements of a wall piece by Judd), but the relative pictorial illusionism of Bontecou’s soot drawings is foil to the “actual illusion” of depth in Bontecou’s wall reliefs.

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45 Oxford English Dictionary, Second edition, 1989; online version December 2011, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91565, s.v. “illusion.” These definitions include the deception of the eye by “false or unreal appearances,” and “the fact or condition of being deceived or deluded by appearances.”

46 See Rosalind Krauss, “Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd,” Artforum 4, no. 9 (May 1966); Ashton, “In Praise of Illusion” (1965), in The New Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966); and Fred Sandback, “Notes” (1973), in 74 Front Street: the Fred Sandback Museum (Winchendon, Mass.: Sandback Museum, 1982), 4, as quoted in Raskin, “The Shiny Illusionism of Krauss and Judd,” Art Journal 65, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 10. See also Barbara Rose, “Abstract Illusionism,” Artforum 6, no. 2 (Oct. 1967), in which Rose postulates that a “return” to illusionism in advanced painting (e.g., the work of Ron Davis, Darby Bannard, Frank Stella, and Jules Olitski) can be reconciled with the preservation of the integrity of the picture plane, the actual flatness of the support on which illusionist space is realized. For recent discussions of the differences between illusion and illusionism articulated in 1960s sculptural practice, see Richard Shiff, “Donald Judd: Fast Thinking,” in Donald Judd: Late Work (New York: PaceWildenstein, 2000); and David Raskin, “The Shiny Illusionism of Krauss and Judd.”
In either medium or hybrid medium (soot drawing or wall relief), Bontecou represents and concocts space not as a container for three-dimensional objects or figures but as content, as that which is contained. In the wall reliefs this space is effected through an illusion of depth, while in the soot drawings both outer space and the drawing sheet’s space are articulated through the paradox of emptiness and fullness. The difference between these effects then—between actual scale and cosmic scale—is what is on top or in front of the velvety black surface. It is the sculptural apparatus of the patchworked skeleton that turns the spatiality of drawing—its illusionary density—into the illusionary depth associated with painting. That is to say, drawing comes to signify painting when sculpture is placed before it (when sculpture mediates it), and thus it is not only the black fabric at the back of the wall reliefs—which, alone, signifies drawing—but also its combination with the sculptural material that renders the mark of painting in the reliefs.

Further, the black fabric and the sculptural material placed on the wall rely on a large scale to achieve illusionary depth. Bontecou produced a handful of small wall reliefs that approximate sketches more than any single drawing does, but none of these maquettes relays the impact of her large-scale reliefs, and they fail to offer illusionary depth. The small 1960 relief at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) foreshadows the large-scale 1961 relief at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 14, Fig. 15). The former seems miniature even aside from reference to the latter, partly because the labor Bontecou put into it was evidently detailed, almost surgical. The different sections of the seven-by-seven-by-three-inch box are not built up towards an emphasis on the central hole. Instead the plane of the central aperture, covered in a metal grille, is flush with the surfaces surrounding it; behind the metal bars there is a second circular
opening set in a mounded base. There are several other openings in the surface of the relief, including a horizontal slot in the upper left, but the viewer must be very near to the piece to see through the punctures in its surface, and at that proximity the barely visible black cloth at the back does not provide an illusion of depth. These maquettes allowed Bontecou to try out detailing techniques, like embedding nails into the cloth; to test compositional structures, like the mound set behind the rounded, grille-covered opening or, regarding the 1960 maquette in the collection of the National Gallery of Art (NGA), the double ring aperture (Fig. 16); and to experiment with cloth, stretching, sewing, and layering various types of fabrics, including an army-green canvas in the NGA maquette and red velvet in the 1962 maquette in Tony and Gail Ganz’s collection (Fig. 17).

Some soot drawings have less in common with the reliefs’ velvet backdrops and more in common with their woven and latticed surfaces. In an exceptional wall relief in which Bontecou uses a soot drawing as the surface of a relief (still using black velvet as a backdrop) neither the dimensionality achieved in most wall reliefs nor the density obtained in most soot drawings takes hold. Bontecou’s *Untitled (57)*, 1961, a relief in the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, ties together soot drawing and wall relief quite literally (Fig. 18). It is essentially a soot drawing on muslin attached with wires to a welded box frame. The face of the box is contoured in literal dimensionality in only several passages: the first is the single hole form in the center of the composition, the

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47 The small relief in the collection of Tony and Gail Ganz corresponds to the larger relief at the Walker Art Center; the small relief in the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation collection evokes the larger prison relief like at the Guggenheim Museum; and the small sculpture in the collection of Joel Wachs is a maquette for a larger one, the current location of which I have been unable to discover (it was last exhibited in 1965 in Bontecou’s solo show at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend).

48 This piece won second prize in the Corcoran Gallery’s Twenty-eighth Biennial, and the museum purchased it thereafter. As Castelli used the numeral 57 to identify the object for his inventory, the Corcoran has so titled the sculpture *Untitled (57).*
mound of which emerges suddenly, rather than gradually, from the flat ground; the second incident of dimensionality is a raised wedge to the right of the central hole shaped like an elongated apostrophe mark, standing out from the surface at a depth of approximately two inches and meeting the ground from which it emerges at ninety-degree angles; the third is the wedge that slices across the middle of the piece, a V-shaped trench that grazes the black velvet strung across the back. However, the surface of the relief is largely contoured with soot. Whereas in the majority of Bontecou’s reliefs different sections of color and shade correspond to different structural sections, so that the shapes of color are coincident with the shapes of fabric that are stretched and tied across the sections of rod, in this relief multiple sections of tint and shade are drawn on large swaths of fabric which are not divided by sections of steel rod. The large bottom section of the piece below the trench-like wedge, for example, is made up of a single soot drawing that is trisected by two vertical columns of black cloth. The pattern of horizontal shapes that stretches across these three sections is drawn on with soot in gradations from an inky dark to the barely dusted, raw muslin material, and it has the effect of the faceted structural sections of most other reliefs. The soot on the cloth surface, the design of which is contiguous with that on the four narrow sides of the box-like frame, does the structural work of sectioning the relief rather than the illusionary work of evoking infinite space.

Likewise, the more complex soot drawings of 1958, which Bontecou rendered by masking off sections and scraping away at the layers of soot, evoke the reliefs’ welded skeletons (see Fig. 19). They work out the architectonics of the wall reliefs, describing better the textures, lines, and intricate layers of the material in front of the wall than the
illusionary space beyond the wall. For example, *Untitled*, 1958, in the Modern’s collection, is a horizontally oriented soot drawing that encompasses radical shifts in scale between extreme distance and extreme close-ups (Fig. 20). It is legible as a topographical map and a detail alike, simultaneously recalling the bumpy, pocked surface of the moon and, self-reflexively, a magnification of the paper fiber. Slightly rounded strips in gray, demarcated by the arcing cut of a razor, at the bottom and top edges of the composition, and bulging forms scraped, divided, chopped up, and made into intersecting, overlapping rectangular shapes at the right and left sides combine to suggest that the central forms represent hills or valleys and that the drawing is a map. Though it evokes the surface of a wall relief, it is not an image of such a work, for this drawing was made in Rome, and Bontecou would not determine how to patchwork her welded skeletons until her return to New York the next year, where she happened upon the canvas conveyer belts discarded by the laundry below her loft; as well, the central holes in this soot drawing are not black but the white of the bare paper. If it is a study or sketch at all, it might reference the heavy and imbalanced structures Bontecou welded then spanned with sheets of pounded-out metal (her first, failed attempts at getting sculpture off the ground and onto the wall—they pulled out the wall with their weight) or the welded armatures fitted with slabs of terracotta and cast in abstracted bird and mammal forms, as if those constructions were flayed. This soot drawing, then, does not explore pictorial space or outer space so much as architectonics, broken-up planes layered in sculptural space. It foreshadows, if not conceptualizes, the ways that, following academic painting principles, Bontecou shaded the edges and grounds of her wall reliefs with darker values and lightened with whiter, brighter values, pulling the most prominent elements of the surface farther forward and
shoving the shallowest elements farther back, exaggerating the reliefs’ literal dimensions of depth. As *Untitled*, 1958, occupies multiple orientations, between the horizontality of the table on which it was made, the verticality of the wall on which it is displayed, back to the aerial view it provides and to the frontality of the wall relief that it recalls, the image shuttles between the microscopic and the cosmic in scale. The two large, white circular forms side-by-side in the center of the composition are craters or mounds and the latticed forms about them rivers, channels, or wired superstructures. At the same time, the attenuated edges of the composition suggest that the form has been squashed between two plates of glass, a specimen put under the microscope. The worldscape is both fantastically vast and microscopic.

The more complex soot drawings thus relate to Bontecou’s doodle-like pencil drawings in two ways: both focus on images, objects, and surfaces emerging and receding in space and both render environmental spaces that are not accommodating to humans. In the complex soot drawings, this inhumanity is established by the two extremes of scale, incomprehensible and un-bodily. In the pencil drawings, the organic-mechanical hybrid environment establishes it.49

**Environment**

Bontecou’s doodle-like working drawings are more concerned with forms in space than her soot drawings or wall reliefs, which explore various properties of space,  

49 Bontecou continued to work with soot into the 1960s, producing with soot and dye on fabric circular and square drawings of concentric oval rings and ovoid forms that appear to pulsate in and out, constrict and dilate within black fields. The ambiguities of emersion and recession in both the pencil and the 1960s soot and dye drawings clearly relate to the two vectors of depth in Bontecou’s wall reliefs—illusionary space behind the wall and actual projection in front of the wall—but here the positions are interchangeable rather than diametric.
including depth and density, as functions of the mediums drawing, painting, and sculpture. Many of these drawings reiterate the black, central, circular void that is the signature motif of her wall reliefs, but graphite turns the black a shimmery silver that, unlike the soot and velvet blacks, is more reflective than absorptive (see Fig. 21). Rather than make the black signify density or depth, illusion or material, these working drawings put the void in relation to the images, objects, and surfaces that emerge from, fall into, or otherwise navigate this nebulus and foreign space. The pencil drawings exhibit none of the sheer materiality that accounts for the hybridity of the soot drawings—the velvety substance that denotes drawing space and outer space that is paradoxically empty and full, “both everywhere and nowhere,” as Klein says. Hybridity in this body of drawings instead stems from the bounded together relationship between the organic and the mechanical. For instance, two graph paper drawings of 1966 in the collection of the University of Wisconsin—Madison’s Chazen Museum of Art depict spaceship-like forms that also appear to be bionic beetles flying or swimming, their tapered tails intimating high velocity air travel as much as languorous underwater drift (Fig. 22, Fig. 23). Their bodies seem at once metallic and fleshy, sea kelp, insect, and rocket simultaneously. The central circular forms are heads, and the black holes are constricted into pupils, so that the head is equally an eye and camera lens. These forms twist and turn, writhing in spiraling space, and in some passages, the same form is revealed from oblique, frontal, and profile views. In the midst of these rockets with their striped ship sails and crustacean bodies, faint line drawings of flower heads and frog faces pop up, as if careless doodles, perhaps inserted into the drawing while Bontecou was chatting on the telephone or lost in thought. Drops of epoxy on these graph paper sheets are indications of the seamlessness
of drawing and sculpture making in Bontecou’s studio practice and the ubiquity of drawings lying about her workspace.

Evidently made spontaneously, though not quickly, the pencil drawings are not composed as single, realized pictures. They evoke Old Master character studies, marked by the revelation of various objects from different vantage points, but there is no reason to believe that any of the drawings was based on observation. Their source is Bontecou’s imagination, which she addresses with her claim that drawing uniquely allows an artist to tap her “inner world”: “It can get your imagination moving, and you can work from your inner world rather than always the external world.”50 Like her remarks about drawing that advert to the lumbering slowness of sculpture-making, this comment emphasizes that drawing is unfettered from the demands of materials. The facility and imagination of drawing, and the few obstructions in its path, are positioned in difference from the way in which Bontecou’s reliefs, for example, are made with found, industrial materials of everyday urban life, bound by the laws of physics (they must be structurally sound), and occupy real space in the “external world.” The distinction is between objects or materials and forms.

Drawing has long enjoyed a special status both as a fundamental medium, the cornerstone of the academic process, and one at the periphery, a subsidiary of painting and sculpture. Its primacy seals its fate as secondary: due to its modest means, drawing is

at once fetishized and relegated to the status of the preparatory sketch. Both positions are based on the premise that drawing is intimately associated with the artist’s interiority, that the immediacy of drawing enables and unveils authentic, even primal, expression.

In being pared down and mobile, drawing, it is thought, is crucial to both the fundamentals of planning and design (disegno) and spontaneous free expression, which curator Bernice Rose describes as “the two senses of drawing, the conceptual and the autographic.”

When drawing first emerged as an independent medium in the 1960s, the conceptual side was developed. The correlation between the courses of the mediums of drawing and sculpture in this decade is, arguably, causal. Sculpture had been tagged for centuries as a lesser medium, a position encapsulated at the dawn of the modernist period by Baudelaire’s 1846 Salon review titled “Why Sculpture is Tiresome” and then again at its twilight by Barnett Newman’s dismissal, “Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.” But in the 1960s, sculpture or other three-dimensional practice rose to prominence, only to collapse as a stable category, according to dominant art histories. Alex Potts deftly navigates the centrality of sculpture’s position at the cusp between “medium-based and post-medium conceptions of art” in this decade, arguing that the very focus “on the tactile substance of objects and materials and the literal properties of its medium” also negated “traditional conceptions of sculptural form

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51 Elizabeth Finch makes a similar observation about the primacy of the graphic medium ironically instilling it with a secondary status in “Drawing Moments,” in New York New Drawings: 1946–2007 (Segovia: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, 2009), 24.

52 In the literature on drawing, there are a multiple references to drawing being the child’s first form of visual expression and to the drawings in the caves at Chauvet and Lascaux, setting off two kinds of “our first scribbles.” Others associate drawing with the line of writing for its intimacy of expression.

53 Berenice Rose, Drawing Now (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 10. Rose’s 1976 show diagnosed this “reevaluation and renewal” of the medium of drawing since the mid-1950s, with increasing intensity in the mid-1960s.

54 This quote is often attributed to Ad Reinhardt.
that were seen to constitute sculpture as distinctive artistic medium.”55 (In Chapter Two I note that the dispersal of the medium-specific into scraps of fabric strewn on the floor, a ditch dug in the earth, or text on the walls of an otherwise empty gallery is characterized as the shift from the specific to the general.) Drawing became increasingly indispensible to the sculptural field, whether sculpture was privileged for its more medium-oriented literal materiality or its openings on to practices that exceed and make “irrelevant” “the formal categorization of works of art as either painting or sculpture,”56 as it took the form of realized and imagined earthworks and colossal monuments requiring complex engineering and planning (e.g., Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Heizer, Smithson, Oldenburg); as the implementation of industrial materials and methods was contracted out to fabricators who relied on artists’ sketches and specifications (e.g., Judd, Andre, Morris); as it became the site-specific work of marking or measuring the walls of a gallery, often temporarily (e.g., Bochner, Baldessari, LeWitt); and as it splintered off into Conceptual art, at the core of which was the written word and the dematerialization of the art object in defiance of the art market (e.g., Weiner, Barry, Kawara). This also meant that the coherence of drawing was exploded as drawing came to signify the graphic, whether verbal instructions or plan projections; the humble, as opposed to the monumental and expensive; and the ephemeral, epitomized by the categorization of Richard Long’s walks as drawings.

While drawing came to the fore of postwar art practice for reasons having to do with the peculiarities of the ways in which sculpture came to the fore, its parameters as a

56 Ibid., 286.
medium remained uninterrogated. Drawing’s propriety was never articulated because its “essence” always remained relative or contingent. Anna Lovatt, who has theorized the “expanded field of drawing,” notes that drawing came through the decade of the 1960s relatively “unencumbered by the burden of recent critical discourse,” adding that it even “escaped definition in reductive, purely material terms” by the most vigorous advocates of medium specificity, Clement Greenberg.57 Thus, the expansion of the field of sculptural practice, at the periphery of which sculpture was relegated as just one term—the generalization of a specific medium—invigorated a medium the specificity of which was never pressured.58

However, Bontecou’s metal and fabric reliefs do not relinquish the category of the specific in favor of the general, but hold on to both terms through the structure of medium hybridity and in that way stray from the course of sculpture plotted in Krauss’s influential 1979 article “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” while her vacuum-formed plastic sculptures track and resist the shift from the specific medium to the post-medium condition. Likewise, though they are not sketches or studies, her drawings retain traditional medium functions insofar as they are not fully autonomous of her sculpture nor do they replace the sculptural object or compensate for losses in the realm of

57 Anna Lovatt, “Ideas in Transmission: LeWitt’s Wall Drawings and the Question of Medium,” Tate Papers (Autumn 2010), http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/10autumn/lovatt.shtm# edn1. In this piece, Lovatt notes that the end of medium specificity (in sculpture) was also the resurgence of the medium of drawing. In “Dorothea Rockburne: Intersection,” Lovatt explores the connection between the incipient practice of installation art in the early 1970s and the renewed interest in drawing.
58 That said, it is telling that “works on paper” is now the preferred nomenclature, for it defines drawing according to its support, perhaps a default reliance on the kind of modernist medium specificity Greenberg proposed. In 1969 Peter Plagens argued that “good drawings today exist not only against a continuing realization of what drawing is, but they are products, more or less, of the modernist art in general.” I am interested in the way Plagens figures contemporary drawing (a specific medium) as an upshot of art “in general” (or the generalization of modernist art). See Plagens, “The Possibilities of Drawing,” Artforum 8, no.2 (Oct. 1969): 50, 52.
sculptural specificity by the expansion of sculptural practice (they do not develop what Rose characterized as the “conceptual sense of drawing”\textsuperscript{59}). Drawing does not recompense for sculpture’s deficiencies in Bontecou’s practice. Instead, drawing complements, rather than supplements, sculpture—the pencil drawings picture the environment from which the sculptures are extracted as specimens, and the convention of showing the drawings alongside the sculptures in exhibition orients the latter towards spaces beyond the gallery, but these are imagined spaces, not those spaces of the “expanded field.”

Drawing and sculpture had also been intertwined in the previous decade, as when Greenberg described David Smith’s welded sculptures as “aerial drawing in metal,”\textsuperscript{60} and by referring to “the lines and surfaces in which it is ‘written,’” likening Smith more to a draughtsman than to a modeler or carver,\textsuperscript{61} and claiming, “its virtue was the line.”\textsuperscript{62} “Drawings in space,” welded constructions joined “two-dimensional forms in three-dimensional space.”\textsuperscript{63} According to Greenberg, the reason that drawing, rather than, say, painting, ensured modernist sculpture’s opticality is that the linear outlines demarcate space, shaping, dividing, and enclosing but not filling it, much in the same way that in drawing the mark delineates empty, white, negative space (whereas in painting the

\textsuperscript{59} Rose, Drawing Now, 10.
Greenberg contended that the dispensation of modernist sculpture was space, rather than volume and mass, which left eyesight, “the agent of space” in art, “freedom of movement” in, around, and through the drawing-like lines of sculpture. However, the relationship between drawing and sculpture in Bontecou’s practice does not observe the modernist sculptural idiom defined by Greenberg. Though she welded armatures and worked with a collage aesthetic using industrial materials, she also filled in those metal lines so that they do not shape space, and though the circular openings in her welded constructions preserve the optical for sculpture, they also lead to space that cedes to the virtual rather than the real. In her working drawings, this space is figurative, rather than abstract, and it is revealed to be a dystopic, futuristic outer space.

Bontecou’s pencil drawings imaginatively explore the hybridity of the organic and the mechanical in the worldscape from which both the wall reliefs and the vacuum-formed plastic sculptures emerge. In Bontecou’s *Untitled*, 1961, a graphite on paper drawing in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, clusters of forms flare up across the sheet (Fig. 24). Some images are spare, primarily linear with minimal shading, while others are dense, modeled, and naturalistic and rely on tone rather than contour to define form. In the bottom left, a line drawing of a spaceship containing eyes and a mask-like face (or a face-like mask), three small pill-like capsules, and a revolver gun abut a shaded and modeled form recalling a sunrise or sunset over a horizon. Two other forms present a

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65 Ibid., 143. Stephanie Straine keenly observes that the linear was made a sculptural idiom again in the works of Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, and Fred Sandback that reformulated the high modernist “drawing in space” in “Dust and Doubt: The Deserts and Galaxies of Vija Celmins,” *Tate Papers* 14 (Autumn 2010), http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/10autumn/straine.shtm
66 Richard S. Field notes that, like her wall reliefs, Bontecou’s drawn forms depend on tone in his introduction to *Prints and Drawings by Lee Bontecou* (Middletown, Conn.: The Davison Art Center, 1975), 7.
spaceship interior and a spaceship exterior that sprays bullets. Bullets shoot from a helmet at the top right, above a dark form of a tornado or mushrooming bomb cloud. Other concentrations of drawing feature eyes. All of the clusters are rendered in short, controlled pencil strokes—there are no sweeping or loose gestures. Most of them are composed concentrically, as if the forms are expanding or spreading, rather than being delimited as discrete shapes that were then filled in, which is the compositional principle of the wall reliefs (welded skeletons then patched over).

Bontecou’s *Untitled*, 1961, in the University of Michigan Museum of Art collection, contains approximately ten studies, many of which juxtapose two elements in a sort of face-off, whether they are mirroring or battling each other or doubling or uniting: horizons in parallel adorned with spidery figures; black planets setting over slightly arched horizons that reflect on the surfaces over which they hover; pits and black holes that are both solid and empty; eyeballs, bolts, wings in atmospheric space, twinning and scrimmaging each other in gusty climes or force fields (Fig. 25). In *Untitled*, 1961, a graphite on paper drawing with five finely rendered images in the Smith College Museum of Art collection, Bontecou explores ways to express depth without depicting an object that has a distinct or discrete backside—that is, the relationship between frontality and dimensionality (Fig. 26). Again we find black holes, tornadoes, horizon lines, spaceship-pterodactyl forms, and metallic orbs. The image of two black holes magnetically attracting or repelling each other and transferring material between one another is repeated in a 1961 drawing in the Menil Collection (Fig. 27). In the upper right of this drawing, two gas masks in profile face each other, passing or sharing in a puff of black smoke from the mouthpieces; no eyes are visible through the goggle lenses and no
heads can be made out behind the masks, which dissipate into the white ground of the drawing (see also Fig. 28).

In a catalogue essay on Bontecou’s prints and drawings, curator Richard S. Field comments that one side of the equation of biologic and mechanistic allusions in Bontecou’s work “seems to be rooted in the past,” meaning that the organic forms reference the past and the technological forms point to the future. But what if it is just the opposite? Bontecou depicts an imagined worldscape, surely, but it is clearly our world transformed, for we recognize those gas masks and airplane parts as the detritus of our civilization. Wasted human technologies are the raw matter, the repurposed remnants, with which natural organisms hybridize in order to survive. Nature survives into this future, although deformed by being irrevocably bound to machines, seamlessly integrating machine parts into organisms’ structures and functions.

Some of Bontecou’s graphite drawings are closer to still-lifes than to worldsapes. For example, in the 1969 flower drawing at the Art Institute of Chicago, all of the petals and two of the pipe-like stems peter out in the white ground of the paper; the top left “pipe” is cut off by the top edge of the drawing, anchoring it more firmly than the blended edges of the rest of the form do (Fig. 29). The white paper constitutes the “color” of the six petals around the central void and also the outer layers of five “white” petals. The pipes appear to be made up of riveted panels, the differently shaded, striped sections of which also make up the ribbed sections of the six outer petals that are penetrated by small bolts and appear flatter than the cylindrical pipe-stems (contra this flatness, the sections of petal bolted onto a striped rib at the middle pucker). The central void is also

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67 Ibid., 3.
made up of panels with bolts, but these disappear into the abyssal blackness at the jet engine-like center. With its black pit and mechanized petals, this drawing evokes the wall relief and plastic sculptures alike, Bontecou’s two major bodies of sculpture from 1960s. One essential value of the consideration of Bontecou’s drawings, then, is that they make visible the connections between the two modes of sculpture-making that critics understood as separate and unrelated.

Bontecou’s pencil drawings not only disclose iconographic links between the wall relief work and the vacuum-formed plastic work, they also show the boundedness of the organic and the mechanical, the hybridity of which is at the core of her practice. In this way they confound Benjamin Buchloh’s analysis of twentieth-century drawing. He argues that in the twentieth century, one of the “principal dialectical oppositions in the medium of drawing has been between the authentic corporeal trace and the externally established matrix.”

Buchloh credits Duchamp with the emergence of a new typology of drawing: the diagrammatic, a fundamental paradigm and morphology within the gamut of abstraction. Analyzing both motifs and modes of drawing, Buchloh observes in twentieth-century drawing a shift away from representation of “the natural world” towards “a concept of drawing as the definition of technical and functional structures.”

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69 Buchloh, “Hesse’s Endgame,” 117.

70 Ibid., 120. Buchloh cites Molly Nesbit’s essay that demonstrates that Duchamp’s anti-drawing would have been seen around the turn of the century as the result of the shift from a concept of drawing as the representation of the natural world to a concept of drawing as the definition of technical and functional structures. See Nesbit, “The Language of Industry,” in The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp, ed. Thierry de Duve (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).
Whereas Bontecou’s drawings approach the representation of the natural world as a set of technical (or technological) and functional structures. Dore Ashton observes the “diagrammatic” in Bontecou’s drawing, as well, remarking that sometimes “it is harsh and precise, an evocation of the mechanical engineer’s drawing board replete with joints, nuts, bolts and other hardware.” Though in Ashton’s view the mechanical also gives way to the natural, as pistols become trees and helmets become crustaceans: “then again in some drawings, the mechanical parts, studied so assiduously, transform themselves into human limbs, and visions of nightmare. Or, rather the frequent pistol shape transforms itself into a tree. Or a stack of metallic shapes, looking like medieval helmets, transform themselves into a crustacean...” This morphing constitutes the autographic in her analysis, for Bontecou’s signature is the ceaseless transformation of the objects of her study (as from the mechanical to the natural), an indication of the “richness of Bontecou’s fantasy,” according to Ashton: “Bontecou never leaves things as she finds them, and that, to put it simply, is why she is admirable.”

For Ashton, the hybridity of the natural and mechanical is Bontecou’s invention, transpiring only on the page and only because of her creativity. Applin, too, proposes that Bontecou’s drawing binds together two distinct spheres (“opposing sets of formal interests”), the motifs of the natural and the man-made (here, I am allying the category of the man-made with that of the mechanical). Applin, who cites both Buchloh and Ashton, sets out to demonstrate the role in her drawing of the contemporary “real” world, with particular reference to the grimy, sooty, industrial downtown, describing the ways that Bontecou’s drawing moves between but cannot be pinned down to either an Abstract Expressionist-like freedom, abstraction,

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imagination, and the natural world, on the one hand, or a grungy, urban, found-object kind of realism of the man-made world, on the other. Her argument is most directly positioned against the tendency in the brief literature on Bontecou’s drawing to obscure the influence and representation of Bontecou’s New York “lived environment” and “the ‘dirtier’ side of her drawing practice” in favor of an emphasis on its natural world sources. For Bontecou, Applin argues, drawing is an “intermediary device” that enables a “free play of association and reference between the natural world and the urban environment.” Where Buchloh sees a dialectical opposition in twentieth-century drawing between the representation of the natural world and the typology of the diagrammatic, and Ashton suggests a chain of transformation from the natural towards the mechanical in Bontecou’s work, Applin sees her drawing moving back and forth between the organic and the man-made to incorporate “such divergent worlds on the same page.”

Yet Bontecou’s pencil drawings show these oppositions—the organic and the mechanical, essentially—to be false oppositions. Hybridity insists upon their proximity rather than their distance. The choice between the organic and the mechanical is not Bontecou’s to make because it has already been made.

In Bontecou’s work the irreversible collapse of the organic and the mechanical is attributed to those forces that would render human life unsupportable, namely, nuclear

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72 Applin, “Surviving Reality: Lee Bontecou’s Worldscapes.”
73 Carter Ratcliff identified this pair of terms in his essay for the catalogue to Bontecou’s 1972 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, claiming that modern art locates itself between the poles of “biological form” and “mathematical-mechanical form.” He determines that modernist movements are so “specialized” that one which leans towards biological form might be as distant from another that leans towards biological form as it is from one on the side of mechanical form. He declares, “Lee Bontecou’s independence in contemporary art arrives from her extraordinarily direct, unspecialized grasp of the mechanical/biological opposition,” and names her canvas and steel constructions “organic machines.” The emphasis there is Ratcliff’s, but I might have italicized it myself given his use of the term “specialized,” so relevant to this dissertation’s discussion of the specific and the general. Ratcliff, Lee Bontecou (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1972), unpaginated.
warfare. She almost seems to be predicting and answering Hannah Arendt, who makes a strong case for the inevitable link between space exploration and nuclear holocaust, and who, in the opening line of her powerful 1963 essay “Man’s Conquest of Space,” asks, “Has man’s conquest of space increased or diminished his stature?” It is a question posed to the humanist layman, not to the scientist, “to whom man is nor more than a special case of organic life,” or to the physicist, whose understanding of physical reality demands “the renunciation of an anthropocentric or geocentric world view” and a “radical elimination of all anthropomorphic elements and principles.”

The very fact that scientists split the atom the moment they figured out how to do so, with no hesitation, despite comprehending its enormous destructive possibilities, proves that the scientist is not concerned with the survival of the human race or the planet, Arendt insists. She considers how “the conquest of space”—or really, the science that has made it possible—has required that we “handle nature from a point in the universe outside the earth,” so that the conquest of space signifies man’s journey to the Archimedean point. Looking down on our own activities from space, those activities will appear to us as “no more than ‘overt behavior,’ which we can study with the same methods we use to study the behavior of rats.” From this point, the cars we have built will appear to us as shells on snails, and “all our pride in what we can do [‘the whole of technology’] will disappear into some kind of mutation of the human race.”

This is what we are doing when we “release energy processes that ordinarily go on only in the sun, or attempt to initiate in a test tube

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75 Ibid., 536. Arendt explains that if scientists had been troubling themselves with questions such as, What is the nature of man and what should be his stature?, or, What is life and what distinguishes human life from animal life?, they never would have led us to the moon. See ibid., 528.
76 Ibid., 538–539.
77 Ibid., 539–540.
the processes of cosmic evolution, or build machines for the production and control of energies unknown in the household of earthly nature,” she explains, referring to nuclear war. The answer to the question with which she introduces the essay is not in doubt, but she nonetheless states it baldly in her conclusion, warning that we are “perilously close” to the point where the “stature of man” is not simply lowered but “destroyed.”

In Bontecou’s worldscapes, human life has been elided, as evidenced in the ways that spaceships fly like birds and swim like fish; that eyes peer through the hardware to which they are fused; that dust storms are kicked up by UFOs; that air is exhaust, stars are jet engines, and machines are carapaces. These worldscapes are swirling and turbulent, marked by disastrous collisions and powerful cosmic phenomena. Dusty, cloudy, and shadowy, they are colorless in an environment of perpetual night. There are no human bodies or earthly attributes in Bontecou’s drawings—the absence of faces behind the gas masks, some of which are imprinted with the letters “U.S.A.,” reminds us that these battles are unmanned, presumably having already decimated humanity—and they convey a chaotic order indifferent to human life. This hybridization is beyond human control, which is why it is not enough to ascribe the manipulation of the categories of the mechanical and the organic in Bontecou’s drawing to her creativity or to describe the relationship between those categories as freewheeling and arbitrary. These dystopic visions are elaborated in her wall reliefs through her use of military-industrial materials (army tents, combat helmets, bomber jet canopies); and her plastic sculptures imagine a more gradual, evolutionary time-scaled but equally destructive chemical war

78 Ibid., 539.
79 Ibid., 540.
waged on nature through the use of the synthetics that Rachel Carson termed “biocides” in 1962.

Moreover, Bontecou’s pencil drawings insist on this hybridity in spite of her own tendency to describe the world as a kind of mystical unity, a stance she articulates in her 2003 Artist’s Statement: “Since my early years until now, the natural world with all its visual wonders and horrors—man-made devices with their mind boggling engineering feats and destructive abominations, the elusive human nature and its multiple ramifications from the sublime to unbelievable abhorrences—to me are all one.”80 She explained in a separate interview that as the world is “all one” so it is in her sculpture: “Human nature became part of the material that I used; there’s the good and the bad, and the play of that against the natural world. It’s all one thing.”81 But Bontecou’s intentions belie the hybridity of the organic and the mechanical in her pencil drawings (and the medium hybridity of her wall reliefs and the species hybridity of her vacuum-formed plastic sculptures). The hybrid is not “all one”; it is a structure and a condition which lets Bontecou (and lets us) hold on to both terms while also giving form to their collapse. Whereas Applin writes that the two spheres of the natural world and the man-made environment are “not in conflict in Bontecou’s drawing but rather are bound intimately together,” I argue that they are bound intimately together and they are in conflict. Because Bontecou’s account of hybridity obscures neither the differences between these erstwhile separate categories nor their irrevocable “oneness,” it manages to both be

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elegiac and to diagnose contemporary conditions of the world (the collapse of the organic and mechanical).

It is not only the coincidence of pictorial space and outer space, which hinges on drawing’s spatiality, that ties Bontecou’s drawing to the space age, as the model of organic-mechanical hybrids reveals another meaning of giving to sculpture the illusionary depth normally associated with the painter’s ability to “go for miles into the surface.”

Bontecou’s boredom with “sculpture as a big thing in the middle of a room” and her wish to make sculpture “go into space” gave rise to painting-sculpture hybrids with her wall reliefs which developed from her soot drawings. But going into space also involves hybridizing the categories of the organism and the machine. The medium-related questions of genre and the biology-related questions of genre cohere at this juncture, for it is the modern organic-mechanical hybrid’s—the cyborg’s—dream to “go into space.”

In the following chapter I consider the medium hybridity of Bontecou’s wall reliefs, connecting it to the hybridity of the organic and mechanical in terms of cyborgs. However, the relationship between cyborg hybridity and medium hybridity was first established with Bontecou’s drawings of an endless outer space and then represented in her futuristic pencil drawings. The term “cyborg” was first introduced in a 1960 article by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline on “altering man’s bodily functions to meet the requirements of extraterrestrial environments.” Considering the challenges that space travel poses to mankind, the authors argue that man must adapt to the space environment,

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82 Bontecou, as quoted in Hadler, “Lee Bontecou—Heart of a Conquering Darkness,” 41.
83 Bontecou, as quoted in Paul Trachtman, “Lee Bontecou’s Brave New World,” Smithsonian 35, no. 6 (Sept. 2004): 100.
rather than vice versa. Better a fish who might wish to live on land design an instrument to allow him to breathe air than take with him a bowl of water, they reason. “Partial adaptation to space conditions” might allow man to “live in space qua natura.” What then, Clynes and Kline ask, are the necessary biological changes to “allow man to live adequately in the space environment,” and what are the necessary devices for the creation of “self-regulating man-machine systems?” Some cyborg solutions—adjuncts to the body’s own autonomous controls—include osmotic pressure pump capsules to deliver pharmaceuticals; psychic energizers to keep the astronaut continuously awake; the reduction of body temperature to reduce metabolism and thus human fuel consumption such as through hypothermia or hibernation; and oxygenization and carbon dioxide removal, also stated as the imperative, “Don’t breathe!” For the “exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system unconsciously,” Clynes and Kline propose the term “cyborg,” the portmanteau of cybernetic and organism.

Thus in 1960—the year of Bontecou’s first solo show at Castelli Gallery in which she exhibited the reliefs that emerged from her drawing practice, and the year in which

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85 Clynes and Kline, “Cyborgs and Space,” 27.
86 Ibid., 27. The authors describe that “the Cyborg deliberately incorporates exogenous components” (such as the osmotic pressure pump capsule) which extends “the self-regulatory control function of the organism in order to adapt it to new environments.” This frees man in space, for if “man in space, in addition to flying his vehicle, must continuously be checking on things and making adjustments merely in order to keep himself alive, he becomes a slave to the machine. The purpose of the Cyborg, as well as his own homeostatic systems, is to provide an organizational system in which such robot-like problems are taken care of automatically and unconsciously, leaving man free to explore, to create, to think, and to feel.” See ibid., 27.
87 Ibid., 27, 74–75.
Mademoiselle named Bontecou a Woman of the Year—going into space meant the hybridization of categories of both art and biology.⁸⁸

In his techno-determinist *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, Jack Burnham identifies as “the next, perhaps ultimate stage of sculpture” cyborg art, that is, the cybernetic organism as an art form or even mock robots as sculpture. See Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: the Effects of Science and Technology on Sculpture of this Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 313. I am not suggesting that Bontecou’s drawings or sculptures are actually cyborgs, of course, but rather that they picture and give form to the otherworldly, post-nuclear environment of the space age and that their medium hybridity is also a model of the kind of organic-mechanical or cyborg hybridity that is required for going into space.
Chapter Two

Going Into Space: Metal and Fabric Wall Reliefs

Medium Hybridity

In 1959, from her studio on Sixth Street and Avenue C, Lee Bontecou began making large-scale, abstract, metal and fabric wall reliefs. Over the course of a year’s experimentation, Bontecou had developed a practice in which she scavenged for muslin, burlap, and canvas, the latter famously cut from worn-out conveyor belts discarded by the steam laundry below her loft. She then patched the found materials over a welded metal framework; she used twists of rusty and copper wires to sew the pieces of fabric around the sections of steel rod. A consistent motif quickly emerged: a central, circular cavity, or sometimes multiple cavities, built up from the rectangular frame of the metal skeleton, projecting a foot or more off the wall and opening onto the blackness of a layer of velvet.

Among the earliest such reliefs to be accessioned into a public collection, even before her first solo show at Leo Castelli Gallery, are Cornell University’s Herbert F. Johnson Museum’s 1959 relief now known by the title Flit (Fig. 30) and Untitled, 1959, at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) (Fig. 31).¹ There are formal differences between these reliefs: the aperture of the central cavity in the former piece has a greater diameter than that of the latter; Flit is also less prominent, extending seven inches forward, while the Modern’s Untitled is eighteen inches in depth; the ascent of the mound towards the

¹ Formerly the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art. As Bontecou leaves her work untitled as a general policy, it is not clear when Flit was assigned its title; in 1964 in S. Lane Faison’s Art Tours and Detours in New York State (New York: Random House, 1964), it is still referred to as Untitled.
aperture is much steadier in the MoMA piece than in the Johnson relief, in which a shallow ledge hangs over the mound’s circular base; Bontecou welded *Flit* in iron and *Untitled* in steel.\(^2\) However, in the main, the composition and operation of these pieces are similar: both have square frames of about five by five feet; both contain sections of found, industrial canvas that feature stenciled letters, including the brand name of a commercial insecticide, *Flit* (the letters in the Modern’s relief are faded and truncated, illegible over all); the roughly monochromatic palette in both ranges across expanses of sooty tans and browns while also incorporating slivers of white; a single, central hole in the bellied surface dominates both; and these holes reveal tautly suspended sheets of light-absorbing black velvet in both.\(^3\) The construction of these early reliefs is self-evident: with the innermost ring of the aperture occupying the foremost plane of the relief, each aspect is fully visible from the frontal view, save for the partially obscured backdrop.

By Bontecou’s own account, the wall relief format represented a continuation of an endeavor initiated a couple years prior while in Rome—an endeavor towards giving sculpture “illusionary depth.”\(^4\) During this time, she primarily created freestanding bird and mammal figures by welding armatures, overlaying them with wire mesh reinforced with concrete, and attaching slabs of terracotta and thin sheets of cast metal; often these forms then were cast in bronze.\(^5\) Towards the end of her stay in Rome Bontecou

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2 Bontecou employed iron in some of her earliest metal and fabric constructions, but she soon began to favor steel exclusively.

3 Due to exposure to light, the velvet cloth at the back of *Flit* has faded from black to red-ish brown, which abridges the effect of illusionary depth, unfortunately.


5 For descriptions of this process, see Karen Wright, “(Re)Birth of a Star: Lee Bontecou is Back With a Bang,” *Modern Painters* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 69; see also Munro, *Originals*, 382.
discovered that if she turned down the oxygen on her oxy-acetylene welding torch, soot would shoot out the flaming end in a plume. She made drawings by spraying the thick, black settling on sheets of muslin and paper tacked to the walls, moving the welding torch quickly enough to avoid burning the sheets. Bontecou refers to these drawings as worldscape—“They were like a worldscape sort of thing” is her phrasing—and indeed her rich, velvety soot drawings suggest an infinite, cosmic space.  

Bontecou recounts that the blackness of the soot drawings led to her use of the black backdrop in her wall reliefs, for she wanted to create the illusion in sculpture that “you can get from a pencil drawing or a painting, the depth and nuances,” the painter’s ability to “go for miles into the surface.” In multiple interviews she has reiterated her interest in the black—“I like space that never stops. Black is like that;” “[The black] was so deep—it gave you a feeling of outer space”—and has explicated the developmental significance of her discovery with the welding torch—“Getting the black … opened everything up. It was like dealing with the outer limits […] I had to find a way of harnessing it.”

A second major breakthrough realized shortly after her return in 1958 to New York from Rome enabled Bontecou to harness, sculpturally, the pictorial black space she generated in the soot drawings. In Italy Bontecou had attempted briefly to construct wall reliefs, but because she used metal and clay to bridge the sections of welded armature, the

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7 Bontecou, as quoted in Munro, Originals, 384.
sculptures were so heavy as to tear out the wall. Back in New York, while trawling the city’s rapidly shifting industrial downtown and shopping at army-navy surplus stores, Bontecou gathered eight-by-twenty-foot conveyor belts retrieved from dumpster of the laundry below her studio, fire hoses, U.S.P.S. mailbags (which she filched until learning it was illegal to do so), tarpaulin, sacks imprinted with company names and serial numbers, and other discarded fabrics (primarily canvas, but also burlap and muslin).

The cloth she found rummaging in garbage cans and hunting along Canal Street presented itself as a solution to the engineering problem encountered in Rome and as an answer to the question of how to achieve illusionary depth in three-dimensional work, as she explains: “I was after a kind of illusion. With painting you have illusion. The surface is two-dimensional, so everything that happens on it is illusionary. I love that. But it seemed you couldn’t have that in stone, wood, or most welded stuff because the material is so heavy; there’s no illusionary depth. But this canvas was the answer.” Because of the light weight of canvas, she could “push part of the structure way, way back,” creating reliefs of great depth that were not too heavy or structurally imbalanced to hang on the wall; and because of the monochromatic color palette of canvas and its capacity to be colored and marked by Bontecou or by the processes of industry (oil stains, stamps, dyes, stitches, seams, and so forth), she could go dark at the background and come forward with the lighter tans, grays, and whites.

Following academic painting principles, Bontecou shaded the edges and grounds of her reliefs with darker values either by applying soot or selecting darker scraps of fabric, and around the apertures she lightened

12 Munro, *Originals*, 382. None of these sculptures are extant or documented photographically.
13 Wright, “(Re)Birth of a Star,” 68; Munro, *Originals*, 384.
14 Bontecou, as quoted in Munro, *Originals*, 384.
with whiter, brighter values either by applying white paint or by selecting lighter scraps.
Pulling the most prominent elements of the surface farther forward and shoving the shallowest elements farther back, the strategically varied values exaggerate the reliefs’ literal dimension of depth.

The 1959 MoMA relief exemplifies these methods. The welded ring of the aperture opening is small in size and is encircled in a thin strip of white-painted cloth that is further encircled by two rings of beige canvas which darken successively, if subtly; a fourth ring, tinted with soot, is the darkest; grease and rust soil the fifth ring, as do rows of holes from stitches ripped apart (Fig. 32, Fig. 33). The black velvet onto which the aperture opens is not hung across the back of the square metal frame as it is in other reliefs; rather, the cloth is stretched across a circle of welded steel suspended approximately six to ten inches behind the opening of the aperture, and it is fastened to that welded circle with the same wires that bind the canvas pieces to the external skeleton. With only a couple of tears in the fabric, comparatively few paint or glue drips or oil stains, and its methodically smudged soot, even the dark, incidental spots of rust bookending every wire twist are rhythmical in their patterning.15 Yet while the piece is tidy in this sense, the overall composition is a little askew. The right side protrudes farther than the left. The rise from the frame’s left edge to the aperture is smoother than the ascent from the right side, the sloped ground of which abruptly joins the angled mound of the right-side base of the aperture. The welded circle of the opening angles downwards.

As with the Johnson Museum’s Flit, some of the MoMA relief’s spokes extend from the edge of the square frame to the innermost welded ring, while other such steel rungs,

15 In the earliest reliefs, the wires were of a rusting metal; soon Bontecou came to prefer non-rusting copper wires.
staggered irregularly across the welded rings, span lesser widths. These metal lines are legible as orthogonals, as though they signify orderly, mathematical backwards recession, but they concurrently create the impression of an outburst, the impact of an uncorking, the urgency of a gushing rush. The chiaroscuro and the explosion effect, augmented by the cock-eyed compositional asymmetry, combine with the illusion focused through the relief’s porthole opening of an abyss, of a hollow, gaping, yawning rabbit hole; the illusion that the black fabric strung across the back of the frame is immaterial space, limitless in its expanse beyond, that we could dive into or be sucked in by this boundlessness, vanishing into its void. In this fashion such constructions extend actually in front of and apparently behind the walls on which they hang.

With works like MoMA’s relief of 1959 and Flit, Bontecou achieved her goal of getting sculpture off the floor and on the wall, even as an illusion of depth burrows through that wall and materials leap off it into real space. In a 2003 interview, Bontecou reflected on the freestanding sculptures she made while studying at the Art Students League and later in Rome—“those things you had to walk around”—revealing that something about sculpture’s three-dimensionality “bugged” her: “It’s just a lump of… It’s a piece of sculpture sitting on a thing. There was something missing for me.” She continues, “It was limiting. I wanted to have the illusion you can get from a pencil drawing or a painting.” And in another interview occasioned by her 2003 retrospective she explained, “I just got tired of sculpture as a big thing in the middle of a room. I wanted it to go into space.” Her wording in those interviews hews closely to her

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16 Bontecou, as quoted in Wright, “(Re)Birth of a Star,” 68.
17 Bontecou, as quoted in Paul Trachtman, “Lee Bontecou’s Brave New World,” Smithsonian 35, no. 6 (Sept. 2004): 100.
wording in a 1963 *Time* magazine profile titled, typically, “The Loft Waif”: “I wanted to get sculpture off the floor—sculptures standing on the floor, they don’t have anything to do with anything; they’re so heavy and, well, I just wanted to get them off the floor.”

The two aspects of placing sculpture on the wall Bontecou identifies—firstly, getting it off the ground and, secondly, creating pictorial illusion in sculpture—disrupt the inertia of sculpture in the round that sits on the floor or the pedestal. These two aspects also disrupt a broad reception of sculpture of this period that defines sculpture against painting. Which is to say that Bontecou’s relief sculpture cannot be fully understood if painting is appraised as its a priori condition, and if its sculpturehood is conceived of as an assault on, correction to, or reification of the traditions and conventions of painting. Dominant histories and criticisms of assemblage art, Minimal art, or process art, then—histories and criticisms which stage sculptural objecthood and three-dimensional work (hung on the wall or otherwise) as an answer to or repudiation of the untenablility of the static, autonomous, distinctly aesthetic realm of high modernist painting—cannot adequately account for the primacy of sculpture in Bontecou’s practice.

Assemblage art, Minimal art, and process art histories, which constitute the most entrenched and compelling accounts of 1960s sculpture and which have served as the principal frameworks by which to receive Bontecou’s reliefs, tend to conceive of sculptural practice as means by which to bring art off the pictorial wall and into the literal or phenomenological world. For instance, William Seitz, curator of the Museum of Modern Art’s landmark 1961 *Art of Assemblage* exhibition in which Bontecou was included, understood assemblage to extend Picasso’s collage practice in its incorporation

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18 Bontecou, as quoted in “The Loft-Waif,” *Time*, Feb. 1, 1963, 59. The profile of Bontecou was part of a larger feature on “the Bohemian life.”
of, rather than imitation of, reality in oil painting, and to continue Cubism’s realism, as opposed to its abstraction. Assemblage is a new medium that combines Abstract Expressionism and Dada, Seitz announces in the catalogue. Yet it jettisons Abstract Expressionist subjectivity and its “slick international idiom” in being constituted in whole or in part by non-art materials and in being composed according to a principle of juxtaposition. If the realism of the objects found in assemblage art has been interpreted as a rejection of gesture and expression, and if their everydayness has been interpreted as a rejection of modernist autonomy (via a diminution of the gap between art and life), it is also true that that these everyday objects have been understood to deliver salient aspects of Abstract Expressionism, such as those articulated by Harold Rosenberg (“the new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life”). As another example, the story of the Minimalist Donald Judd running with the materialist, reductive notion of painting’s medium specificity and ending up with “specific objects” is now familiar. Hal Foster has convincingly argued that for Judd “the mandate that late-modernist art pursue objectivity is completed only to be exceeded”: Judd comes “out the other side of the objecthood of painting into the realm” of three-dimensional objects. (Judd’s critical writing will be treated in depth below.) Another example of sculpture-as-logical-elaboration-of-modernist-painting is the work of Robert Morris, who laid the theoretical groundwork for the process art with which he is associated, Anti-Form. Morris championed the painting of Jackson Pollock for its model of an integral relationship

20 Ibid., 87.
between physical process and visible product, effort and result. Pollock’s elimination of the verticality of the easel painting in his use of gravity as a means, encoded materially, inspired the horizontality and indeterminacy of Morris’s scattered matter. To reiterate, such accounts understand 1960s sculpture as modernist painting practice’s repercussion.

Further, these accounts tend to conceive of a shift from painting to three-dimensional, (quasi-)sculptural practices in the 1960s and beyond (assemblage, Minimalism, and process art, followed by the expanded field of practice, site-specific art, installation art, institutional critique, and, ultimately, international mixed-media installation) as a shift from the specific to the general. This constitutes another reason to disentangle Bontecou’s reliefs from such art histories. Allan Kaprow, for instance, charted the forgoing of the specific in the favor of the general. He saw assemblage art heralding the indistinguishableness of the categories of the plastic arts and, by way of a principle of extension, inaugurating environments. Picking up where Pollock left off, young artists of today, Kaprow notes in 1958, occupy themselves with the spaces and objects of everyday life, bodies, clothing, rooms, and “the vastness of Forty-Second Street.” They no longer need to declare themselves as painters, poets, or dancers, for “[t]hey are simply artists. All of life will be open to them.” Rosalind Krauss also plots

24 Thierry De Duve has also argued that Greenberg’s retrospective and descriptive critical doctrine became prospective and prescriptive for most Minimal artists, who started out as painters, their early work stemming directly from Stella’s black paintings, and their later work adding a three-dimensional element to produce “arbitrary objects.” De Duve further argues that, following Minimal art, the practices of conceptual art, Land art, performance art, and appropriation all pit themselves against painting (“and sometimes sculpture”), and all retained from the 1960s the “authorization to produce generic art.” See de Duve, Kant After Duchamp (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), 204–205.
the trajectory from the specific object to “Art in General,” noting that Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth identified that the term for the paradoxical outcome of the modernist reduction—Judd’s conclusion that painting had become a three-dimensional object—was “not specific but general.” As for Morris, the recent past of object-type art (Minimalist structures) “which took the conditions within individual things—specific extension and shape and wholeness of one material[—]” inevitably maintained a figure-ground relation. He called for a shift of focus, diffusing it towards the visual field (the visual field in general, I want to say), creating indeterminate, heterogeneous “fields of stuff” in a landscape mode related to psychologist Anton Ehrenzweig’s “dedifferentiated vision.”

Whereas Krauss, quoted above, understands the intermedia condition as a loss of specificity, I argue in this chapter that as hybrids of painting and sculpture, Bontecou’s reliefs retain specificity. Bontecou’s hybrid wall reliefs are paintings generically and sculptures specifically. And if I claim that Bontecou’s reliefs hold on to the categories of the specific and the general, this is not intended to position their hybridity as a way station along a historical path from the specific to the general, either from painting to sculpture or from the specific-object to the dematerialized object. Bontecou’s reliefs divest of the medium specificity/specific objecthood/art in general course of 1960s

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26 Rosalind Krauss, “A Voyage on the North Sea”: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 10. In this short book, Krauss invokes the term hybrid, describing Judd’s specific objects as “hybrids that would form out of this collapse [of painting and sculpture].” For Krauss, hybridity is tantamount to “intermedia.” See “A Voyage on the North Sea”, 10, 12. De Duve argues in Kant After Duchamp that it was Duchamp, with his proposition that a work of art might be designated rather than made, who established “art in general.”


28 Ibid., 61. Morris contrasts “fields of stuff” to specificity in opposing the former, which “have no central contained focus and extend into or beyond the peripheral vision,” to “a self-contained type of organization offered by the specific object.” See ibid., 57.


30 The schematic formulation of the arc from the specific object to the dematerialization of the art object is also treated in Jo Applin’s “This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object’: Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void,” Art History 29, no. 3 (June 2006).
sculpture, which holds that, following from work that had to be either painting or sculpture (associated with Greenberg’s promotion of medium specificity, especially Abstract Expressionist painting), there emerged work that was neither painting nor sculpture (associated with Judd’s theory of specific objecthood, art in general, and sculpture’s expanded field). Bontecou’s work approximates the both/and condition of hybridity.

The earliest English language use of the word hybrid in the seventeenth century (from the Latin hybrida or hibrida) identified the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar (the word did not come into popular usage until the nineteenth century). I do not intend to prove that the hybrid pig stands as a successful or somehow unassailable analogy to Bontecou’s wall reliefs, but rather that her medium hybrids illuminate two features of the etymological meaning. The first of these is the asymmetrical formation of identity, for the offspring of the wild boar and the tame sow is not half wild and half tame, not half male and half female. The second is the simultaneity of the markers of genealogy and the breeding of a new, particular species, as the hybrid constitutes its own species while it also bears the genetic traces of its parents’ identities. If the biological hybrid is the offspring of two different animal or plant species, then Bontecou’s reliefs—which really do spring off (the wall)—are hybrids of two different taxa, genus and species; and they unequally inherit and manifest aspects of these taxa, painting and sculpture. Rather than “get clear of” the forms and qualities of painting and sculpture, as a specific object does, a medium hybrid is the mongrel that bears the identities of its progenitors’ set forms.31

31 Here I am citing Judd, who claims, “Much of the motivation in the new work is to get clear of these forms [painting and sculpture].” See Judd, “Specific Objects” (1965), in Complete Writings, 1959–1975:
Unlike the fifty-fifty hybrids known from a long art history—ancient Greek and Egyptian mythological creatures such as the centaur and the sphinx, or the angels of Christian iconography—Bontecou’s hybrids are partly generic and partly specific, and these parts are incommensurate.

Bontecou’s reliefs are generically pictorial and specifically sculptural. Genre is a French word rooted in the Latin genus (or generis), meaning class, kind, race. Jacques Derrida reminds us that genre refers both to nature and to history (these are the “two genres of genre”): gender and birth, for example, in the category of physis, as well as technè, thesis, nomos (art, poetry, literature) in the category of all those laws thought to be opposed to nature. Genre is related through genus to general, gene, and the discourse on Linnaean taxonomy (back to genus). Specific has its roots in species, which takes the meaning “appearance, form, kind” from the Latin specie, itself derived from the Latin specère, “to look or behold.” Specificity thus relates to the eighteenth-century discourse on the natural sciences mentioned above and to the mid-twentieth-century art-historical discourse on mediums, including medium specificity and specific objecthood.

Judd’s theory of specific objects enjoys the strongest hold on Bontecou’s reliefs, especially as they have been received since her 2003 retrospective. But Judd made three-

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dimensional work in order to bring painting off the representational register of the wall, while Bontecou sought to get sculpture up on that very wall (see Fig. 34). Bontecou’s reliefs are more productively conceived of as sculptures hanging on painting’s wall than as paintings unfurled into sculptural space because that emphasis adheres to Bontecou’s statements, including her self-identification as a sculptor specifically rather than an artist generally; because it prizes her reliefs from the grip of specific objecthood; and, centrally, because it accords with the reliefs’ structure of medium hybridity.  

Judd championed Bontecou’s reliefs in reviews of her first two solo exhibitions at Castelli Gallery and in three essays, including his seminal “Specific Objects,” all published in Arts Yearbook and Arts Magazine between 1961 and 1965. He identified Bontecou’s reliefs as “specific objects,” works constituting a new third term of art that is “neither painting nor sculpture” (indeed, Judd seems to have developed in his texts on Bontecou the language he would later utilize to theorize “the new three-dimensional work” in 1965’s “Specific Objects”). Authors of art magazine and popular press reviews of the 2003 retrospective customarily invoke Judd’s shorthand, labeling

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34 For an example of Bontecou’s sculpturally specific self-identification, see Mara Tapp, “Lee Bontecou Doesn’t Care What You Think,” Chicago Reader, Feb. 27, 2004, 18.
35 “In the Galleries” (1961) was originally published in Arts (Jan. 1961), and it reviews Bontecou’s 1960 solo show at Leo Castelli Gallery; “In the Galleries” (1963) was originally published in Arts Magazine (Jan. 1963), and it reviews Bontecou’s 1962 solo show at Leo Castelli Gallery; “Local History” was originally published in Arts Yearbook 7 (1964), and it describes a shift that occurred around Bontecou’s and other artists’ shows in New York in 1960, a shift from the uniformity and preponderance of New York School painting towards the diverse, open field of practice that characterized the current moment; “Lee Bontecou” was originally published in Arts Magazine (Apr. 1965), and it profiles Bontecou’s career, beginning with the work made in Rome, focusing on her wall reliefs, and using much of the same terminology laid out in previous writings on Bontecou and in “Specific Objects”; “Specific Objects” was originally published in Arts Yearbook 8 (1965), and it provides a state-of-the-field analysis of the best new three-dimensional work which is neither painting nor sculpture, referring to Bontecou’s “single image.” All are reproduced in Judd, Complete Writings, 1959–1975. For a discussion of Judd’s criticism of Bontecou’s work and its exceptional status within his body of writing, see Alex Potts, The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist (2000; repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 272–277.
Bontecou’s reliefs “specific objects” and summarily defining them as “neither painting nor sculpture,” or citing a line or block-quoting a paragraph from Judd’s corpus on Bontecou (by far, the most frequently invoked is his observation, “The image extends from something as social as war to something as private as sex, making one an aspect of the other”). Given Judd’s stature and Bontecou’s own reticence, this habit would make good enough sense if Judd’s texts were not telegraphic and if his focus were not myopic. However, toeing Judd’s line imposes two major limitations on our understanding of Bontecou’s wall reliefs. The first concerns Judd’s failure to acknowledge the pictorial implications of Bontecou’s creation of illusionary depth; the second concerns Judd’s dismissal of the reliefs’ material specificities.

Judd’s account of Bontecou’s reliefs emphasizes their singularity, a quality formed by the coincidence of multiple elements. These elements—structure, shape, and image (Judd sometimes counts scale as a fourth element)—are coextensive aspects that combine into a single form. Whereas ordinarily “structural parts lie within a field formed by the rectangle of the painting,” in Bontecou’s reliefs “the periphery is as much a part of the single structure as the center,” since the holes are “the primary and determining structure.” “There is no field in which the structure or the image occurs; there is no supporting context,” Judd avers with regard to an oval relief shown in Bontecou’s second solo exhibition at Castelli in 1962 (Fig. 35). Instead the image, existing triply as image, structure, and shape, is itself an object (he later will use the phrase “it becomes an object

37 Judd, “In the Galleries” (1963), 65.
38 Elyse Speaks interprets this reticence as an upshot of Bontecou’s identification with the Abstract Expressionist generation. She contends that the reluctance to speak about her work that separated Bontecou from her peers was not so much a result of gender (e.g., the silent woman versus the vocal male) as of her Abstract Expressionist-like disdain for theoretical positioning. See Speaks, The Architecture of Reception: Sculpture and Gender in the 1950s and 1960s (Ph.D. Diss. Brown University, 2005), 132–133.
in its own right”). Judd holds that the relief is actual, it is specific, and it is experienced as an object. He attributes a positivist, skeptical, and particularly American logic to Bontecou’s work, which, “because it is so strong and material that it can only assert itself,” is “too intense to be extended into solipsistic generalizations” (alternately phrased, it does not induce “idealization and generalization”).

Judd’s vocabulary of exclusion, exception, and explicitness displaces inclusion, allusion, and implicitness, values apposite to (and exhausted by) tired European painting, according to him. The object is “minatory,” “seemingly capable of firing or swallowing,” he writes in his review of Bontecou’s 1962 show. The next year, in a feature devoted to Bontecou, aptly titled “Lee Bontecou,” he repeats this assessment, referring to Bontecou’s reliefs overall: “The bellicose detail and the formidable holes are experienced as one would experience a minatory object” (Fig. 36). Because the object is definite, not descriptive, we behave around it as we would around any other “threatening and possibly functioning object”: “The image cannot be contemplated; it has to be dealt with as an object, at least viewed with puzzlement and wariness, as would be any strange object, and at most seen with terror, as would be a beached mine or a well hidden in the grass.”

40 Ibid., 178.
41 Judd, “In the Galleries” (1963), 65.
42 Ibid., 65. Generalization comes up repeatedly in the profile “Lee Bontecou,” as well. Judd insists that Bontecou’s work, because of its specificity, only asserts itself, ignoring “all the forms of solipsism, natural, moral, and social, and the other generalizations which exceed their basis. Bontecou is obviously unimpressed, for example, by artistic generalizations;” and “The explicit power which displaces generalizations is a new and stronger form of individuality.” See Judd, “Lee Bontecou,” 179–180.
43 Judd, “Local History,” 152. An image of Bontecou’s Untitled, 1960, in the collection of the Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart—Berlin, illustrates both this essay and Judd’s review, “In the Galleries” (1961). The piece is currently installed 180-degrees opposite its orientation as depicted in the reproductions in Judd’s reviews. I have brought this to the attention of a curator at the Hamburger Bahnhof, asking how or why the museum has determined to install it like so, and at present I await her response.
Judd insists that the image does not represent or describe something else; that it is, rather, experienced as an “oppressive,” “primitive,” “powerful” object itself.

Thus, the first limitation attendant with adopting Judd’s well-worn, taxonomic “neither painting nor sculpture” is that it ignores one of the reliefs’ most salient facets, namely illusionary depth, which alludes to an endless outer space. The striking illusion in Bontecou’s reliefs receives no attention in Judd’s writings. Elyse Speaks has argued in her dissertation that Judd’s texts on Bontecou do engage with the allusions (and by association, the illusions) in Bontecou’s imagery even if he disclaims as much. In her chapter on the reception of Bontecou’s wall reliefs, Speaks cites certain descriptions as evidence that Judd treats both the reliefs’ inclusiveness and openness, on the one hand, and their exclusiveness and objecthood, on the other. Among these are his description of the image extending “from something as social as war to something as private as sex” and his observation that it “extends from bellicosity, both marital and psychological—aspects which do not equate—to invitation, erotic and psychological, and deathly as well.”

Likewise, Speaks posits that despite his bent to distinguish new, American non-compositionality from traditional European art, Judd’s examination of Bontecou’s reliefs inadvertently emphasizes the classical composition of discrete parts. (In this regard, Speaks cuts Judd little slack, for Judd claims that Bontecou’s imagery is unique in its unitary objecthood, not that the imagery is not at all evocative; and he claims that the parts are subservient to the whole, not that there are no parts whatsoever.) Interestingly, the discrepancies within Judd’s Bontecou writings that Speaks highlights correspond to the discrepancies between Judd’s criticism and his artwork that art historians have

46 Ibid., 149–150.
plumbed since Krauss published “Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd” in 1966. In her brief essay, Krauss combats the characterization of Judd’s art as negative, blank, and empty by pointing to the beauty and insistent meaningfulness of his “objects of perception.” Judd’s proscription of allusion and illusion, she maintains, does not measure up to his work, which “derives its power from a heightening of illusion—although not of pictorial illusion but of lived illusion.” Recently, James Meyer has demonstrated that the classical composedness of Judd’s stacks contradicts his pretensions to “one thing after another” non-relationality. My interest is less in holding Judd’s feet to his own fire, as these scholars have done well, and more in examining that which he ignores in Bontecou’s reliefs, illusionary depth being first and foremost. For un-suppressing illusionary depth demands reorienting the medium status of Bontecou’s reliefs towards hybridity.

Owing to the literal dimensionality of sculpture, illusion in sculpture is usually associated with verisimilitude—the illusion that the figures in a sculpture are alive, as is notable in the work of Bernini (or Madame Tussaud). The illusion Bontecou’s reliefs

47 At the start of her essay, Krauss quotes from Judd’s Bontecou criticism, though she does not provide the citation or mention Bontecou’s name. See Krauss, “Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd,” Artforum 4, no. 9 (May 1966): 25. For an extended analysis of Krauss’s writings on Judd, see David Raskin, “The Shiny Illusionism of Krauss and Judd,” Art Journal 65, no. 1 (Spring 2006). Hal Foster has considered the ways in which Minimalism preserves, even expands, the pictorial illusionism to which it was ostensibly opposed. In recent writing on Dan Flavin, Foster has argued that rather than pose the specific object against the illusionistic space of painting, Minimalism might actually have been propped up by this illusionism. See Foster, “Dan Flavin and the Catastrophe of Minimalism,” in Dan Flavin: New Light, ed. Jeffrey Weiss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

48 James Meyer, “The Minimal Unconscious,” October no. 130 (Fall 2009): 149. Briony Fer examines the discrepancy between Judd’s writing and the work it sets out to describe, focusing especially on his ostensibly “minimalist” writing style, in On Abstract Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Robert Smithson understands Judd’s writings on Bontecou to mime the objects of his criticism, observing that when Judd “wrote about Lee Bontecou, his descriptions became a language full of holes.” Smithson continues, noting that “Judd brings an ‘abyss’ into the very material of the thing he describes when he says: ‘The image is an object, a grim, abyssal one,’” and adding that, in parallel, “Judd’s syntax is abyssal—it is a language that ebbs from the mind into an ocean of words.” See Smithson, “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” (1968), in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1996), 80.
offer is not mimetic. Not only are her reliefs abstract, they exhibit, to again invoke Bontecou’s own phrase, illusionary depth.  

This kind of depth is most proper to painting, the illusionary depth of which is founded on the linear perspective of the window and on our conditioning to see two juxtaposed colors as situated on different representational planes. In Bontecou’s practice, illusionary depth offers the illusion of the extension of a single dimension, to be differentiated from illusionism, which offers the illusion of three-dimensional objects or bodies in three-dimensional physical space, typified by the *trompe l’oeil* grapes and curtains of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. While not illusionistic, per se, Bontecou’s reliefs still take on a markedly pictorial illusion in their exhibition of illusionary depth.

For Judd, what makes painting *painting* (precisely what makes redoing it problematic) are, firstly, the rectangular shape of the picture plane and, secondly, spatiality. “The main thing wrong with painting,” Judd writes in “Specific Objects,” “is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall.” In painting, definite parts relate within the whole rectangle of the canvas, which is itself a shape and a definite form (not a neutral limit) but which is subordinated to the parts. Judd favors non-relational, non-hierarchically composed, whole work. As well, Judd concludes, “almost all

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49 The significant, analogous instances of illusionary depth in the field of sculpture in this period involve mirrors, most notably Robert Smithson’s use of mirrors in his *Displacement* and *Non-Site* works and Lucas Samaras’s and Yayoi Kusama’s mirror rooms.


51 David Raskin points out that artists such as Fred Sandback and art historians such as Richard Shiff have distinguished between illusion and illusionism. See Raskin, “Shiny Illusionism,” 10. (Shiff states that illusion is the way things are, while illusionism is the way things are not in “Donald Judd: Fast Thinking,” 9.)

52 Judd, “Specific Objects,” 181.

paintings are spatial in one way or another” by virtue of the fact that “anything on a surface has space behind it.” He sees the new three-dimensional work as better equipped to deal with this limitation: “Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors,” and this amounts to “riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art.” These are, of course, two of the very conditions that designate painting, at least conceptually, in Bontecou’s sculptures: the rectangular frame hanging flat against the wall and the illusion of depth (“spatiality”) viewed through a relief’s circular opening.

Furthermore, these constituted the conditions of painting that so much art practice in the 1960s attempted to purge from or subvert from within the medium because they jeopardized painting’s medium specificity. That is to say, the illusionary depth and rectangular format that are the characteristic designations of painting in Bontecou’s reliefs were increasingly estranged from painting in that period. As is well known, in 1960’s “Modernist Painting,” Clement Greenberg contends that the illusion of the dimension of depth is not proper to pure painting, and for this reason artists have increasingly driven painting towards the ineluctable flatness of its surface. In the tendency to associate Greenberg with abstraction, it is often forgotten that Greenberg argues that representational imagery may well have its place in modernist painting (see: Dubuffet); it is “sculptural illusion” that does not belong in painting, according to

encompasses rational, Cartesian philosophy. Judd explains that his work uses “simple forms” in which the whole is emphasized; for parts prioritize “order,” and most of life is not order, but chance and accident. Judd, as quoted in Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” 150, 156.

Judd elaborates: “Except for a complete and unvaried field of color or marks, anything spaced in a rectangle and on a plane suggests something in and on something else, something in its surround, which suggests an object or figure in its space, in which these are clearer instances of a similar world—that’s the main purpose of painting.” See Judd, “Specific Objects,” 182.

Ibid., 184.
Greenberg. It was for this reason that Judd turned to the production of three-dimensional objects—because he did not want, but could not escape, illusionary depth in painting. The emergence of the shaped canvas in that period has largely been understood as a corollary to the effort to “acknowledge the literal character of the picture support,” an interpretation established primarily by Michael Fried: rather than compose shapes within the rectangular canvas, painters shaped a canvas in shapes continuous with a painting’s depicted forms, Stella’s deductively structured paintings being the ritual example. Thus two key signals of painting in Bontecou’s reliefs were among the most contentious, overdetermined elements of painting practice in this period, no longer received as neutral, still given conventions. In their own ways Judd, Greenberg, and Fried understood illusionary depth and the rectangular format to be inimical to specificity (whether medium specificity or specific objecthood), and, fittingly, in Bontecou’s work, these elements mark not the specific but its opposite, the general. They mark the genre of painting.

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The General as Genre

Though painting is itself not a genre, Bontecou’s reliefs manifest marks of some genres of painting. Let us take 1960’s Untitled relief in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, which is approximately six by six feet in height and width and eighteen inches in depth, and the top half of which is dominated by concentric half-circles, while the composition of the bottom half is radial (Fig. 37). The genre of illusionistic painting, for example, is marked in the relief’s reversal and hypostatization of one-point perspective, with the steel circle opening as the vanishing point, the ribs of the skeleton orthogonals, the welded square frame a window. As well, the relief is marked by the genre of Abstract Expressionist painting; Speaks believes that Bontecou’s reliefs take Abstract Expressionist painterly principles of scale, total composition, and a signature style as their point of departure. There are the marks of the genre of modernist painting, which reduces the medium to its essence, stripping it to its bare bones: canvas, which even blank could be considered a painting according to Greenberg, and the support (in this case, the steel ribs of the armature). Or, as Dore Ashton has indicated, it is marked by the genre of Cubist painting—the dingy beige and brown shades, the joining of “quasi-geometric volumes with an emphasis on the unseen edge,” the repurposing of found materials. Given the materials’ associations with the lowly and the everyday—the pieces of fabric are ripped and torn, even scorched, splattered with white paint, and stamped with numbers and logos, including a shamrock at the bottom right—it can be

58 Collette Chattopadhyay similarly observes that Bontecou deconstructs the formal premises of Renaissance illusionism, flipping the classical illusion of receding space inside out, in “The Uncanny Eye: Lee Bontecou,” Sculpture 23, no. 2 (Mar. 2004): 31. For Jo Applin, the inside out is the body inside out, and this is what disrupts the object-viewer encounter, charging it psychically. See Applin, “‘This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object’: Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void.”
said to bear the marks of genre scene painting. In sum, Bontecou’s reliefs are generically pictorial owing to their multiple generic markings and to the generic (or anti-specific) designations of contemporary painting, illusionary depth and rectangular format.

In addition to the traditionally pictorial qualities of illusionary depth and rectangular format, and the evocation of genres of painting, Bontecou’s reliefs engage with other signal conventions of painting: they are constructed with canvas, the paradigmatic support of painting, and in some reliefs the sections of canvas are made taut through sizing; they hang on the wall at eye level and address viewers frontally; and their patches of color are varied in value according to optical laws. By these lights, they are all but paintings—except, crucially, they are not flat, and they are not painted (it is true that a white ring of paint surrounds the aperture in many reliefs, though even then the whiteness reads as blank painter’s canvas or primer). Bontecou’s wall reliefs qualify as paintings generically to the degree that they are rectangular in basic format but are three-dimensional, offer an illusion but are not illusionistic pictures, and use canvas and paint but only as some materials among other materials.

Derrida reminds us that the “law of the law of genre” is ultimately a “principle of contamination, a law of impurity.” In his 1980 essay “The Law of Genre,” Derrida observes that the distinctive trait of a genre, or the mark of a genre, is by definition remarkable, and moreover, that “such a trait is remarkable, that is, noticeable in every

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61 The swaths of black fabric themselves evoke the genre of monochrome painting, from Malevich to Reinhardt, and the kitsch genre of black velvet painting.
62 This paragraph owes much to Brigid Doherty’s excellent essay on the marks of genre in Rosemarie Trockel’s wool pictures, “On Iceberg and Water: Or, Painting and the ‘Mark of Genre’ in Rosemarie Trockel’s Wool-Pictures.”
aesthetic, poetic, or literary corpus.”  

However, the remark of the genre (the remark of belonging, of inclusion) does not belong properly to a genre. An example of a remark of belonging which does not belong is the “mention” of type beneath the title of certain books—novel, drama, epic, etc.—which does not itself “properly pertain to any genre or class.”  

Even if the designation “novel,” for example, does not appear in the explicit form of a subtitle, the designation is still marked “in one way or another” (for “there is no genreless text”), and yet the designation is not novelistic (it does not “take part in the corpus whose denomination it nonetheless imparts”), “nor is it simply extraneous to the corpus.”  

As Derrida offers, it keeps the corpus from “identifying itself with itself.”  

Derrida’s conception of genre (or its mark) as “a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set” models the way that Bontecou’s reliefs are remarkable as paintings while those remarks do not belong to painting.  

In Bontecou’s work, the designations of painting (illusionary depth, rectangular format, and evocations of various genres of painting) take part in painting but they themselves are not pictorial or painterly. Those pictorial designations are not painted, they are not rendered in paint or as marks upon a surface (flat or otherwise). Rather, they belong to—they are specifically rendered as—their medium is—

64 Ibid., 64. The re-mark of the designation “novel” or “drama” is only one example. The re-mark of belonging can take on a great number of forms, Derrida insists; it “need not pass through the consciousness of the author or the reader” even; and “it can also refute this consciousness or render the explicit ‘mention’ mendacious, false, inadequate, or ironic according to all sorts of overdetermined figures.” See ibid., 64.  
65 Ibid., 65. What is “on the line,” Derrida explicitly states, is the relationship of nature to history, the relationship of nature to all its others, including techné, thesis, and nomos or art, poetry, and literature. “Genos” sheds the greatest obscurity on the process of defining nature against all its others (it “locates one of the privileged scenes of the process”). Ibid, 60–61.  
66 Ibid., 64–65.
sculpture. The reliefs may form an image, but they do not resolve as a picture, for the remarks of painting obtain materially and dimensionally, hence sculpturally.

While the genre of the reliefs is another medium (painting), specifically, the reliefs’ medium is sculpture. The word specific comes from *species*, which encompasses character and kind, as mentioned above, as well as obsolete definitions of “outward appearance,” the “immediate object of vision,” and an “emission or emanation from outward things, forming the direct object of cognition for the various senses or for the understanding” (this last meaning refers to those things which are sensible rather than intelligible).  

Outwardly, immediately, objectively, directly, the reliefs are sculptural. They are turned outwards, reaching out towards the viewer in literal three-dimensionality, often two feet from the wall, sometimes farther, into actual space; if *Untitled*, 1962, in the collection of the National Gallery of Art is a modest fifteen inches in depth (Fig. 38), other pieces, like the 1962 *Untitled* in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston reaches out twice as far at thirty-inches deep (Fig. 39). While they recede from the viewer in illusionary dimensionality, even this illusion of depth is predicated on the outward projection of the reliefs’ circular openings, for just a black sheet of velvet hung against the wall might intimate deep space, but it would not be seen to burrow through the wall. Thus, the reliefs associate the sculptural with the specific both through the definition of species and because the maneuver of the reliefs is to reverse the terms of the established course of sculpture in which painting represents the specific medium and sculpture prompts its undoing into the post-medium general.

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For Greenberg, too, it is the actual dimensionality of sculpture that defines its specificity, its essential material condition. However, the sculptural specificity of Bontecou’s reliefs is not identical to the medium specificity theorized by Greenberg. Similar to accounts of the sculptural work of assemblage, Minimalism, and process art, albeit differently chronologized, Greenberg’s account of sculpture’s medium specificity echoes a painting-to-sculpture lineage. Though due to his insistence on painting’s ineluctable flatness Greenberg is often characterized as medium boundaries’ most vigilant guard, he in fact locates modernist sculpture’s roots in painting. For example, Greenberg claims David Smith’s sculpture, “like all modern sculpture of any vitality since Maillol,” stems “from painting rather than from any tradition of carving or modeling.” He describes Smith’s constructions variously as “sculptural collage” and “aerial drawing in metal,” and by likening Smith to a draughtsman.

Greenberg further argues that the literalism of sculpture’s dimensionality liberated sculpture to cross medium boundaries, and, what’s more, he hoped it would compel sculpture to orient itself to opticality. In “The New Sculpture,” an essay published in 1948 and revised in 1958, Greenberg contends that sculpture can afford “a greater

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70 Greenberg’s published works include only one reference to Bontecou, a passing and disparaging one. It appears in a review of *Rosc 1967*, an exhibition at the Royal Dublin Society which had a “nineteen-fiftyish cast to it, an unnecessary tiredness,” according to Greenberg—a consequence of continental Europeans “stalled” in *art informel* making up a majority of the artists. But the American and English sections of the exhibition did not fare much better, doing little to “relieve” the gray-brown “pall” cast over the show, Greenberg claims: “A de Kooning, a Rauschenberg, a Lester Johnson, or even a Bontecou can look as muddy as the muddiest Cobra artist, or as chromatically tired as a Soulages, a Zao Wou-Ki, a Lataster, or a late Picasso.” Greenberg, “Poetry of Vision” (1968), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, 285.
71 Greenberg’s use of literalism differs markedly from Fried’s in “Art and Objecthood”: Fried opposes literalism to abstractness, while Greenberg opposes abstraction to illusionism.
latitude of figurative allusiveness than painting” because it “remains tied, inexorably, to the third dimension and is therefore inherently less illusionistic.” The immediacy of sculpture’s literalism, its concreteness, is secure enough to permit sculpture to “confine itself to virtually two dimensions…without being felt to violate the limitations of its medium.”

Greenberg observes that the literalness that was once considered sculpture’s handicap has now become its advantage, suspending “the prohibition” against medium impurity. Sculpture, he offers, can be as pictorial “as it pleases,” and it can make the forms no longer possible in painting. In fact, he implies that sculpture should be pictorial if it is to distinguish itself from the world of everyday, utilitarian, arbitrary objects (it should, as Michael Fried puts it, confront and overcome its condition of objecthood), and if it is to compensate for painting’s lost ability to provide “figurative allusiveness.”

But if Bontecou’s reliefs trade on the structure of painting, they are not yet optical sculptures or weightless drawings in space. Her reliefs offer a mirage, but their mass is not sublated into syntax; their materials are not incorporeal. Indeed, in a second generation of reliefs that Bontecou began by 1961, two years after she made her first large-scale reliefs, individual material components pointedly do not, as Greenberg’s sculptural medium specificity would demand, yield to the virtual.

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73 Ibid., 143.
74 Here we find another point of difference between Greenberg and Fried. For Fried, a successful sculpture’s corporeality will be shared with our (the beholders’) own corporeality, and Fried deems this more significant than sculpture’s permission to be as pictorial as it pleases: “Unlike the modernist reduction of painting to flatness and shape of the picture surface, the modernist reduction has left sculpture as three-dimensional as it was before. This additional dimension of physical existence is vitally important—not because it allows sculpture to continue to suggest recognizable images, or gives it a larger realm of merely formal possibilities—but because the three-dimensionality of sculpture corresponds to the phenomenological framework in which we exist, move, perceive, experience, and communicate with others.” An unsuccessful sculpture is one whose corporeality is identical to the literalism of everyday objects, according to Fried. See Fried, “Anthony Caro” (1963), in *Art and Objecthood*, 274–275.
75 The phrase “mass sublated into syntax” is borrowed from Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 183.
This set of reliefs incorporates prominent three-dimensional objects that, unlike the found materials in the first generation of reliefs emblematized by the Modern’s 1959 *Untitled* and Cornell’s *Flit*, are not seamlessly woven into a singular, central composition: rope, iron grilles, grommets, buckles, sawed-off gun barrels, plumbing parts, and saw blades, as well as fabrics such as chamois, rawhide, and denim. For instance, in the 1962 piece at Brown University’s David Winton Bell Gallery, corroded metal washers fastened onto the fabric and rusty grommets puncturing the cloth dot the relief’s contoured surface (Fig. 40). These circles and holes rhyme with the larger protrusions and cavities that emerge and recede all over the relief, projecting and tunneling back in varying widths and depths and pointing in various directions. (If Bontecou’s reliefs are self-generating Minimalist structures, it is only in this way—seemingly involuntarily metastasizing. The forms are repetitive but not serial, sectional but not modular.) The mound of the largest, most central protrusion sports two smaller protrusions, one comprised of fabric and the other of strips of black painted metal, primarily. To the right of the central hole, another tunneled form projects out to the rim of its welded circle and then recedes back in; a flat, frontal, circular rim in white canvas abuts this inner recess; and off the side of the mound, a small cylindrical form emerges out only a couple of inches. This compositional intricacy is matched by a torrent of textures, ranging from the fraying canvas cloth, stitches of seams and hems undone, lumpily welded steel ribs, and bristling red copper wires to the drips of glue and epoxy, stenciled lettering, iron grilles, bands of metal, saw blades, buckles, canvas straps, pipes, and washers (Fig. 41, Fig. 42, Fig. 43, Fig. 44).

The materiality of such a relief introduces the second major pitfall involved in toeing Judd’s Minimalist line. Because Judd classifies Bontecou’s reliefs as “specific
objects,” Judd’s reviews not only dismiss their pictorial qualities—the marks of the genre of painting, illusionary depth in particular—they also dismiss the reliefs’ sculptural qualities—their particular, textural materialities, these bits and chunks that disrupt the sense of a unified singularity. Judd’s criticism cannot sustain consideration of works like the Bell Gallery relief, for these reliefs are not explicit, meaning that their image, shape, and structure do not co-extend. Judd is avowedly invested only in work that is “interesting” “as a whole.”76 In his review of Bontecou’s second solo show at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1962, he writes of one “complex” relief (which I understand to be the Bell Gallery piece), “there are numerous and varied holes and much bellicose detail— orificial washers, mouths with saw blades inside, barred ones, muzzles and straps. The Cubistic dispersion of these elements and their literality are less interesting than the explicit, centered form of the majority of the reliefs” (here we must remember Judd’s premium on interest).77 In his 1965 feature, “Lee Bontecou,” Judd refers to the Bell Gallery relief again and asserts, “If the secondary elements are numerous and too complex, as in a relief done in 1962 which is ferocious in a too literal way, the work nearly lapses into ordinary imagery.” He prescribes a course of action: “The reliefs were simple at first. Some reduction should be next.”78 The simplicity of the hole being the whole thing—and he very much takes the hole to be a “thing”: “threateningly concrete,”79 an “abyssal object,” “the black hole does not allude to a black hole; it is one”80—stands as a key criterion for Judd’s classification of Bontecou’s reliefs as specific objects. By

76 See Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” 155.
77 Judd, “In the Galleries” (1963), 65. Judd declares a premium on interest: “A work needs only to be interesting.” See Judd, “Specific Objects,” 184. For more on the shift from valuing quality to valuing interest, see Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism.”
79 Ibid., 178.
80 Ibid., 178.
contrast, the many holes of the “complex” reliefs are fronted with metal teeth, and the
erstwhile focus of the “centered,” “singular” reliefs is now scattered throughout as detail
as the chunks and hunks of metal scraps. Judd deems these reliefs with their
“Cubistically-dispersed” and literal elements “less powerful and less interesting.”

Similarly, Bontecou’s other major advocate of the 1960s, critic Dore Ashton, sets
store by the hole above all, but for Ashton the hole is an image, not a thing. The “black
tunneled hole” is “central to everything Bontecou undertakes,” she assesses. For Ashton
the “reigning image” of “black empty centers” evokes “wells, tunnels, sequestered and
mysterious places,” “illusions of very deep space,” Bontecou’s imagination, and the axis
mundi. Ashton’s esteem of the holes’ quality of mystery diametrically opposes Judd’s
valuation of specificity. Yet both critics deride Bontecou’s more “complex” reliefs, such
as the Bell Gallery relief, the 1961 Whitney Museum of American Art relief (Fig. 45),
and the 1961 relief at the Walker Art Center (Fig. 46). Ashton refers to the Bell Gallery
relief, which Judd considers too literally ferocious, as a “blatant construction with its
grand guignol horror” and as “the grinning death piece…in which the materials and the
intentions are so obvious.”

In reviews of the earlier, non-“blatant,” non-“obvious”
reliefs, Ashton praises Bontecou’s use of “rough and ‘found’” materials precisely because
it overcomes the identities of those materials. “Their origin is of no interest,” she

84 Dore Ashton, “Art” (1963), 5.
85 Ibid., 5. For Applin, too, the void is paramount, and the urban and social associations with the materials
in Bontecou’s reliefs are beside the point: “the incorporation of the detritus or emblems of everyday
America is not the point of Bontecou’s work—unlike that of Chamberlain and Rauschenberg,” Applin
argues that the void subsumes the worldly materials that surround it—it “seeks to remainder that world,
and steel when those materials are used “to evoke an image that has little to do with the purposes for which these materials are normally used.” She therefore dislikes the Bell Gallery relief in which the violence of the image does not overcome, but rather is amplified by, even directed by, the industrial and militaristic origins of the sculpture’s materials. Both Ashton and Judd prefer Bontecou’s earlier reliefs, such as the reliefs from 1959 at MoMA and the Johnson Museum, though their reasons are antithetical (mystery for Ashton, specificity for Judd); and both critics dislike reliefs such as that at the Bell Gallery, though their reasons are again antonymous (Judd regrets their complexity, Ashton their blatancy). However, we must take seriously that which these critics dismiss, for the martial identities of these materials and the relationship between these mechanical components and the natural formal compositions of the reliefs elucidate a second version of hybridity, that of the organic and the mechanical.

**Generalized Gender**

In “The Politics of Genre: Space and Time in Lessing’s Laocoon,” W. J. T. Mitchell pursues the “political unconscious” (after Frederic Jameson) of the regulative principles on which Lessing grounded his claim that literature is an art of time and painting an art of space, and he demonstrates that the ideological basis for Lessing’s laws of genre are gender laws. Through a close reading of Lessing’s classic 1766 text, staging its disappearance through the black hole that anchors the work and arrests our attention.” See Applin, “‘This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object,’” 485.


87 Michael Fried also laments Bontecou’s shift from abstract to literal imagery and forms in “New York Letter,” *Art International* 6, no. 10 (Dec. 1962): 57.

Laocoön, Mitchell uncovers Lessing’s “decorum of the arts,” and at bottom it “has to do with proper sex roles.”89 Painting Lessing associates with femininity and poetry with masculinity; blurred genres he associates with moderns, adultery, monsters, and mothers, and distinct genres he associates with ancients, honesty, beautiful bodies, and fathers.90 What Lessing teaches us, Mitchell elucidates, is that the “relation of genres like painting and poetry is not a purely theoretical matter, but something like a social relationship.” The “relations of the arts” are “subject to versions of the laws, taboos, and rituals that regulate social forms of life.”91 In Bontecou’s reliefs, we observe that the hybridization of painting and sculpture as genre and medium (genus and species) also breaches the boundary between the natural and the technological, coupling not man and beast but machine and organism.

As Bontecou’s reliefs are specifically sculptural and generically pictorial, so too they are specifically mechanical and generally organic. It is here that the feminist arguments for Bontecou’s reliefs take hold. The organic qualities of Bontecou’s reliefs are their bodily ones: armature and canvas are like skeleton and flesh; holes recall orifices (mouths, eyes, vaginas, anuses); mounds evoke breasts and bellies. But the body parts evoked in Bontecou’s reliefs are drawn from the natural world in general rather than from the terrain of the human body specifically, so that, in addition to sex organs, shells, wings, and petals are suggested, too.92 As these biomorphic elements are drawn from the

89 Ibid., 108.
90 Ibid., 109. According to Lessing, in ancient Greek culture “beautiful men” fashioned “beautiful statues,” but in modern times, “the susceptible imagination of the mother seems to express itself only in monsters,” and this “demands the careful attention of the law.” See ibid., 107–108.
91 Ibid., 110.
92 In an insightful essay written for the catalogue accompanying Bontecou’s 1965 solo exhibition at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Annette Michelson observed that in Bontecou’s reliefs “the erotic principle is used as a generalizing agent, absorbing, sublimating” (“…dans ces reliefs le principes érotique est utilisé comme...
natural world in general, their gender is not specifically human, and this renders the well-tread politics and dynamics of human sexuality less determinative. At the very least, this invalidates the assumption that gender in Bontecou’s work is identical to Bontecou’s own gender. At best, the reliefs that most convincingly maintain the generality of gender (which is genre) suggest the political dimensions of organic-mechanical hybridity, for such hybridity challenges the dichotomies of human/animal, organism/machine, and male/female alike.

This is not to diminish that for some art historians the assertion that the body in question might be specifically human is hard won, as when Anne Wagner argues in favor of thinking about the subject of the work of Eva Hesse “as being, in some profound sense, ‘human’ experience, rather than specifically female.”

Neither ambiguous nor androgynous, Hesse’s work, Wagner wagers, conveys something of a particular or, again, agent généralisant, absorbant, sublimant”). I wish to emphasize her use of “generalizing,” which appears again in her conclusion as she writes, “by virtue of its generalizing nature (and that is where the force of its obsession resides), this art is neither feminine, nor feminist… it attains to this essentially androgyne character of the art of its time” (“…en vertu de sa nature généralisante, (et là réside la force de l’obsession), cet art n’est ni féminin, ni féministe… il attient à ce caractère essentiellement androgyne qui est celui de l’art de son temps”). Michelson clarifies that while she might not normally consider an artist’s gender, it is appropriate to consider Bontecou’s because her body of work is “only conceivable in the context of a society that has considerably expanded the margin of liberty that was traditionally limited” and, further, because the “source of the pathos of the work” concerns the cautiousness of the invitation extended women to “enter into the arena” (“Normalement ce serait là une considération secondaire, mais je pense que dans ce cas précis il convient de la souligner. Sartre a fait la remarque qu’il ne saurait y avoir de grands créateurs parmi les femmes avant que la société ne leur permette d’assumer pleinement leurs responsabilités. L’œuvre de Bontecou n’est en effet concevable que dans le cadre d’une société qui a considérablement élargi une marge de liberté traditionnellement limitée et qui l’a invitée à descendre du pseudo-piédestal du matriarcat pour entrer dans l’arène. Mais cette invitation reste prudente. De là provient tout aussi certainement le pathétique de l’œuvre, l’exigence de son appel.”); my translation.) Michelson, “Lee Bontecou,” Lee Bontecou, (Paris: Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, 1965), unpaginated.

specific human experience in the wake the Holocaust, an “embodied and sensate”
experience of being human not just before, but after too, being either male or female.\textsuperscript{94}
However, the bodily references in Bontecou’s reliefs are not always human or not only
human—they belong to humans, animals, and machines—so that the reliefs’ hybridity is
that of the organic and mechanical rather than the male and female.

This hybridity implies a post-sex condition that supports the feminist reading of
this body of work, for it points to a future without origin narratives, without gender
difference, and without heterosexist reproduction. Donna Haraway, a feminist historian
of science, has written persuasively about a “possible world” of “cyborg subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{95}
In her well-known 1985 polemic, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and
Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” Haraway defines the cyborg as “a
hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine,” and explains that we (post-war
humans) are already cyborgs.\textsuperscript{96} The cyborg world enables social and bodily realities in
which people “are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid
of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints,”\textsuperscript{97} and it bolsters “the
hope for a world without gender.”\textsuperscript{98} In the introduction to the book of essays in which
“Cyborg Manifesto” is reprinted, Haraway asserts that simians, cyborgs, and women are

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 281
\textsuperscript{95} Constance Penley, Andrew Ross, and Donna Haraway, “Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna
\textsuperscript{96} Donna J. Haraway, \textit{Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature} (New York: Routledge
Twentieth Century” was first published as “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” \textit{Socialist Review} no. 80 (1985). By
Haraway’s account, three sets of boundaries breached by the late twentieth century in American scientific
culture make her analysis possible: human and animal; human-animal (organism) and machine; and
physical and non-physical. See “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in \textit{Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 181.
all monsters, and states the “utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without
gender.”99 She points out that “monster” shares its root with “demonstrate,” and urges,
“As monsters, can we demonstrate another order of signification?” For Haraway, the
significance of the “illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” is that these are the
“couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic.”100 Haraway directs her
argument towards socialists and feminists in the 1980s who found in high technological
and scientific culture deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism
and materialism, and who sought new “essential unities” among women, whereas
Haraway is invested in building coalitions on the basis of affinity, not identity.101 Still we
can understand Bontecou’s hybrid reliefs as giving form to the political-scientific cyborg
myth of partiality, opposition, heteroglossia, illegitimacy, of the breach of the
nature/culture boundary by the terms, materials, and structures of nature and
technology.102

Yet for Bontecou these transgressions are far less utopian than for Haraway.
Whereas Bontecou preserves the specificity of sculpture by reorienting the general
towards genre—making a hybrid medium that does not give way to art in general—
shifting gender to the general and figuring genre transgressions (or contaminations)
across categories of machines, humans, animals, and plants is achieved at the expense of
the specifically human (the human species).

The martial identities of the materials in Bontecou’s reliefs imagine organic-
mechanical hybridization as the fallout from nuclear disaster, as in her pencil drawings.

99 Ibid., 181.
100 Ibid., 176.
101 See ibid., 156.
102 Ibid., 150, 176.
In 1963 Bontecou spoke about the dread of nuclear attack that pervaded American life during the Cold War. Her generation, she remarked, “at least had some years without the atomic fear hanging over our heads. But to be born into that situation in which we can end it all!” In a letter to Dorothy Miller, curator of the Americans 1963 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Bontecou offered, in lieu of a proper artist’s statement, that her “concern is to build things that express our relation to this country—to other countries—to this world—to other worlds—in terms of myself. To glimpse some of the fear, hope, ugliness, beauty, and mystery that exists in all of us and which hangs over all the young people today” (here we note her repetition of the phrase “hanging over”). And in a rich 1979 interview, she reflected,

I was angry. I used to work with the United Nations program on the short-wave radio in my studio. I used it like background music, and, in a way, the anger became part of the process. During World War II we’d been too young. But at that later time [the 1950s and 1960s], all the feelings I’d had back then came to me again. Rockefeller was trying to push bomb shelters on us. Africa was in trouble and we were so negative. China was trying to make her thing and we were negative. Then I remembered the killings, the Holocaust. The political scene.

By her own account, work such as the Bell Gallery and Whitney reliefs was “like war equipment. With teeth,” and it represented one form of response to the anger these world events, historical and contemporary, provoked in her.

103 Bontecou, as quoted in William Wolf, “Bumpers, Wires, and Canvas” (June 1963), in Lee Bontecou Artist’s File, Museum of Modern Art Archives.

104 Bontecou, as quoted in Munro, Originals, 384. Another response, according to Bontecou, involved countering the depressed feelings the “political scene” brought on by making more optimistic work, and this work is represented by the first large-scale reliefs. She made the “light” and “dark” bodies of work in parallel, going back and forth between them, “bouncing from the negative to the positive.” Bontecou, as quoted in Tomkins, “Missing in Action,” 40. In one interview she recalls, “On Sixth Street, I started doing those dark teeth. And then, I couldn’t stand it, so I would jump to working on these big, spatial things that were more open, and you could breathe.” See Oral history interview with Lee Bontecou, 2009 Jan. 10, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. In another interview she reports, “In the first place, I’d get so depressed [about the ‘political scene’] that I’d have to stop and turn to more open work, work that I felt was more optimistic—where, for example, there might be just one single opening, and the space
The reliefs’ hybridization of the organic and mechanical preserves the originary status of nature over technology. Earlier I labored to insist that the genus, painting, does not precede or give birth to the species, sculpture, in Bontecou’s reliefs—that her sculpture cannot be accounted for as a mere repercussion or outgrowth of painting, or as a three-dimensional species of painting. I emphasized that the genus and species of mediums possess an asymmetrical, hybrid relation in her work. However, with regard to the organic and mechanical formal hybridization of her work, the conventional hierarchy of biological classification is observed, with genus ranking above species, as in, genus: nature; species: technology. Bontecou has hinted at this formulation in interviews, noting the airplane’s basis in the bird and, in a similar vein, commenting that the inventors of the submarine based their design on dolphins and sharks; in Bontecou’s thinking, Sputnik and the dragonfly are conjoined. Based on conversation with the sculptor, Mona Hadler summarizes, “Bontecou has stressed that she sees technology through nature.”

Bontecou’s largest and most public relief, *Untitled (1964)*, which Philip Johnson commissioned for the western stairwell of the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, incorporates the Plexiglas turret of a Second World War bomber jet (Fig. 47). Twenty-one feet wide, five-and-a-half tall, and two deep, two smaller holes flank its prominent central hole, a large hood hangs over all three holes from the top, and a lip with a crescent gap pouts from the bottom edge. Unlike the majority of beyond it was like opening up into the heavens, going up into space, feeling space.” Bontecou, as quoted in Munro, *Originals*, 384.

105 Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” 57. Bontecou also commented, “The jet form harks back to insect types, such as the dragonfly, and in this way it is related to nature” in her 1988 lecture at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. See the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Lecture Archive 383, The Museum of Modern Art Archive.

106 It was renamed the David H. Koch Theater in 2008. The only other permanently and publicly installed relief is Bontecou’s 1966 *Untitled* in the Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Collection, Albany, New York.
Bontecou’s wall reliefs, the forms of this piece exceed the bounds of the welded metal frame: the bulges and curves obscure the rectangular frame as they flow over its top and side edges.\footnote{107} What is more aberrant within Bontecou’s oeuvre through 1964 is the reduction of wires seen in *Untitled* (1964): the dashboard-like hood is a fiberglass resin form onto which sections of tan canvas have been glued, rather than stretched and fastened with wires (and some of the wires that do appear in the piece are camouflaged, as in the black wires around the inner rim of the central hole which match the black fabric they puncture). The tautness of this resin section and of the four sections excised from the Plexiglas turret of a World War II bomber jet—the two white shells with undersides shaded in black soot arching over the smaller holes, and the two white shells linking the inside corners of those holes to the central mound—recalls the economy of the aerodynamic engineering of insects. The relief approaches us like a gigantic beetle, wings splayed, in the perspective of extreme foreshortening, while it also seems to be propelled by hot exhaust (see Fig. 48).\footnote{108} Airplanes and insects do that which Bontecou wished to make her sculptures do: go into space.\footnote{109}

\footnote{107} There are several other works which exceed and obscure their rectangular frames in various ways, most notably the oval relief of 1962 in the Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung at the Kunstmuseum Basel—Museum für Gegenwartskunst (see Fig. 35). Some reliefs’ frames are not rectangular, such as *Untitled*, 1961, in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (see Fig. 49). And Bontecou also made several freestanding sculptures from metal, fabric, and wire in the early 1960s, including: *Untitled*, 1961, in the collection of the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin—Madison; *Untitled*, 1964, in the private collection of Joel Wachs; and *Untitled*, 1964, in the collection of the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art.

\footnote{108} Bontecou’s obsession with flight finds a place in modern sculpture’s history among Tatlin, who turned in the 1930s to the design of his human-powered gilder *Letalin*, and among Brancusi and Duchamp, who are, famously, said to have been influenced by a visit to the *Salon de l’Aviation* in Paris in 1912. (Jyrki Siukonen contends that Brancusi, Duchamp, and Léger visited the *Salon de l’Aviation* at the Grand Palais in 1909, coincident with the 1909 Salon d’Automne in which all three artists participated, rather than in 1912, as it is usually reported. See the chapters “Paris 1909: The Shiny Propeller” and “Appendix” in Siukonen, *Uplifted Spirits, Earthbound Machines: Studies on Artist and the Dream of Flight, 1900–1935* [Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2001].) For more on the intersections between flight, airplanes, and art, see Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908–*
1918 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), according to which the invention of the airplane was initially perceived as an aesthetic event; see also Anne Collins Goodyear, “Chronology of Aviation and Art,” in Defying Gravity: Contemporary Art and Flight (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2003).

Brancusi’s example is most relevant, not least because he is one of the few sculptors Bontecou is willing to name as an influence, but predominantly because his many bronze and marble versions of the Bird in Space, executed between 1923 and 1940, represent his attempt to give sculptural form to “the essence of flight.” Brancusi, as quoted in Mircea Eliade, “Brancusi and Mythology,” in Ordeal by Labyrinth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 200, as quoted in Siukonen, Uplifted Spirits, Earthbound Machines, 76–77. In this series, Brancusi pares down the bird to the smooth-surfaced, abstracted form of its upwardly thrust body, its shape evoking a propeller blade. As Hal Foster shows, with his Bird in Space of 1923, Brancusi develops both the materialist and idealist sides of modern sculpture’s dialectic: on the one hand, bronze polished to reflect its site, and on the other, the ascendant, pure form of the idea of flight. See Hal Foster, “The Un/making of Sculpture” (1998), in Richard Serra, ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press), 180. This dialectic bears on Bontecou’s reliefs’ structure of medium hybridity, through which Bontecou develops both an illusion of limitless space, predicated on the generic conceits of painting, and a sculptural specificity and literal materiality rendered through suturing and welding found objects. In Brancusi’s sculptures the ideal aspect soars upward into siteless space and the material plunges down towards the floor; in Bontecou’s reliefs, this axis is horizontal, with the pictorial ideal burrowing through the wall and the sculptural material pushing off it into the viewer’s space (Bontecou’s work better demonstrates going into space than going up in it, no matter her own phrasing). Another difference from Brancusi’s model—this one more significant—is that in Bontecou’s reliefs form is not “pure,” as Bontecou’s sculptures go into space precisely by hybridizing mediums. The genre of painting is, as Derrida teaches, based upon a principle of contamination, and indeed the reliefs’ designations of painting (and painting’s illusionary depth) are themselves sculptural, not pictorial, in form. Neither is material “sheer” with Bontecou, as the materials’ associations with their industrial, urban, and martial origins are not severed and also as the imprint of Bontecou’s messy artisanal labor remains undisguised in the detailed, chunky sculpturality.

109 I am grateful to conservator Marc-Christian Roussel of Roussel Art Conservation for taking the time to discuss with me his 2009 treatment of this piece. The choicest morsel from our conversation was Mr. Roussel’s explanation that the piece is constructed in three separate parts that are attached by nylon cable ties; this illuminates how Bontecou was able to make the piece in her studio and have it transported to Lincoln Center.

In a graphite drawing that dates to the same year as the Lincoln Center relief, planes swerve through the sky, being blown to smithereens; helicopters baring dental grilles face off; sets of clenched teeth fitted with wings buzz in the mayhem of battle; fragments of shrapnel are scattered throughout; an explosion blasts apart the horizon line. Though Bontecou leaves her work untitled as a matter of course, this 1964 drawing reportedly came to its collectors with the subtitular nickname “dogfighting sculptures” (dogfighting refers to a method of aerial combat between fighter aircraft popular during the Second World War). Switching out “airplanes” for “sculptures,” this title recalls Bontecou’s love-hate affair with airplanes and exemplifies the association between airplanes and sculptures in Bontecou’s thinking. Bontecou answers the question, “How do you think about the intersection between technology and nature in your work?” by saying, “I generally have an interest and a love, actually, for airplanes. They’re beautiful. And the engineering! But then again we have those beautiful war machines. They’re absolutely gorgeous. They’re sculpture flying in the air. Then they carry the guns and the bombs and the destruction. So it’s a big love and hate thing.” Bontecou, as quoted in Michael Workman, “War Machines,” Newcity, Feb. 19, 2004, 13. Bontecou also commented, “I had a sort of love-hate affair with prop-jets. I love the look of them, particularly the dark nose cone, which has a kind of power,” in her 1988 lecture at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. See the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Lecture Archive 383, The Museum of Modern Art Archive. She has commented on multiple occasions on the jet’s duality as a magnificent flying sculpture and an instrument of death, in the case of a bomber. It was a common refrain in her press interviews surrounding the 2003 retrospective: “Look at the stealth bomber. It’s a beautiful thing up in the air, a piece of sculpture! But what it does is horror!” Bontecou, as quoted in Trachtman,
One of the strange consequences of presenting the technological as an outgrowth of the natural is that humans—we who normally see ourselves as the mediator between nature and technology—are bypassed somewhere along the way (as mentioned above, one ramification is the elision of specifically human gender and sexuality). Charlotte Willard pinpointed this when she wrote that Bontecou’s sculptures “have the quality of having been born rather than made.” Given that the reliefs are evidently constructed laboriously by hand, patchworked from worn and tattered materials, and arranged in asymmetrical compositions, the impression that Bontecou’s hybrid constructions were created autonomously is not an upshot of a factory finish, the sheen of the new, or robotically engineered execution. It is primarily an effect of the appearance of many of Bontecou’s reliefs that they are capable of functioning automatically, the sense that they are alive. For example, the 1961 relief at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam seems to be puffed up, recalling a flared nostril, inflated blowfish, or ship sail having caught a gust of wind (Fig. 49). Its four wedge-like sections of bowed forms stacked atop its three oval openings appear to be expanded or unfolded. The fullness of these sections is suggested by the semi-circularity of the top edge of the frame, as if the bowed forms forced the edge of the steel frame into its curved shape. The effect of the relief immediately projecting forward from the right and left sides of the frame is also one of at-capacity fullness (the

“Lee Bontecou’s Brave New World,” 100. “Have you ever seen a stealth bomber? It’s terrible, really, but it's also a kind of miracle.” Lee Bontecou, as quoted in Lyle Rexer, “Lee Bontecou Returns from Her Faraway Planet,” The New York Times, Oct. 5, 2003. And “You look at one of those big fat bombers today, and you can’t beat it as a piece of sculpture flying through the air—and then it goes and kills people.” Bontecou, as quoted in Doug Harvey, “Back From the Void: Lee Bontecou, 30 Years Later,” L.A. Weekly, Oct. 9, 2003 http://www.laweekly.com/content/printVersion/37297. In the mid-1960s Bontecou made model airplanes and submarines as a hobby, and she used the same materials—balsa wood, paper, silk mesh, and glue—to create a handful of delicate Cocoon sculptures that evoke canoes and chrysalises.


The perception that the objects might function dates back to Judd, who describes a relief as a “threatening and possibly functioning object” in “Lee Bontecou,” 178.
depths of other reliefs are more gradually built from gentle sloping at the sides towards the central, outermost projections). Crucially, the wedge-like sections at the top of the relief also seem to be capable of deflating, of exhaling, of collapsing and folding down into a neatly contained, nearly flat form. As with other reliefs, the construction of the Stedelijk piece evokes the economy and technology of the overlapping segments of a shrimp’s exoskeleton or an artichoke bud’s scales. So, too, the 1961 relief at the Modern appears to possess the photonastic or nyctonastic abilities of those varieties of flowers whose petals daily splay themselves open to the sun (or the moon) and then close up again at dusk (or dawn) according to circadian rhythms (Fig. 50). If it were manipulable, each of its sections might fold down to cover the gaping hole at the relief’s center. Still other reliefs give the impression of spontaneous regeneration, along the lines of a snake shedding its skin or a hermit crab molting its carapace. For instance, the 1959–60 relief in the collection of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf is comprised, at its base, of a relief very much recalling the early reliefs at the Modern and the Johnson Museum (Fig. 51). Superimposed upon this, a second relief “layer” shares the same square frame as the first, but its circular opening is vast enough to permit unobstructed visual access to the first layer of relief. The inner relief appears to be sloughing off the outer, pushing through its broad aperture. Machinic materials (steel rods, copper wire, small metal machine parts, industrial canvas, military paraphernalia) may evoke industrial designs (airplanes, dashboards, and turbines) but their compositions are patterned after natural mechanisms.

Furthermore, and all the more devastating, is the indication that, not only do the reliefs seem to function automatically, they seem to have hybridized automatically.
Surveying a number of Bontecou’s reliefs, one imagines that they spontaneously formed themselves in radioactive pools from the debris of the city, industry, or war (or all three). The mid-size 1961 relief in the collection of the Frankel Foundation seems to be one such creature (Fig. 52). Set back from the rim of its round aperture, two strips of canvas frame a circular plane of vertical metal bars. Behind these bars hangs a plane of metal saw blades. As in other reliefs, a horizontal gap in the middle of the blades denotes a set of upper and lower teeth (through this gap, the sheet of velvet strung across the back is visible), and the frosting of white paint contributes to the dental “look.” The saw blades also recall upper and lower eyelids, the whole relief a cyclops. The surface of this relief, unlike other reliefs that are made by stretching and sewing large swaths of canvas, is made of irregularly shaped, small scraps of canvas piled onto a fiberglass surface and affixed with glue. Two balls, perhaps tennis balls, one red, the other white, are also embedded into the dense accumulation of materials on the surface, as well as pieces of knit fabric (sock, I suspect), denim, string, copper wire, thread, metal washers, screen mesh, and grains of dirt and dust—presumably the odds and ends from other reliefs littering Bontecou’s studio floor, swept into a dustpan, and deposited onto this Swamp Thing-like relief. This relief along with the Bell Gallery and Whitney reliefs discussed above recall post-apocalyptic cyborgs rising from the gutter, from the ashes, from a toxic swamp, rattletrap radioactive creatures, jury-rigged from the remainders of nuclear exchange, new breeds automatically born of biological organisms and technological materials.

Indeed, the materials in such reliefs are not only sculpturally specific in the sense of being dimensional, objective, immediate, outward, for as martial contents, they are
also specific to the reliefs’ violent forms. More than six-feet tall, nearly six-feet wide, and
over two-feet deep, the 1962 Bell Gallery relief growls through clenched saw blade teeth
at the dead center of the composition. It menaces, but it is also a kind of wounded soldier,
an injured veteran, ramshackle in its reconstitution through military paraphernalia: leather
belts and handles, buckles, and straps dangling from grommeted canvas knapsacks and
duffle bags; army green fabrics with the stenciled black lettering of (possibly) military
service serial numbers and names, such as “J. SHEEHAN 008746” (both last names and
brand logos appear in this relief, demonstrating a kind of equivalence between the
military and the industrial); and two steel combat helmets conjoined and fenced off
behind a convex metal grid below the central mound. Scattered throughout are sections of
metal bands from which white-painted pipes peek through peeled back strips of metal,
like cannons or gun barrels protruding from a trench. A form evoking the fan of a
propeller jet in the bottom left is made partially of metal eyeshades from a combat
helmet. Bontecou placed similar metal eyeshades in the 1961 Whitney relief, caging them
behind vertical steel bars at the left of the composition. Two dirty, hulking sections of
rope, nooses or nautical remnants, hang from canvas handles attached to the aperture of
the Whitney relief. In that piece, too, black metal gums and spray-painted white teeth bite
into a grimace set behind the opening of the central hole. This, I gather, is what Judd
refers to as that which is “too literally ferocious” and Ashton as “so obvious.” (Here the
two critics concur that in the more successful reliefs the central form of the black hole
subsumes the specificity of the individual material objects, and in the less successful
reliefs ferocity and horror are conveyed literally and obviously by the ferocity and horror
associated with the various material components.) And it is this which the critics cannot assimilate into their conceptions of Bontecou’s reliefs.

As I have insisted, the reliefs’ materials are not sublated as pure form, optical image, or raw matter. Kirsten Swenson offers a cogent social history of Bontecou’s reliefs, analyzing Bontecou’s incorporation of “artifacts of fear,” such as saw blades, gas masks, and helmets.¹¹² For Swenson, the Whitney Museum’s “martial” relief, “visually fitted to fire projectiles, tear flesh, and perhaps exude poison gas through vents or holes,” corresponds to Cold War tensions. In 1961, the date of the relief, Eisenhower warned of the potential “unwarranted influence” of the developing military-industrial complex, Kennedy ordered the invasion of Cuba’s Bay of Pigs, East Germany constructed the Berlin Wall, and anxiety about nuclear attack continued to mount, climaxing with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (the date of the Bell Gallery relief).¹¹³

Gas masks, helmets, airplane parts, gun barrels, saw blades, rope, tents, nail, rucksacks—all these materials are materiel, a term that, in a military context, denotes the

¹¹² Though I have not been able to determine where such a material might be found in any of Bontecou’s reliefs, references to Bontecou’s use of gas masks are ubiquitous in the literature, and Bontecou herself makes several references to incorporating gas masks into her wall reliefs. See Munro, Originals, 386; see also Oral history interview with Lee Bontecou, 2009 Jan. 10, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

supplies required to undertake a mission, or, following Bontecou, what we might call “war equipment.” Dissertationist Lesley Shipley observes that Bontecou conveys the “human side of war” through the particularly intimate war materials she uses—namely, helmets, tents, and duffel bags, which soldiers wear, sleep in, and carry on their bodies. But it seems that these materials that were once extensions of the human body have transformed into extensions of a non-human body.

Above, I proposed that in being medium hybrids Bontecou’s reliefs divest from the medium specificity/specific objecthood course of sixties sculpture. Considering the materials’ identities as “war equipment” reveals the ways that Bontecou’s reliefs cannot be accounted for as modernist sculptures as prescribed by Greenberg (since they trip up the transcendence into pure opticality) or as specific objects as formulated by Judd (since they thwart central, singular compositions and the coextensiveness of structure, shape, and image). The martial materials, then, constitute just one reason that these reliefs demand rethinking dominant narratives of sculpture of this period, alongside the consequences of placing sculpture on the wall (Bontecou’s aim to get sculpture off the ground and create pictorial illusion in sculpture) in distinction from the notion that sixties sculpture is a mere repercussion of modernist painting. Moreover, the concept of “war equipment. With teeth” establishes the hybridity of the organic and the mechanical, while the materials suggest that it is war—nuclear war, the most disastrous threat of the Cold

114 See Lesley E. Shipley, Specific Objects: Lee Bontecou’s Steel and Canvas Reliefs, 1959–1964 (Ph.D. Diss. Bryn Mawr College, 2011), 164. Tarpaulin, rucksack, nails, scraps of metal, and helmets are the clunky, palpable materials of war (materiel), distinguished from the abstraction of war in the period of the Cold War—the space race, domino theory, mutually assured deterrence, satellites (both space satellites and proxy wars), the battle for hearts and minds. This suggests a different take on the well-established notion of “Cold War abstraction” that concerns the rhetorical and propagandistic uses of Abstract Expressionist painting. For the standard account, see Eva Cockroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” Artforum 12 (June 1974).
War—that engenders this hybridity, one ramification of which appears to be the elimination of the human species.¹¹⁵

In her next body of work, vacuum-formed plastic sculptures, Bontecou fully develops the connections between the specificity and generalization of mediums and the post-apocalyptic, posthuman hybridity of the organic and mechanical that she explores in her wall reliefs. It was by the late 1960s and certainly by 1971 when Bontecou showed her plastic sculptures, which are the subject of the next chapter, that the specific medium had been outmoded by the expanded field of practice, that the war on nature doomed the existence of natural species, and that Bontecou’s choice of material—plastic—could address the capacities and fates of modernist sculpture and of the environment, for the material is itself a hybrid. In Chapter Three I examine the ways in which the kind of automatic self-generation Bontecou’s organic-mechanical hybrid wall reliefs exhibit is comprehensible within the frameworks of modernist sculptural autonomy and the autonomy of nature.

¹¹⁵ For Marshall McLuhan, weapons were a medium, a term which he uses interchangeably with media and technology. In his Understanding Media of 1964, the so-called father of media studies postulates that the media (a capacious term that accommodates the light bulb, television, airplanes, comics, automation, the press, clothing, the wheel, and of course artistic mediums) are “extensions of man.” Eerily echoing Bontecou, his entry on “Weapons” describes the rifle as an extension of our teeth. See McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964; repr. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994), 341. According to McLuhan, while mechanical technologies extend our bodies, in the new electric age (also called the information age), the media extend our central nervous systems. In other words, the media (or mediums or technologies) make us cybernetic organisms (cyborgs). McLuhan’s thesis therefore aligns with my own comparison of the generically pictorial/specifically sculptural to the generally natural/specifically technological because, in his thinking, technologies are mediums which possess a hybrid relation to organic bodies as sensory prosthetics. As well, the corollary to McLuhan’s famous dictum “the medium is the message” is his “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium”; for instance, the content of the press is literary statement, the content of the book is speech, and the content of the movie is the novel. See McLuhan, Understanding Media, 8, 305. Though this is understood as the effect of technological development, with the newer medium encapsulating the older one, we might still think of my claim that the genre of Bontecou’s sculpture is another medium (i.e., painting) in this context.
Chapter Three

Plastic Arts: Vacuum-Formed Fish and Flowers

Species Hybridity

“Since my early years until now, the natural world with all its visual wonders and horrors—man-made devices with their mind boggling engineering feats and destructive abominations, the elusive human nature and its multiple ramifications from the sublime to unbelievable abhorrences—to me are all one.”

The above sentence comes from an artist’s statement included in a 2003 press release Bontecou issued to correct erroneous assumptions about her work and its associations with “unrelated artists” by stating her “true inspirations” and “actual influences.” She clarifies that “the primary influences on [her] work have occurred” in “the spirit of this feeling”—the feeling of the oneness of the natural world’s wonders and horrors, of its definition by human-made devices and human nature. Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures of fish and flower forms suggest that the natural world, if not one with, has hybridized with the “mind boggling engineering feats and destructive

2 The statement was published as “Statement by Lee Bontecou” on the Web site ereleases.com on September 25, 2003, and as “Artist’s Statement” in the front pages of the catalogue Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective, though it did not make it into the first hardbound editions, precisely because it was provoked by the essays in the catalogue. In the preface to the statement, the online press release singles out Robert Storr’s essay for the retrospective catalogue and criticizes Storr for failing to interview Bontecou or view her recent work (Storr’s essay positions her work in relation to that of the Futurists, Marcel Duchamp, Lucio Fontana, and Alberto Burri, among others). Against such “irrelevant” contextualizations, Bontecou, in her statement, identifies the primary influence on her work as the feeling of the oneness of the natural world. The secondary feeling in which her work was made, she recounts, is the excitement of seeing Greek vases and the African halls at the Metropolitan; fossils, bones, and panoramas at the Museum of Natural History; and Brancusi at the Modern. The individuals who influenced her work are her friends, including the scroll painter Doc Group. Finally, she highlights the energy and desire for “boundless freedom” that the “period” of Abstract Expressionism spread over her and her contemporaries, of whom she names John Chamberlain, Tom Doyle, and William Giles (the latter is her husband and press contact for the 2003 press release). See Bontecou, “Artist’s Statement,” 12.
abominations” of “man-made devices,” or, more particularly, with those devices’ transmutative effects. The fish are clad in screwed-on armor (see Fig. 53), and the flowers wear gas masks (see Fig. 54). Her plant and marine forms are freakish, post-apocalyptic mutants outfitted for and by a violent ecology, hybrids of the natural and the artificial.

Not only the natural but the traditional, too, is irrevocably collapsed with the synthetic in this body of work. In creating her flora and fauna sculptures from 1967 to 1971 Bontecou employed traditional methods of sculpture-making. These include the subtractive process of creating the parts of the mold by “old-fashioned carving” and the additive process of affixing the carved parts together to assemble the whole mold; the positive and negative of cast and mold; and, more broadly, the artisanal manufacture of crafting sculpture from start to finish, by oneself, in the studio. Bontecou engaged traditional methods by means of synthetic materials, though: Styrofoam, the mold material which she acquired in log form from an airplane factory; sheets of plastic, cast when hot and malleable (a homemade vacuuming contraption evacuates air such that the plastic forms to, hardens around, and replicates the foamed polystyrene mold in a matter of minutes); aniline dyes to tint the plastic; acrylic bases; and plastic pins and epoxy to fasten together the vacuum-formed parts. Little is known about how Bontecou came to these methods and materials, except that through her friends Jack Beal and Sondra

4 Elisabeth Sussman speculates that the first of the plastic sculptures is Untitled, 1967, a vacuum-formed plastic sculpture which pairs a taller gas mask-wearing flower in full bloom and a shorter bud (see Fig. 54). See Sussman, “Silent Spring,” in Lee Bontecou: Vacuum-Formed Sculptures and Related Drawings (New York: Knoedler and Company, 2007), 7.
5 Bontecou recalls, “I went to Long Island, and got these big logs that were a very fine Styrofoam which was used for bulkheads in airplanes or canoes, or whatever. And I started carving this stuff.” See Oral history interview with Lee Bontecou, 2009 Jan. 10, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
Freckleton Beal she met a sculptor named Lindsey Decker who was building a vacuum former just as Bontecou was making his acquaintance. Her first vacuum-formed sculptures were cast in Decker’s machine; soon thereafter Bontecou constructed her own vacuum-former in her studio on Wooster Street. She began making flower sculptures in 1967 and made the first fish forms two years later, but she reports that she did not show the plastic sculptures to anybody until they were debuted at Leo Castelli Gallery.6

Castelli showed the vacuum-formed plastic sculptures and related drawings in Bontecou’s fourth and final solo show at his gallery in 1971. In a review of the exhibition for *The New York Times*, critic James R. Mellow brings the plastic works to bear on Bontecou’s earlier wall reliefs, recalling that in the 1960s Bontecou had been hailed “quite justifiably” as one of the “bright new talents of the decade.” But that earlier work is discredited by the recent work: in light of the new plastic work’s “reversion” to “an imagery very definitely drawn from nature and far removed from the unadorned boxes and cubes that were being evolved by her Minimalist colleagues,” Mellow remarks, “one begins to suspect that her relationship to that group was largely tangential.” In hindsight, “even her unidentifiable, sinister images of the early and middle sixties now seem to carry hidden, naturalistic associations.” Mellow continues his reassessment, asserting that Bontecou is less a “new object-maker gone wrong, backsliding into realism,” and more “a strange naturalist all along.”7 I believe that the reason the retrospective view of the metal and fabric reliefs disappoints Mellow concerns specificity.

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6 Ibid. In this interview, Bontecou implies that her large-scale plastic sculptures were formed in Decker’s large vacuum-form machine, and that her smaller sculptures were formed in the machine which she constructed herself and which had a small bed.

Mellow defines the “class of art object” to which Bontecou’s reliefs had once seemed to him to belong as “not quite painting, nor sculpture either, but a hybrid that was intended to be more viable than each of the older, conventional forms.” With this phrasing, Mellow follows Donald Judd’s formulation of the “specific object” laid out in his texts on Bontecou and ultimately in his 1965 essay “Specific Objects” (the “new three-dimensional work” is “neither painting nor sculpture”). By contrast, Bontecou’s fish and flower work is resolutely sculptural and so cannot be considered “new object” work. But it is not only their medium specificity that fails, in Mellow’s analysis. The fish and flowers’ “strange” naturalism and “fussy” detailing are “dissatisfying” in comparison to the “formal independence and authority” that marked Bontecou’s previous style. The plastic work, Mellow finds, tends to be too “illustrational,” too “anecdotal.” I propose that the illustrational and anecdotal qualities evoke a new species of creature, rather than a new species of object. Which is to say, the plastic sculptures were the wrong kind of hybrids for Mellow: hybrids of categories of nature and technology rather than of mediums.

and mid-sixties Minimalist reliefs, since “hidden naturalism” is the accusation Michael Fried levels at literal art (or Minimalism) in his landmark essay “Art and Objecthood” (1967), in Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

In a two-paragraph long review of the Leo Castelli Gallery show, Marjorie Welsh also uses the term hybrid. She observes that the drawings in the exhibit “disclose some of these ‘eyes’ [the “caverns” seen also in the metal and fabric wall reliefs] growing into a meticulous complex of shapes—a head of a nightmarish fish or flower or hybrid of the two.” In sculpture, however, the “fantastic creatures lose their sting.” See Welsh, “Art,” Manhattan East, June 1, 1971, 2. Like Welsh, critic John Canaday prefers the drawings in the exhibition to the sculptures. He expresses the hope that Bontecou is already “off on a new tack by now,” for “these new fantasies, engaging though they are, strike [him] as the least imaginative work of this imaginatively gifted artist.” See Canaday, “Art: New Talent in Printmaking Show,” The New York Times, May 22, 1971, 27.


Bontecou’s fish appear to be marked by genetic mutations, results of a toxic environment in which and against which they are specially designed to survive. The modernist precept “form follows function” now takes on a Darwinian valence. In works such as *Untitled*, 1970, the panels bolted onto the outside of the scale-patterned skin of the fish recall heavy artillery or medieval armor (as with her wall reliefs, all of Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures are untitled; see Fig. 53). The term “iron lung” is reconfigured for the gills, which also read as metal, such as the faceting of dirigibles. Fins are brittle and sharp, aerodynamic as ship sails. Paranoid eyeballs and maniacal grins littered with piranha teeth are particularly illustrative of the madcap murky waters in which these creatures seem to swim, macabre pools in which predator is prey. In some fish sculptures, cylindrical bolts spread across the body stand out as warts or tumors, and in others, such as *Untitled*, 1970, shark teeth-like spears nail together the plastic layers of the sculpture (see Fig. 3). This creature’s tail is bent at hinged sections, suggesting that it is mechanized. At the same time, red, bloody coagulations bubbling up where fins adjoin to bodies insist upon the flesh and gore of the plastic material. Dopey little fish nestled in the body cavities or caught in the snouts of larger fish demonstrate that the rule is eat-or-be-eaten (see Fig. 55).

Like her soot drawings of 1958, the drawings that relate to Bontecou’s plastic sculptures rely on the nebulous and foreign depths of black. Executed on black paper with white charcoal, they provide meticulous renderings of the fish and flowers to which Bontecou’s vacuum-formed sculptures give three-dimensional form. Their dates indicate that the drawings are neither studies of completed sculptures nor sketches for incipient ones, but complements to the sculptures, made in tandem to them. They pictorially flesh
out the post-apocalyptic worldscape from which those sculptures are extracted as specimens. With a very fine hand, in subtle gradations of white charcoal against black paper Bontecou depicts the profiles of three fish in *Untitled* of 1970 (Fig. 56). The top and bottom fish are meatier than the one in the middle—their bodies are relatively larger and fuller, the bellies bulging, almost whale-like. The bottom fish uses its sharp teeth to catch a small fish, the protruding tail of which is faintly rendered in white outline. A circular, window-like opening in the plate armoring across the side of the bottom fish’s body, which recalls the circular apertures of the reliefs, exposes another dozen previously ingested small fish. The food chain continues inside that windowed belly where shark-toothed fish bite into each other. Facing the viewer, as if looking out that window, the eyes of the fish within the fish gnawing on fellow fish are dilated with appetite and self-defensive wariness. There is a robotic, procedural quality to their merciless indifference, as if the fish are streaming forward on an underwater conveyer belt, catch-as-catch-can with their drain-mouths. The middle fish in this same 1970 drawing has also caught in its mouth a smaller fish, only the tail end of which emerges, and there is already a fish inside its stomach which appears to be swimming into the view of the windowed belly, for its

11 Mellow concurs: “That the sculptures serve as three-dimensional models of an eerie fantasy world, one can determine from the large drawings in chalk and pencil which have also been included in the exhibition. A few of these depict the creatures in their native habitats—the luminous fish swimming in black waters; the flowers in nocturnal bloom, looking prim and poisonous.” See ibid., D19.
12 Charcoal is a carbon, like soot.
13 Welsh also observes that the “eyes” recall the “caverns” seen in the metal and fabric wall reliefs in “Art,” 2.
14 It has been suggested that the small fish nestled inside larger fish in both sculptural form and in the drawings represent babies. But given how often Bontecou depicts a smaller fish caught in the mouth of a large fish, and given the violence depicted throughout these sculptures and drawings, I am convinced that this is a digestive, not uteran, process. I would also venture that the “pregnancy interpretation” stems from Bontecou’s own motherhood (she gave birth to her daughter, Valerie Giles, in late 1966/early 1967), and I consider this interpretation to reflect a problematic form of psychobiography at best.
own tail is occluded. The absent tail of the fish inside the gullet matches up with the tail of the fish caught in the mouth, and the effect is that of an endless cycle of consumption.

*Untitled*, 1970–2006, depicts a school of fish, the white highlights of which against the black ground suggest radioactive glow (Fig. 57). A massive fish in the center is surrounded by relatively smaller fish of various sizes and various scale patterns (on some fish horizontal rows of circles across the top of the body remind us of submarine riveting and the bolts Bontecou used to nail together her plastic sculptures). Nearly all are seen in profile, their fins pushed back and air bubbles trailing behind them, giving their swim a sense of purpose (though the largest fish fans its tail back and tilts its face towards the viewer slightly, and the fish in the upper left that merges into the group is viewed from an oblique angle). Each is equipped with a metal mask, the main function of which seems to be the disk-like filter that fits over the mouth. Through the perforations in the drains we spot mouths, even lips in the larger fish. These drains attach to masks with irregularly shaped eyeholes, some of which reveal rounded, alert, terrified eyeballs, while others cover the eyes and instead reveal blackness or scaled skins. Here again, there is a sense of forward motion, of purpose, and of the “safety in numbers” ethos of a gang. The nomenclature “school” suggests as well that the biggest fish is training the smaller fish in the ways of this dark, nocturnal sea, though who is to say it might not turn around and consume them? Here, depth does not signify illusion (as in “illusionary depth,” the achievement of which propelled Bontecou’s wall reliefs) but distance—unfathomably deep waters, a far-flung, future universe.

15 The date indicates that Bontecou left the drawing alone for a number of years and finished it—or decided it was finished—in preparation for the 2007 show at Knoedler & Co. Gallery.
As with the fish sculptures, the flower sculptures are sexual, infertile, fleshy, limp, carnivorous, poisoned, noxious, fossilized, primordial, and futuristic all at once. Petals are perky and trim, evenly fanned about hemispheric heads, tapering into delicate tips like curly brackets, or more suggestively, like nipples (see Fig. 58). But if these flowers recall the body, it is a body at once wounded and clinical, its pathologies both malignant and hygienic. The filaments and stamen, stigma and styles that emerge from these flower heads bring to mind the inert plastic tubing of intravenous drips. In 1969’s *Untitled* flower sculpture, it appears that red blood clots plug up ends of the tubes (I believe the red sections are sections of electrical wire, stuffed into the tubes; Fig. 59, Fig. 60). Though they correspond to the reproductive organs of flowers, these tubes are not pert; they do not offer their pollen to the birds and the bees. Instead, they are hypertrophied, drooping, flaccid. Bontecou routed some tubes back into the sculptures’ acrylic resin bases, a short-circuiting that simultaneously suggests self-fertilization and sterility (see Fig. 61). The imbrication of replication or regeneration and violence in the atomic age worldscape from which these specimens appear to be extracted is redolent of Judd’s 1963 observation about Bontecou’s reliefs: “The image extends from something as social as war to something as private as sex, making one an aspect of the other.”

The collapse of the organic and the mechanical advances a specificity which is positioned in relation both to evolutionary, survivalist specialization and to modernist medium specificity, both to ecology and to art history. Bontecou’s sculptures illustrate

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species that are natural-synthetic hybrids, whereby specificity is posed against nature in the face of extinction and against sculpture in the face of extinction.\textsuperscript{17}

The bodies of these creatures illustrate or “anecdotalize” (to mine Mellow’s vocabulary) a worldscape in which gene mutation amounts less to aberrance and more to evolutionary necessity. The traits exhibited by Bontecou’s creatures are determined by this alluded-to worldscape, and, falling in line with Darwin’s theory of evolutionary selection, their survival (or extinction) is determined by their ability to adapt to this environment—to specialize. Given the ravages of this evoked wasteland, the survival of the fittest in their post-apocalyptic environment might count as a Pyrrhic victory. They seem designed to continue to survive nonetheless. The flowers, for example, have been refurbished, salvaged parts cobbled together with Frankenstein monster bolts, hooked up to wheelchair-like prosthetic devices, and hammered deeply into their frosted square bases (see Fig. 62). With leaves like arms like propeller blades and organs like fallopian tubes like gas mask hoses, their hybridizational capabilities are articulated as a value opposed to extinction.

In the previous chapter I outlined the etymological connections between specificity and species, to which specialization is also related, and between genre, gene, general, and gender. I defined hybridity as the asymmetrical “both/and” of the general and the specific, arguing that Bontecou’s wall reliefs are paintings generically and

\textsuperscript{17} The sometimes intersecting, sometimes parallel relationship between the environment and art is treated in the anthology Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics, ed. Arnold Berleant (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2002). In the volume’s introduction, Berleant points out that Kant developed his aesthetic views with reference to nature, while Holmes Ralston III, in “From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics,” observes that aesthetic experience is the most common starting point for an environmental ethic. In “The Two Aesthetic Cultures: The Great Analogy of Art and the Environment,” Yrjö Sepänmaa argues that the art world and the environmental world together form aesthetic culture.
sculptures specifically. As they pertain to hybridity in her fish and flowers body of work, the general and the specific are inextricable from one another. Animal and vegetable genetic matter has already mutated with artificial material under the survivalist conditions of adaptive specialization to deliver new natural-synthetic hybrids, organic-mechanical species. In this respect, specificity has little to do with the purity of mediums and has much to do with environmental pollution.

**Monumentality**

The location of two eight-foot tall flower sculptures is unknown; they are lost, most likely destroyed; they exist only in photographic reproduction. One appears but once in the photographic record, in an archived black-and-white installation shot of the 1971 Castelli Gallery show. It is immediately recognizable as a full-scale version of the thirty-inch tall flower sculpture in the private collection of Tony and Gail Ganz (Fig. 63). Eight plastic tubes trail along the base of the Ganzes’s flower sculpture, and three elements arise from that base: the pipe of the stalk which arches back before it blossoms into the bulbous flower head, and two outward-flaring, surfboard-shaped leaves which are set behind, but rise taller than, the protruding flower. It is transparent save for six soot-tinted circular petals and the dark frosting at the tips of the leaves flanking the flower on either side (Mellow describes the giant-sized version as “milky white” in color; Fig. 64). The other eight-foot tall, lost flower sculpture, pictured in several, multiply reproduced photographs, is tinted to a purplish-black with dark soot (Fig. 65). It features a columnar, tri-partite stalk, several layers of tear-shaped petals, and half a dozen clear petals.  

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plastic tubes which sprout from the flower head and graze the cloudy cubic base in which
the sculpture is rooted. It is particularly minatory, reminiscent of a human-eating Venus
Flytrap as in The Little Shop of Horrors, with tentacles of such a size that they could
ensnare its viewers.\(^{19}\)

The statuesque size, solid cubic pedestal, and tall, narrow shape of both large-
scale flower sculptures recall a monument, and many of the flowers that are much smaller
at heights of nineteen, twenty-one, or thirty inches are legible as maquettes for sculptural
monuments as massive as the lost giant flowers. In this, I disagree with critic Lil Picard
who describes the plastic sculptures as “glassy and lovely,” and concludes, “The whole
thing looks a little like Steuben Glass: decorative objects, crystal knickknacks for the
affluent, haute bourgeois home, only bigger.”\(^{20}\) Rather than view the sculptures as large
versions of small, tchotchke-like things, I understand the majority of Bontecou’s plastic
works to be small versions of large, monumental sculptures. The spine-like curvature at
the necks of the stalks on the small sculptures endows these wilting loners with their
delected character. By the same token, this gesture is indistinguishable from that of a
threatening advance, for the downward angle of the flowers’ heads possesses a looming
quality. As a result of this angling, I imagine them as larger than they are, as larger than I
am. I imagine complementing their overhang by craning back my neck. The monumental
quality of even the small flowers is thus effected not only by their statuesque proportions

\(^{19}\) Roger Corman’s The Little Shop of Horrors was released in 1960.
Objekte, Kristall-Nippes für das gut bürgerliche, finanziell wohlfundierte Heim, nur grosser, und aus den
Blüten spriessen Spaghettiröhnen wie Fühler, Fangarme, Polypen” (my translation). Lil Picard, “Die neuen
but by the logic of scale by which in order to meet them vis-à-vis the viewer must be beneath them.

The connection between looming over the observer and the monument comes by way of Tony Smith. In an exchange with Sam Wagstaff—an epigraph in Robert Morris’s 1966 “Notes on Sculpture, Part II” made a polemic by its citation in Michael Fried’s 1967 “Art and Objecthood”—Smith explains that the dimensions of his six-foot cube of 1962, Die, qualify it as neither an object, of which an observer can see over the top, nor a monument, which looms over the observer.21 Morris holds that the larger an object is in proportion to the size of the spectator, the more the quality of publicness is attached to it. Because one keeps one’s distance from a large object in order to take in the view of it, a more monumentally-scaled object includes more of the spatial field around it than a small object does, and this distance both structures the public mode and makes physical participation necessary.22 Bontecou’s extant flower sculptures are located on the smaller end of what Morris calls the “size range of useless three-dimensional things”23 (Picard’s knick-knacks). But the existence of two large-scale pieces, lost though they are, and the implications that the more intimate versions function as maquettes for pieces that would loom over the observer demonstrate the relevance of the term monument to this discussion of Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculpture—a relevance buoyed by the writings of Robert Smithson and one that resituates Rosalind Krauss’s influential claim.

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22 Ibid., 231. For Morris, this distance is what allows the object to be “but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic.” See ibid., 232. Michael Fried finds this scale to be akin to that of a “surrogate person” or “kind of statue,” and he finds the distance distancing, two factors in his suggestion that literalist art such as Smith’s and Morris’s is anthropomorphic. See Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 156.
that 1960s sculpture had become the negative condition of the monument (to be discussed below).

The memorial rhetoric in which the fish and flowers speak further reinforces the notion of the monument, a monument being, according to the Latin, a “thing that reminds” (*monumentum* comes from *monēre*, meaning “to remind”). A thing, as Sigfried Giedion elaborates, “to be transmitted to later generations.”

Bontecou’s plastic sculptures operate as mnemonics for the remembrance of nature, yet they do not heroicize or grieve the passing of an erstwhile version of nature. Even as the sculptures illustrate a version of nature inseparable from plastic, and even as they urgently collect memories of nature while such memories can still be formed, they are not precisely or not solely warnings about impending environmental degradation. As I will explain further, in the way that the flowers appear to thrive on DDT’ed soil and the fish appear to be quenched by acid rain, they are affirmative, too.

Since the vacuum-formed plastic works depict the embeddedness of post-atomic warfare synthetics in the constitution of plant and animal life, they can appear to articulate quasi-political “statements” about the dire state of the environment: for example, Elizabeth A. T. Smith considers the plastic works to have “functioned as a statement about Bontecou’s growing environmental concerns…by combining elements of nature and mechanistic culture.”

Similarly, Mona Hadler asserts, “She used her medium to express her strong ecological concerns in the ironic social message that the world had

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become a place for plastic flowers.” For Jo Applin, “The plants register as horrific harbingers of a future with no clean air or natural life, and the artificial plastic of the flowers contrasts sharply with the attendant suggestion of organic material.” And Elisabeth Sussman argues that the plant sculptures, especially those outfitted with gas mask forms, hint at “the possible threats to natural life of poisonous gasses.” These authors approach a roughly similar idea: the sculptures serve as concerned and disconcerted doomsday warnings, foreboding global destruction in lightly coded cautionary tales.

Sussman’s essay helpfully refers to *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson’s bestselling 1962 book on the long-term effects of misusing chemical pesticides. Its title names a fabled world in which, suddenly, an evil spell settles on a small farming community. Chickens, cattle, and sheep perish; illness strikes the farmers’ families; children die of diseases that doctors cannot explain; the birds disappear, leaving silence over the fields, woods, and marshes; hens brood but no chickens hatch; livestock litters do not survive; trees bloom but no bees pollinate them. Though no single community has suffered all these misfortunes, Carson exhorts, each of these disasters has actually occurred in some town in America. The tragedy she imagines is already on its way to becoming a reality, and *Silent Spring* pleads for the use of biologic alternatives to synthetic chemicals.

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27 Jo Applin, “Surviving Reality,” *Tate Papers* no. 14 (Autumn 2010), http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/10autumn/applin.shtm. Applin goes on to suggest that the “ecological concerns” foregrounded in the plant forms also haunted the ambiguous, abstract references to the natural world in Bontecou’s earlier wall reliefs.
28 Sussman’s is the only published essay that gives sustained attention to this set of works and related drawings, and the 2007 Knoedler & Co. Gallery exhibition (the catalogue for which Sussman’s essay was written) was the first dedicated to them since their 1971 debut at Leo Castelli Gallery.
In her introduction to the 2002 edition of *Silent Spring*, Carson’s biographer, Linda Lear, lauds Carson’s book for proving that “our bodies are not boundaries,” that we are permeable and thus vulnerable to pesticides’ ills. Carson’s work typified the mid-twentieth-century shift in environmental thought toward an ecological perspective which American culture historian Leo Marx identifies as the belief that humanity and “man’s works” are “wholly and ineluctably embedded in the tissue of natural processes.” By contrast, Marx describes the conservationist movement’s characterization of nature as a world of useful and pretty objects placed “out there” for the benefit of humankind (as scenery or as natural resources, for instance). Carson’s book thus represented a watershed in 1962 because its systemic, holistic view showed that the reach of the human world penetrates the very fiber of the natural world. This permeation makes the entire world unfit for all life: in our search to “control a few unwanted species,” Carson proclaims, we have “contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death” to our own kind. Insecticides would be more appropriately called “biocides.”

agent of the popular environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s and took shape with the first Earth Day, observed on April 21, 1970.

31 Leo Marx, “American Institutions and the Ecological Ideal,” in *Arts of the Environment*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1972), 79. Amanda Boetzkes allies the view of the planet as a “standing reserve” of resources for human consumption with Heidegger in *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 12. In his 2007 book, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Timothy Morton argues that “the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.” He focuses on the latter, in particular on Romantic period literature, because the “fantasies we have about nature” take shape (and dissolve) in art. How we have conceptualized nature—it is “as a transcendental, unified, independent category”—is the problem: “by setting up nature as an object ‘over there’” the “ambient poetics” of nature writing (the attempt to conjure or imitate immediate material surroundings) “re-establishes the very separation it seeks to abolish.” See Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1, 13, 125.
According to Carson, by 1962 almost 500 new chemicals annually found their way into use in the United States alone. “The figure is staggering and its implications are not easily grasped—500 new chemicals to which the bodies of men and animals are required somehow to adapt each year, chemicals totally outside the limits of biologic experience.”

Framing the chemical sprays, dusts, and aerosols of peacetime by the atomic age, she continues:

Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man’s total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm—substances that accumulate in the tissues of plants and animals and even penetrate the germ cells to shatter or alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends.

Carson warns that by inadvertence we might be bringing about “gene mutations,” as pesticides and other chemicals spreading in our air, water, and soil become integrated into the hereditary make-up of plants, wildlife, and humans.

With Silent Spring’s approach to ecology, which one scholar defines as “the fragile, complex, and unpredictable interconnections between living systems,” Carson definitively demonstrates that nature is not an autonomous realm. However, if the infiltration of synthetics through the environment and into the body diseases and kills Carson’s human and animal creatures and plant life, whether fabled or observed, in Bontecou’s work the natural lives on precisely because it has hybridized with the

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33 Ibid., 7.
34 Ibid., 8.
synthetic. As I have argued, gene mutations are a positive feature in the creatures that Bontecou produces—they are the marks of the species’ perseverance, apparently having survived our abominations and “abhorrences.” By these lights, the sculptures are not precisely or not solely warnings about impending environmental destruction and devastation.\textsuperscript{36} For though the armored and tumorous neoplasms of the fish and the hypertrophy and prosthetics of the flowers signify anthropogenic environmental catastrophe, they also affirm the adaptive specialization that prevents their extinction.

This is not to say that the species of fish and flowers are unscathed by their fight to survive. The damage incurred by hybridization manifests particularly at those sites where discrete parts of the sculptures are fitted together (these are also the sites of the plainest evidence of Bontecou’s facture). Seams between petals and the flower heads to which they are attached by epoxy are reddened and lumpy, evoking suture and infection. Where the wall reliefs’ stitches are mechanical, stitches here are implied by scar tissue-like coagulations of plastic and epoxy. In \textit{Untitled} of 1969, the epoxy substance drips down the fish’s body, as if its fin had been jammed back in after some malfunction (Fig. 66).

The simultaneity of the creatures’ resilience and vulnerability distinguishes them from the Vorticist sculptures of the 1910s, which constitute the most significant sculptural tradition they inherit. In 1919 the leader of the British Vorticists, Wyndham

\textsuperscript{36} Carson, \textit{Silent Spring}, 13. Mona Hadler takes the title of her essay, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” from the archive of Joseph Cornell’s notes, Cornell being one of Bontecou’s early admirers and one of her few friends in the New York art world. In 1962, Cornell noted, “In other days there were the ‘mouth of truth’ and the lion’s mouths of Venetian Inquisition, then, there is the terror of the yawning mouths of cannons, of violent craters, of windows opened to receive your flight without return, and the jaws of great beasts; and now we have Lee’s warnings.” Cornell, as quoted in Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s ‘Warnings,’” 56. Hadler goes on to argue that the central hole in Bontecou’s sculptures is “Lee’s warnings,” the “springboard to the formal power and social message of Bontecou’s oeuvre.” See ibid., 61.
Lewis, declared, “The creation of a work of art is an act of the same description as the evolution of wings on the sides of a fish, the feathering of its fins; or the invention of a weapon within the body of a hymenopter to enable it to meet the terrible needs of its life.” This motif continues as Lewis describes a certain class of beetles that can “convert their faces into hideously carved and detestable masks, can grow out of their bodies menacing spikes, and throw on top of their heads sinister headdresses, overnight…Any art worth the name is, at the least, a feat of this description.” These statements analogize artistic plasticity to evolutionary hybridization in the context of a threat to vitality, as do Bontecou’s sculptures. For Lewis, the fusion of the organic and inorganic was a necessary precondition for the survival of modern life. The demand for the armorng of the subject was met by sculptures like Jacob Epstein’s 1915 Rock Drill, in which a skeletal figure mounts a drill, the upshot of their coupling already anticipated in the planar fetus form curled into the stomach. In Henri Gaudier-Bzreska’s small bronze Bird Swallowing a Fish of 1913–14, an abstracted bird rests on its belly and swallows a fish, its tail end protruding from the bird’s open beak (Fig. 67). Having been made more

38 Gaudier-Bzreska’s sculpture is perhaps the most immediate sculptural ancestor of Bontecou’s fish, and Frank Gehry’s fish forms are perhaps the most immediate descendants, at least morphologically. Between 1984 and 1986 architect Frank Gehry constructed a series of fish form lamps, fabricated from ColorCore, a laminate-like product made by the Formica Corporation. At this time Gehry began to incorporate the fish form into his building work, a direction motivated by contemporary architectural trends. By his own account, his peers, fueled by a postmodern practice of pastiche, were looking back to the temples of Greek antiquity. Gehry’s rejoinder was to look back ever further—hundreds of millions of years—to the primordial phase of the fish. (See Charles Jencks, The New Paradigm in Architecture: The Language of Post-Modernism [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002], 250; this account was also presented in the promotional literature for the Jewish Museum’s 2010 exhibition, Fish Forms: Lamps by Frank Gehry.) In architecture the piscine motif “expressionistically” distorts the abstract geometries of modernist architecture, and is intended to make buildings fluid. Whereas Gehry whimsically makes the inorganic imitate the organic, capriciously applying the fish to inorganic forms (the light bulb, the museum) in order to breathe new life into those forms, the hybridity of the organic and the inorganic in Bontecou’s work—what I have also described as the natural and the synthetic—is irreversible, entropic.
robust by the bird’s triumphant ingestion of the fish, bronze signifies the hardening of the bird’s shield. It’s a dog-eat-dog world, this sculpture tells us, and we are best advised to reduce ourselves into “a simple black human bullet.”39 By contrast, Bontecou’s vacuum-formed sculptures, though they are monumental at least insofar as they are memorial, are not triumphal. While Gaudier-Bzreska’s bronze is a guarantor of survival, Bontecou’s thin, transparent plastic emphasizes the fish and flowers’ fragility and the precariousness of their existence.

Contrasting Bontecou’s vacuum-formed sculptures with her first animal form sculptures further demonstrates the significance of the plastic material. In the 1950s in Italy Bontecou made abstracted dog, bird, and seated human figures by laying slabs of terracotta and thin sheets of metal across welded armatures reinforced with cement and wire-mesh; many of these sculptures were then cast in bronze through the lost-wax method by brothers Giovanni and Angelo Nicci of Nicci Foundry, Rome.40 Grounded Bird of 1957, for example, exists in both terracotta, housed in a private collection, and bronze, in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (the bronze’s date, 1957–58, reflects both the year of the execution of the terracotta and the cast year; Fig. 68, Fig. 69). The approximately twenty-inch tall, sixty-inch wide, and twenty-inch deep bird strides across its black-painted wooden base. The left leg, spurred with claws, extends into the haunch that stretches into the broad saddle of its body. Multiple, layered slabs cut along curving lines form the body, and the open slits between the slabs read as


40 So far as I know, each of the casts was a single cast.
gills or gashes. The body flattens out at the elongated neck, tapering into a beak and two holes, legible as nostrils as much as eyes. On the bird’s right side, a thick, arm-like chunk tapers into the form of the bird’s head, and a long, meaty tail extends from its rear. Strikingly primordial and reptilian, it recalls a dinosaur more than a bird. Similarly, Bontecou’s bronze *Untitled* of 1958 in the collection of the University of Wisconsin—Madison’s Chazen Museum of Art, depicts a squat bird with two thick, trunk-like legs and two sets of fierce talons, but with no wings (Fig. 70). It is another bird that cannot fly. Here, too, slits across its surface reveal the thickness of the slabs of the rough and chipped bronze, coated in a blue patina that emphasizes just how long the bird has been stationary.41

In her recent oral history interview with Dore Ashton for the Archives of American Art, Bontecou claims a connection between her early bronze sculptures of wingless birds made in Italy and her vacuum-formed plastic fish and flowers: “I was working with birds, and trying—and I thought, ‘Well, these birds are not going to fly, because the world is not ready.’ I mean, they have cut their wings already. I mean, I had all that pollution thing already. And the flowers I made later in plastic, where they were trying to breathe, but no one got that picture.” She says that she intended for both bodies of work to reflect the poor ecological conditions of plant and animal life: “And they [the vacuum-formed plastic sculptures] were really anti—it was really anti-pollution-oriented… And same with the birds, those big—they were birds I made in Italy, but they

41 The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art registrar’s files for *Grounded Bird*, 1957–58, note that Bontecou purposely applied no protective coating or finish to the surface in order that it may age naturally.
never could fly. So these—I don’t want them to fly, because they can’t. Not now.”

(These recent comments comprise Bontecou’s most explicit references to her environmental concerns, by far.)

But the plastic sculptures succeed where the bronze sculptures fail—namely, on the grounds of material. A couple reviewers of the 1959 show of Bontecou’s Rome-made sculptures at G Gallery, New York, noted that the animals seemed “prehistoric.” Stuart Preston wrote of the “imposing formal style of armor-plating which gives them a rigid, rather menacing, prehistoric appearance as well as lending them the ceremonial grace of ancient Chinese bronzes”; and a reviewer for Arts commented that the “large, prehistoric creatures” give the impression “of great weight and solidity, suggesting the blind timelessness of inert matter.” As these critics point out, the physical weight and the weighty tradition of bronze endow Bontecou’s atavistic birds with solidity and evoke antiquity, which contrasts with the fragility and the modernity of plastic. What’s more, traditional, natural bronze, and its associations with the “timeless,” “naturalistic” tradition of sculpture (this goes for the terracotta versions of the sculptures, too), has no clear connection to the endangerment and extinction that the wingless bird creatures face and against which their survival ostensibly is posed. Where bronze seems arbitrary, plastic is a motivated material. The entropic worldscape Bontecou’s plastic sculptures conjure is

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42 Bontecou, as quoted in Oral history interview with Lee Bontecou, 2009 Jan. 10, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. In a 1979 interview, Bontecou noted, “Some of the birds were grounded. In no way could they fly.” While she did not address any of the environmental implications of these sculptures in that interview, she did connect the bird sculptures to the wall reliefs on the basis of form and the method of working in pieces: “If you skinned them [the bird sculptures] and laid them flat, the forms would be close to my later pieces [wall reliefs].” Bontecou, as quoted in Munro, Originals, 382–83.


44 H. D. M., “Lee Bontecou,” Arts 33, no. 6 (Mar. 1959): 64. In his profile “Lee Bontecou,” Judd writes of these sculptures, “They are good, but, as she says, they could have been done at any time.” It is unclear when or where Bontecou is known to have made such a comment; in any event, Judd, too, describes these figures by their timelessness. See Judd, “Lee Bontecou,” in Complete Writings, 1959–1975, 178.
made of plastic. Plastic bodies of the natural-synthetic hybrid creatures breathe in plastic’s toxic fumes. And plastic makes the worldscape so, for plastic wreaks environmental degradation, from the plastic debris that lines ocean floors to the burning of fossil fuels like petroleum from which plastic also is derived, not to mention chemical warfare (the greatest advances in the plastics industry were made for military purposes).

The sculptures’ synthetic material attests that one point of no return has already been passed, leaving organic plants and organic sculptural materials (marble, bronze, clay) out of reach. Plastic makes visible the irrecoverableness of an environment autonomous of synthetics. Bontecou reflected in a 1979 interview,

Just as there were gas masks and Nazi helmets involved in the steel-and-canvas sculptures, so the flowers in their way were saying ‘Okay, we have to have plants. If you don’t watch out, this is all we’ll have to remember what flowers used to look like, this kind of flower that is made of plastic.’ My making them out of synthetics was a way of saying what would happen if we keep gallivanting the way we are.

This quotation clarifies that Bontecou’s flora and fauna do not offer an account of an eschatological future but of a near, inevitable future that is anticipated as a past. Her sculptures are akin to memorials to what nature will have used to look like when whatever it is that follows these plastic flowers evolves, when the condition of the world is post-plastic flower, even. Bontecou casts memories of nature while they can still be (vacuum-)formed at all. The near future of “this kind of flower that is made of plastic” has, in fact, all but arrived already, and there is a later, flowerless future that Bontecou’s

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45 In published interviews and statements, Bontecou only uses the term “memorial” once, to my knowledge. Regarding one of her wall relief pieces that was “like war equipment. With teeth,” she said, “It was a sort of memorial to my feelings [about “the killings, the Holocaust. The political scene”].” Bontecou, as quoted in Munro, Originals, 384.
46 Bontecou, as quoted in ibid., 386.
sculptures do not yet illustrate, but to which they gesture.\textsuperscript{47} We have to have plants, even if only plastic memories of them, Bontecou urges. As warnings, her sculptures express only the pathetic hope that tomorrow we will not need today’s plastic art to remember nature by.

Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures speak in multiple temporalities at the iconographic level by collapsing the primordial and the futuristic. At the grammatical level, the works memorialize in anticipation of a later remembrance of nature, as if projecting back to a near future from a further futuristic reckoning. This mix of temporalities is of a piece with contemporaneous writing in the 1960s, both art-historical and fictional: for example, in the same year that Carson published \textit{Silent Spring}, science-fiction writer J. G. Ballard told the tale in “The Garden of Time” of an aristocratic couple who live in a high-walled villa that contains a garden of “exquisite,” six-foot tall, translucent, crystal “time flowers”: “The flowers grew to a height of about six feet, their slender stems, like rods of glass, bearing a dozen leaves, the once transparent fronds frosted by the fossilized veins. At the peak of each stem was the time flower the size of a goblet, the opaque outer petals enclosing the crystal heart.” When plucked, a blossom releases a light for several days, protecting Count Axel and his wife, the story’s protagonists, from an advancing army of limitless extension by flinging the concourse

\textsuperscript{47} The tense in which Bontecou’s memorials speak is related to the future anterior theorized by Jacques Lacan. He writes, “What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming.” See Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (1953), in \textit{Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English}, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 247. However, Lacan’s thesis concerns the development of the subject, and this does not impinge upon Bontecou’s sculptures, insofar as the (human) subject seems to be extinct in the worldscape she conjures.
back in a “reversal of time.”  When the short story begins, a dozen time flowers remain. With only three or four of those fully grown and the rest being but buds, the couple’s days are numbered. When the story ends, the mob has made a ruin of the villa, and the Count and Countess have become stone statues in a thicket of thorn-bushes in the garden. The visual resonance between the transparent, crystal, six-foot tall time flowers and Bontecou’s monumental vacuum-formed plastic flowers is striking. Moreover, like Bontecou’s memorials to an imminent future anticipated as past, Ballard’s story compresses “cores of time”: a villa that immediately turns into a ruin, as if the time bought with the flowers was cashed in all at once; a garden, which is simultaneously dying, life-preserving, and already dead (it is like an “embalmed forest”); and the effort to keep the inevitable onslaught at bay by being carried back in time (reflected in the flinging back of the army) with the release of the flowers’ time cores.

The field of art history, too, theorized multiplied temporalities in this period. Also in 1962, George Kubler published The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, a polemic against the history of art and its attendant notion of style. A Yale University professor of pre-Columbian art history, Kubler intended for the “history of things” to include “both artifacts and works of art, both replicas and unique examples, both tools and expressions—in short, all materials worked by human hands under the guidance of connected ideas developed in temporal sequence.” A “shape in time” (also called a “portrait” of the collective identity) emerges from all these. Replacing linear accounts

49 Ibid., 143, 145–146.
of art-historical development, Kubler’s “form-classes” are composed of “mental problems” or forms and their “solutions” or series of artifacts. Kubler conceives of works of art as solutions to some problem, to which there have been other prior solutions and to which other solutions will likely be invented, too; prime works and replications are early and late versions of the same action.\footnote{Ibid., 30, 119.} Kubler therefore rejects the biographical and biological metaphors of style “as a sequence of life-changes”—for example, the “birth of an art,” “life of a style,” “death of a school,” “flowering,” “maturity,” “fading,” and other metaphors which “bestow upon the flux of events the shapes and the behavior of organisms.”\footnote{Ibid.} His “chain of linked solutions” instead finds its biological analogy in “speciation,” by which “form is manifested by a large number of individuals undergoing genetic changes.”\footnote{Ibid.} Kubler contends that speciation, rather than the life cycle of a single organism, is a more appropriate model for art-historical development. This exemplifies the non-linear temporality of a “history of things,” as well as the contemporary potency of the analogy between art and species evolution.

Pamela M. Lee observes that, like Kubler, post-Minimalist and Earthworks artist Robert Smithson linked the organic metaphor and modernist, formalist criticism, contending, “A trans-historical consciousness has emerged in the sixties, that seems to avoid appeals to…organic time.”\footnote{In Chronophobia: on Time in the Art of the 1960s (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004), Pamela M. Lee argues that Kubler’s thesis on time resonated with Smithson because it illuminated emerging theories of information technology. Constellating Kubler, Smithson, and the cybernetician Norbit Wiener reveals an episode of crisis in the 1960s, that is the crisis of non-contemporaneity or of not being with the time, according to Lee. In “Ultramoderne,” Smithson writes that there are two types of time: organic time, which is associated with the modernist, historicist, realist, naturalist, and avant-garde; and crystalline time, which is associated with the Ultramoderne of the thirties, ab aeterno (“from eternity”), the enigmatic, and}
monumentality in the work of his coevals relates closely to Bontecou’s multiple
temporalities. In addressing the celebration of entropy or “energy-drain” in his 1966
essay, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” and in his 1967 photo-text travelogue, “A
Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” Smithson enriches an understanding of
the complication of temporalities in Bontecou’s memorials, although Smithson does not
specifically cite Bontecou. Smithson famously suggests illustrating entropy by having a
child run clockwise around a sandbox that is filled with white sand on one side and black
sand on the other. As running counterclockwise will not restore the division of light and
dark grains, the irreversible greyness that results represents entropy. Smithson explains
about entropy that the Second Law of Thermodynamics dictates, “in the ultimate future
the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing
sameness.” (We could use Ballard’s descriptions of the army of destruction advancing
upon Count Axel and his wife to picture entropy—an “amorphous,” “unbroken mass” of
an “apparently limitless extent,” “pressing forward in a disorganized tide,” and
“blot[ting] out the horizon.”) The sense of a “backwards looking future” and of
“evolution in reverse” disclosed in the work of his contemporaries “neutralize[s] the myth
of progress.” Smithson claims that “the awareness of the ultimate collapse of both
mechanical and electrical technology” motivates the artists under discussion “to build
their monuments to or against entropy.”

Flam (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1996), 63.
55 Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967), in Robert Smithson: The
Collected Writings, 74.
57 Ballard, “The Garden of Time,” 142, 144, 146.
59 Ibid., 12.
entropy. She casts memorials to “backwards looking future” natural forms already collapsed with, and because of, the environmental consequences of industrial, military, and technocratic “progress,” and she articulates the mutations of those organisms towards survival as a value against that ultimate, terminal entropic decay.

The new monuments, Smithson observes, place both past and future into “an objective present,” a time that has little or no space and that is related to the Museum of Natural History, where “the ‘cave-man’ and the ‘space-man’ may be seen under one roof.” Bontecou’s monuments also hover in an “objective present.” The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has encased its 1969 fish sculpture in a vitrine that doubles as empty aquarium; in it the fish, mounted on two stakes, is preserved as a delicate fossil and a specimen extracted from an imminent worldscape (Fig. 71, Fig. 72). So, too, the installation shot illustrating Mellow’s New York Times review of Bontecou’s 1971 show at Castelli’s makes the gallery itself look science-fictional (opposite the anonymous exhibition attendee in this photograph, unpictured, stood the “milky-white,” giant-sized version of the Ganzes’s flower sculpture; Fig. 73). Mellow’s review touches on this quality: “One gets the peculiar feeling, on visiting [Bontecou’s] show, of having wandered into a science fair or some corner of a natural history exhibit. An odd corner, to be sure.”

Critic Carter Ratcliff confirms this impression with his fancy, “If the fish come from very deep waters, these strange forms [‘sinister plants’] seem at first to come

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60 Ibid., 15.
61 Mellow, “Bontecou’s Well-Fed Fish and Malevolent Flowers,” D19. Brian O’Doherty satirically describes the “ideal gallery” as the combination of “chic design” with the “sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory” to produce “a unique chamber of esthetics.” It is his reference to the laboratory that I wish to emphasize, for O’Doherty argues that the image of a “white, ideal space,” more than “any single picture, may be the archetypal image” of twentieth-century art. See O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space (1976; repr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 14.
from another planet.”\footnote{Carter Ratcliff, \textit{Lee Bontecou} (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1972), unpaginated.} The giant flowers and smaller maquettes turn the white cube into extraterrestrial turf. The fish sculptures, cleverly hanging from the ceiling by transparent fishing wire, place the white cube underwater. John Perrault makes the tongue-in-cheek distinction between “underwater” and “underground” in his \textit{Village Voice} review of the show, pointing to the ways that, as firmly sculptural work, unlike the medium hybridity of her wall reliefs, these sculptures are not “underground,” not avant-garde or experimental.\footnote{John Perrault, “Art,” \textit{The Village Voice}, June 10, 1971, 28.}

Not being medium hybrids, the plastic sculptures count as medium-specific. Which is not to say that they are sculpturally specific in a strictly Greenbergian sense. Greenberg defines the modernist sculptural idiom by space, which is there “to be shaped, divided, enclosed, but not to be filled,” by industrial materials rather than stone, bronze, or clay, and by methods according to which “a work or its parts can be cast, wrought, cut or simply put together; it is not so much sculptured as constructed, built, assembled, arranged.”\footnote{Greenberg, “The New Sculpture” (1958), in \textit{Art and Culture: Critical Essays} (1961; repr. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 142.} This account of medium specificity is tethered to abstraction, whereas Bontecou’s sculptures are figurative. Bontecou’s use of a non-natural material, if not an exactly industrial one, does fit Greenberg’s bill. But it is her sculptures’ autonomy that primarily establishes their engagement with the discourse of medium-specific sculpture. The autonomy of sculpture is signaled in the plant and marine forms by the penetrant fixture of stems to bases—the modernist absorption of the pedestal, typified by Brancusi—and by the apparent free-float of the fish, suspended by clear wire. The self-referentiality of material and construction pronounces autonomy as well: transparency,
the impress in the plastic of the nails that held the Styrofoam mold together, the visibility of the bolts that fasten together the sections of plastic, the fact of no hidden armature. But by the time the sculptures were shown at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1971, that autonomy might have been seen as outmoded as the autonomy of nature, for her sculptures’ autonomy is pronounced relative to process-oriented, performance- and participation-driven, site-specific, and conceptual, environmental, or ephemeral contemporaneous sculptural practices.

A reviewer for *Art News* assessed that the logic evinced by Bontecou’s plastic sculptures in the exhibition was that of “a struggle for survival where survival is visibility and the foe is the process of abstraction.” This critic astutely points to an aesthetic and ideological struggle in which the odds were stacked against Bontecou’s figurative creatures. But rather than abstraction and figuration (the critic’s “visibility”), the stakes concern medium-specific sculpture and the generalizing expanded field of art practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Not only had the medium of sculpture (and the notion of medium) undergone intense interrogation during the time Bontecou formed her plastic sculptures, critical art practice had begun, as a matter of course, to put the gallery under scrutiny. Key examples of such from the period 1967 to 1971 include: Smithson publishing “A Tour of the

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65 C. R., “Reviews and Previews,” *Art News* 70, no. 5 (Sept. 1970): 14. (I suspect but have not been able to confirm that the initialed author, C. R., is Carter Ratcliff.)

66 In 1969 the Museum of Natural History presented an exhibition titled *Can Man Survive?*. Robert Smithson wrote a short essay inspired by his visit to the exhibition in which he describes the structure of the installation. Smithson caps the end of the essay with a few lines organized under the heading “Can Art Survive?”: “The enclosed society that makes abstract art has become an esthetic slave to its own fear of nature. Today the artist can uphold the failure of modernism with its pretense of closed, immobile hierarchical values by being a slave to all its compromises or he can choose to be a terrorist.” Here, too, the foe of art’s survival is abstraction, but in this case it is specifically modernist abstraction. See Smithson, “Can Man Survive?” (1969), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 368.
Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967); Morris embarking upon Anti-Form, and Walter De Maria exhibiting his first Earth Room (1968); Castelli showing Richard Serra’s lead castings, and Robert Barry closing the gallery during the exhibition (1969); Michael Heizer carving Double Negative, and Serra also leaving the gallery for the streets of the Bronx (1970); and Hans Haacke being excluded from the Guggenheim for Shapolski et al. (1971). Yet Bontecou is not in this cohort.\textsuperscript{67} In comparison, her 1971 exhibition seems quite a fish out of water. She does not, say, refuse the production of precious, skillfully crafted, market-friendly art objects or their circulation in the commercial gallery system (even if, in fact, none were sold from that show and today only one is represented in a public collection). She neither attaches her studio-made, carved and casted, peripatetic sculptures to a specific site nor otherwise invests their meaning in contingency. Bontecou does not insist on the activation of the work by the viewer in the spatio-temporal phenomenological present. On the contrary, she alludes to a world that seems inhospitable to human life (her sculptures may be memorials for us to remember nature by, but how would we hold up in a post-plastic flower ecology?).\textsuperscript{68} Granted, the above list of dominant sculptural practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s features genealogies that we trace from Minimalism and post-Minimal earthworks

\textsuperscript{67} By way of another example of Bontecou’s relative outsiderness, we could point to Leo Castelli’s exhibition schedule. The two shows at his gallery that preceded Bontecou’s 1971 show were solo exhibitions of work by Robert Barry and Douglas Huebler, and the two shows that followed it were a group show including Ron Davis, Dan Flavin, Joseph Kosuth, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Frank Stella, and Andy Warhol and a Kosuth solo show.

\textsuperscript{68} Carter Ratcliff in his catalogue essay for Bontecou’s 1972 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, projects a quasi-Minimalist engagement onto Bontecou’s plastic sculptures, arguing that they displace composition “from the structure of the work to the process of viewing.” Speaking of the works’ “non-hierarchical, endlessly variable compositional flux,” he claims, “Each form is to be composed and re-composed from different angles” and, “The viewer is required to take an active responsibility for composition.” I am not convinced by his interpretation, but I note its phenomenological orientation nonetheless. See Ratcliff, Lee Bontecou, unpaginated.
through conceptualism to institutional critique and installation art, genealogies which tend to make a monolith out of the projects of modernism.\textsuperscript{69} I wish neither to reinstate that monolith by this account of the expanded field of practice nor to suggest that Bontecou’s plastic pieces reactionarily, univocally mourn the loss of a modernist sculptural autonomy (her monuments are memorial, not funereal). Bontecou’s sculptures do, however, recover critical aspects of an obsolete autonomy.

In her well-known 1979 essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Rosalind Krauss identifies the logic of sculpture with the logic of the monument: a commemorative representation that “sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.”\textsuperscript{70} This logic faded in the late nineteenth century, and with Rodin “one crosses the threshold of the logic of the monument,” entering a space of “its negative condition”—sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place. One enters modernism, that is, in which sculptural production operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, functionally placeless, largely self-referential, and essentially nomadic.\textsuperscript{71} By the early 1960s sculpture

\textsuperscript{69} Some of these artists would likely have bridled at the suggestion their work constituted “dominant” practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But if modernist painting and sculpture had become doxa for them, the postmodernist expanded field of practice has since become canonized in institutional and academic histories of art and presents itself as doxa today.

\textsuperscript{70} Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: The Bay Press, 1983), 33. Anne Wagner has offered a strong critique of Krauss’s essay with her “Splitting and Doubling: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Body of Sculpture,” Grey Room 14 (Winter 2004). Wagner highlights what the rigorous structuralism of the Klein-diagrammed expanded field leaves out, suggesting that sculpture’s special purview is the body, an uncanny, spectral, psychologically dimensional body. She also points to a kind of interdisciplinarity—a coming together of architecture and sculpture—rather than an atomization of discrete practices as various positions plotted in an expanded field.

\textsuperscript{71} Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 35. For Douglas Crimp, the homelessness of modern sculpture was the precondition of its circulation from the studio to the commercial gallery to the private collection and, finally, to the museum or corporate headquarters lobby. Thus he claims that that “the real material condition of modern art…is that of the specialized luxury commodity.” The aim of Crimp’s essay is to demonstrate that the specificity of site is political specificity, but here I want to point to his alignment
had “entered the full condition of its inverse logic and had become pure negativity,” Krauss diagnoses.\textsuperscript{72} Arguing that sculpture had become defined in relation only to what it was not—the combination of two exclusions, not-landscape and not-architecture—Krauss then elaborates these negations into positive expressions, logically plotting an expanded field of terms. Sculpture is now seen as just one term, at the periphery no less, of a postmodernist field of forms including landscape, architecture, “marked sites,” “site-constructions,” and “axiomatic structures.”

Krauss’s unfolding of the map of the expansion flattens out the field. Though comprised of finite positions, and though presented as a specific historical event, the expanded field is generalizing. It may be that a “site-construction” or “axiomatic structure” also possesses a specific relation to the general expanded field of sculptural practice, but it is only sculpture whose specific relation to the general field of sculptural practice is one of medium specificity. In the last pages of “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Krauss declares that the “bounded conditions of modernism have suffered a logically determined rupture.” Practice is no longer defined by a relation to a medium, itself defined according to a material support.\textsuperscript{73} Krauss considers the expanded field an historical event that displaces the modernist demand for distinct, pure mediums and for “the necessary specialization” of a practitioner. In the postmodernist view, many different

\textsuperscript{72} Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 36.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 41.
mediums might be employed within the logical space, and an artist might occupy many different positions within that space.\textsuperscript{74}

If in the late 1970s Krauss became the voice of sculpture and of sculpture’s relative generalization via the expanded field, she remains the primary voice because she has returned to reengage “medium” in recent years.\textsuperscript{75} Two decades after heralding the expanded field, she confronted its two-headed monster—the absorption of the practice of institutional critique by institutions and the ubiquity of the international spread of mixed-media installation. In her 2000 “\textit{A Voyage on the North Sea}: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition,” Krauss inquires, given that capitalism is the ultimate master of \textit{détournement}, how did and should the artist involve medium with commodification? This is a question about art in general, but her answer is “specific.” The model of conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers is key for Krauss, for she views his redemption of the art that the post-medium condition renders “extinct” as akin to Walter Benjamin’s views on obsolescence.\textsuperscript{76} As Krauss explications in her related article “Reinventing the Medium,” Benjamin understood the onset of obsolescence, which is the law of commodity production, to offer a “momentary revelation of the utopian dreams encoded within the various forms of technology at the points of their inception.”\textsuperscript{77} In the moment of a medium’s obsolescence, Krauss writes, drawing on Benjamin, it can “remind us of its

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 41–42.
\textsuperscript{75} Krauss’s landmark survey text \textit{Passages in Modern Sculpture} was published in 1977 by The Viking Press; it makes no reference to Bontecou.
\textsuperscript{76} See Krauss, “\textit{A Voyage on the North Sea}”, especially pp. 32–45. Krauss points to Broodthaers’s use of early cinematic techniques, through which he is able to recover the openness of the medium of primitive film and its specificity in its condition as self-differing (e.g., simultaneity and sequence, layering of sound or text over image, and immediacy and distance).
\textsuperscript{77} Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 291. For example, the genius of the medium of photography at its inception in amateur portraits is found in the rendering of the human subject woven into the network of its social relations.
promise of becoming a medium,” not as a “revival of itself” but as a revival of the plurality of the arts, rather than the idea of Art, or art in general.\textsuperscript{78} She elaborates: “This is a way of stating the need for the idea of the medium as such to reclaim the specific from the deadening embrace of the general.”

Krauss’s reading of the outmoded enables us to put specificity, generalizing equivalency, and extinction in meaningful relation to Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures.\textsuperscript{79} The aspect of the promise of modernist sculpture at its late nineteenth-century birth that Bontecou’s plastic works might be said to seize upon is a monumentality that has not entered its negative condition. For Rodin, sculpture was not fully a “not-monument.” Its positivity allowed for a kind of counter-monument—a commissioned monument to Balzac, for instance, that dramatized its condition of homelessness (multiple versions exist in multiple places, though none exists on the original site), since homelessness was not yet a fully absorbed formal principle.\textsuperscript{80} For Bontecou, the mode of memorialization does not only dramatize the condition of sculpture in the late twentieth century; it also sincerely points her sculpture’s loss of site towards a real loss of nature. Since the word “ecology” derives from the Greek oikos, meaning “home,” sculptural homelessness is also a kind of ecologylessness. In this way, the modernist “essential nomadism” of Bontecou’s plastic fish and flowers triples as a

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 304–5.
\textsuperscript{79} Krauss arrives at her call for specificity in a roundabout manner, more or less bypassing the centrality of Surrealism to Benjamin’s theorization. It is equally true that in employing Krauss’s thesis as I am, I am bypassing the centrality of photography to her essay, “Reinventing the Medium.” Her essay focuses not on sculpture but on the “triumphant postwar convergence of art and photography that began in the 1960s” from the late twentieth-century perspective of the fact of photography’s obsolescence. See Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” 289.
\textsuperscript{80} Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 35. See also Alex Potts, \textit{The Sculptural Imagination}, 96.
function of the creatures’ ecological refugee status and of sculpture’s displacement to the edges of the expanded field and the margins of art practice.

If Leo Castelli Gallery, as captured in the photo illustrating Mellow’s review, seemed like an “odd corner” of a “science fair,” this was both because of the outmodedness of autonomous, medium-specific sculptures presented in the white cube, and because of the obsolescence of the autonomy of nature epitomized by the hybridity of her organic-mechanical species.\(^{81}\) The tense of multiple temporalities in which Bontecou’s memorials speak thus also bears on the peculiarity of that period in the late 1960s when, at once, the white cube asserted itself as a paradigm and critical art practice abandoned the gallery. A period in which the role of sculpture in art practice was more important than it had been in millennia and sculpture as a category was diffused into a general field of practice.\(^{82}\) Otherwise put, it is the tense of multiple temporalities in which in 1967 *Artforum* published its special issue on sculpture, featuring Fried’s “Art and Objecthood,” Smithson’s “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site,” Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture, Part III,” and Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” a series of crucial essays which solidified the relevance of sculpture just as the practice (or its coherence) dematerialized. In ways made possible by the outmodedness of sculpture as a specific medium and by the vastness of the expanded field, in 1971 Bontecou’s sculptures could mean as monuments. Precisely because the categorical coherence of sculpture as such was dissolving at this moment could her meticulously sculpted, fragile maquettes

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82 Alex Potts treats this “moment in the 1960s when the tensions between modernist medium specificity and the avant-garde negation of traditional medium boundaries had become particularly acute,” when sculpture is a real concern and also on its way out, depending, in “Tactility: The Interrogation of Medium In Art of the 1960s,” *Art History* 27, no. 2 (Apr. 2004).
for memorials to nature in the “objective present” remember site, as much as it can be remembered. Which is to say not much, because plastic hybrid flowers are very nearly already what flowers used to be.

**Plasticity**

Bontecou’s flora and fauna sculptures capture the material specificity of plastic, the original meaning of *plastic* being “the art of modeling or sculpting figures.”\(^{83}\) Bontecou engenders new species in opposition to a deadening generality, that entropic blackout of environmental extinction,\(^{84}\) and her sculptures reveal that survival is at stake for both sculpture and nature. The specificity of plastic sustains the analogy of the two outmoded autonomies, for the material plastic sounds the call for the survival of the plastic arts rather than art in general. Not only are the natural and the synthetic, the traditional and the chemical, imbricated in the creation of hybrid species; vacuum-forming plastic develops its own kind of material hybridity, too, specific and general. Bontecou’s carving of molds in Styrofoam, the trademarked name for foamed polystyrene plastic, her replication by the vacuum former of each segment of flower stem or shell of fish body, and the fastidious detail of each tooth, petal, and bolt analogize plastic’s malleability, the plastic art sculpture’s mimetic capability, and a species’ adaptability.

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\(^{84}\) I have suggested that environmental depredation signifies the “general,” but I should clarify that it does not affect all people equally (it is generalizing but not democratizing). As Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher note, the worst devastations of climate change affect poorer, developing countries, while the United States, the largest producer of greenhouse gasses, faces the least-dramatic consequences. See Braddock and Irmscher, introduction to *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, eds. Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 2.
Judd made his case for the specific objecthood of one of Bontecou’s wall reliefs by explaining, “The structure and the image are coextensive. The image is an object.”

With the fish and flower sculptures, plastic’s translucency renders structure and image coextensive. The transparent attribute of the material can put forward symbolic meanings; for example, to understand its transparency as making clear the hollowness of plastic’s promises or emptying them out (the sculptures are only not-hollow when the fish have ingested in their bellies other, smaller fish, or when the flower stalks encase the tubular plumbing that connects the parts). But as Roland Barthes shows, this symbolism yields to a more historically determined and differentially specific understanding of the operation of the material plastic in the fish and flower sculptures.

Barthes meditated on plastic as the “transmutation of matter” from crystals into “human objects” in his short essay on the material in *Mythologies* of 1957 (it was translated into English in 1972, the year following Bontecou’s Castelli Gallery show). After attending an exhibition of plastics, he writes that, “more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation,” and “it is less a thing than the trace of a movement” (that movement being a sudden transformation of nature). Yet the idea of plastic’s infinite transformation opens on to things, lots and lots of things: suitcase, brush, car-body, toy, fabric, tube, and so on. As Barthes elucidates, “And as the movement here is almost infinite, transforming the original crystals into a multitude of more and more startling objects, plastic is, all told, a spectacle to be deciphered: the very spectacle of its end-products.”

87 Ibid., 97.
Barthes’s remarks posit the ubiquity of plastic as a deadening, totalizing condition. Originally touted as an imitative substitute for rare, natural luxury goods such as tortoiseshell, ivory, amber, and marble, plastic had belonged to the world of appearances. But it has since been demoted to the world of “actual use,” Barthes says. Now a common household material, plastic is “the first magical substance which consents to be prosaic.” Further, the proliferation of specific material forms gives way to a kind of formlessness, eliminating difference. “[A]n artificial Matter,” Barthes predicts, is about to replace nature: “The hierarchy of substances is abolished: a single one replaces them all: the whole world can be plasticized, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas.”

This account reveals that as Bontecou’s creatures proclaim the specificity of their evolutionary design as species over and against environmental extinction, and as the medium specificity of an obsolete technology, sculpture, articulates itself over and against the extinction of modernist autonomy, the material specificity of plastic does so, too, over and against the homogenizing sameness of plastic, deadening not least in the sense of its assault on the environment. Plastic is spectacle, but it also signifies the capacity to adapt, specialize, and survive. At its root, the word means “capable of change or modification,” and its obsolete definitions as noun and adjective include “the

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88 Jeffrey L. Meikle also notes that when it was introduced around 1870, celluloid was touted for its mimetic capabilities, and was produced to offer the illusion of ivory, tortoiseshell, amber, gems, marble, and other prized natural materials. See Meikle, American Plastic: a Cultural History (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 2.
89 Barthes, Mythologies, 99.
procreative or creative principle” and “causing the growth or production of natural forms, especially of living things; formative, procreative, creative.”

Protean plastic’s articulation of its own specificity over and against its own generality resonates with another of Krauss’s formulations of the medium. This formulation owes much to Hal Foster’s argument that the principle of Richard Serra’s sculpture is the medium-differential—that sculpture is positioned between, and in opposition to, both painting and architecture, and that its critical value is in its critique of painting (its materiality activates the body) and of architecture (its relative autonomy analyzes structure). In Krauss’s espousal of “differential specificity,” she retains the term medium despite its deeply discursively entrenched associations with Greenberg. She offers a corrective to a “strange” and common misunderstanding about the medium, demonstrating that even Greenberg’s own definition of the term so yoked to his name is differentiated internally. Greenberg in fact jettisoned the materialist, purely reductive notion of the medium and isolated the essence of painting in opticality, which is not the physical, flat two-dimensional picture plane but rather its projective, “visionary,” three-dimensional field and its mode of address. Opticality, Krauss contends, was generative of a set of conventions, namely in the practice of Color-Field painting, and in this way was a medium: a modernist medium and an aggregative, internally differentiated, internally

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90 Meikle, American Plastic, 4. Oxford English Dictionary, Third edition, 2006; online version June 2011, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/145291, s.v. “plastic.” Alain Resnais capitalizes upon this proximity between the organic and inorganic in his short 1958 documentary film on the “siren song” of plastic, Le Chant du styrène, commissioned by the plastics manufacturer Pechiney and shot in their factories. It opens with animation of the sprouting of bright red, yellow, transparent, green, and blue plastic (artificial) algae, kelp, and fern plants; next it displays a range of ordinary household objects made of plastic; and the film works backwards from there, unraveling the manufacture process back to the raw materials. For an insightful analysis of the film, see Edward Dimendberg, “These are not exercises in style: Le Chant du Styrène,” October 112 (Spring 2005).

complex medium. Krauss insists that the specificity of all mediums, even modernist media, must be understood like so—as differential, self-differing, layerings of conventions, internally complex.

If there is a case to be made for Bontecou’s sculptures’ specificity as self-differing, that case is located in the fact of a material that is complexly referential—to itself as sculptural material, to a future worldscape, to the commodity spectacle, and to environmental depredation. These plastic works further self-differ by standing up above and in opposition to plastic’s deadening ubiquity, yet also from plastic, by its material means, recharging traditional figure and ground. Designed to be discarded but not to disintegrate, plastic is the self-differing material which endangers species and also the one which guarantees the survival of Bontecou’s hybrid species.

Smithson, in his 1965 artist’s statement on “Quick Millions,” professes that he likes plastic “as a medium because it can be both real and/or unreal, according to your mood. Plastic exists between a solid specific and a glittering generality.” In Bontecou’s work, plastic does not exist between the specific and the general; it acts as both specific and general, a hybrid material. Plastic is the specific material, molded into the disposable fork, Barbie doll, artificial Christmas tree, Plexiglas plane turret, or other commodity that will retain its definite form in the landfill’s heap. Plastic also possesses the general, spectacular, protean capacity to become anything and be everywhere. Plastic is a formless constancy of transformation (in this regard, the fact that the makers of the first chemically synthetic plastic, Bakelite, took the mathematical symbol for infinity as its logo is close

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to the bone). Because it is a cheap, throwaway material, often intended for a single use, plastic is both ubiquitous and ephemeral. What is most notable about plastic is that it can withstand extreme deformations and still retain its chemical identity. Along these lines, Barthes submits that the primary attribute of plastic is “resistance.” But it is just as important, especially with regard to Bontecou’s sculptures, that Barthes also defines the material as the “transmutation of matter.” This structure parallels the hybrid, which, as it was defined in the previous chapter on Bontecou’s wall reliefs, constitutes its own species while it also bears the traces of its forebears’ identities. This resistance/transmutation structure also gets to the heart of the hybrid species treated in this chapter which resist plastic’s enactment of environmental extinction by plastically transmuting.

If plastic posed a threat to natural species’ survival, it also posed a threat to modernist art practice and the survival of medium specificity. For the modernist question was an ontological one asked at the very moment of the proliferation of materials that seemed to have no essence, plastic chief among them. Indeed, the beginnings of plastic coincide with the origins of modern sculpture (celluloid was invented around 1870, and Bakelite, the first chemically synthetic plastic, was invented in 1907). Bontecou’s sculptures track that shift from plastic primarily designating the plastic arts to primarily denoting the inauthentic, the infinitely transforming, and the ubiquitous but
substanceless. Perhaps it was the sculptures’ material that led Picard to think of them as “decorative objects, crystal knickknacks for the affluent, haute bourgeois home.”

Perhaps Bontecou’s sculptures can reveal for us the ways in which the pressure put on mediums was the pressure of plastic’s formlessness and transitory appearances; of the synthetic, mass-produced, and disposable; of the world of kitsch.

Above, I quoted a critic who proposed that the logic of Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures was one of survival against the enemy of abstraction (“a struggle for survival where survival is visibility and the foe is the process of abstraction”). In this context, there appears a new valence to that review. After all, the accumulation of plastic that abolishes the “hierarchy of substances” is, as Barthes reminds us, the spectacle, and the spectacle, as Guy Debord reminds us, is an abstraction.


100 In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg equates the synthetic with kitsch, stating about the Socialist Realist painter “Repin, or kitsch, is synthetic art.” See Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), in Art and Culture: Critical Essays (1961; repr. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 15. Greenberg’s language in this essay is biological, addressing the threat to the “survival in the near future of culture.” The notion of culture as “living” (“the avant-garde forms the only real living culture we now have,” Greenberg warns) and, furthermore, the very meaning of the word culture, which is agricultural in origin (as in cultivating the land), exemplify the relationship between art and nature assumed in this essay. Ibid., 8. In 1940’s “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” Greenberg invokes a vocabulary of survival, attack, and disease, referring to the avant-garde as “the embodiment of art’s instinct of self-preservation,” the arts being “hunted back to their mediums,” and the necessity of the avant-garde “to escape from ideas, which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society.” See “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” in Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 28, 32.


102 It was ten years after Barthes published Mythologies that Guy Debord testified in his La Société due spectacle, “commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.” See Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 29.
In “Entropy and the New Monuments,” Smithson writes of the Museum of Natural History (which Bontecou frequented often) that in it “all ‘nature’ is stuffed and interchangeable.” Bontecou’s memorials to nature disrupt the pure exchangeability of nature and nature’s reification by erecting themselves out and up from its generic extinction. Plastic is disposable but non-biodegradable as well, and this is certainly a strange way for her hybrid species to not go out without a fight. Yet they are strange sculptures—much ignored, the largest among them are lost, and still they linger as memorials, speaking in their past and future tenses, resisting degradation. Hot, soft, malleable plastic vacuumed into shock-withstanding gas masks and armor, Bontecou’s sculptures stand up for themselves. They insist upon the value of distinguishing their specificity as creature, medium, and material from the vast and general plastic sea of extinction.

**Gallery As Worldscape**

Bontecou’s drawings in white charcoal on black paper provide detailed pictures of the world from which the plastic sculptures are extracted and which was recreated in the gallery installation. In the 1971 show of plastic sculptures and related drawings at Leo Castelli’s, Bontecou’s final solo show there, the two large monumental flower sculptures stood in the center of the gallery, allowing viewers to walk between and around them,

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104 Interestingly, fossils, like sculptures, are formed as casts and molds and are classified according to those sculptural terms. For example, an external mold fossil is formed when all that remains of an organism is the organism-shaped hole in a rock; a cast fossil is formed when the hole is filled with minerals; and internal mold fossil is formed when minerals fill the internal cavity of an organism.
while the small maquettes were placed on platforms against the back walls. But the drawings on black paper indicate that these small sculptures, maquettes for monumental sculptures, also transform the gallery into a perspectival space.

For example, the black ground of *Untitled*, 1969, in the Rosenfeld/harrisburg collection evokes a post-apocalyptic worldscape in which the sun does not shine or burns only dimly, gently revealing the frosty white grounds and surfaces of the vegetation (Fig. 74). Three large central flowers recall the sculptural flowers with surfboard-like, propeller-blade arms, though the tips of the drawn fronds are pointier than the rounded plastic forms. The centers of the flowers—the botanical heads—are equipped with the same drain-like masks worn by fish in other drawings, and the middle flower’s stalk is fastened together with bolts that bring to mind the nails which physically fasten together the plastic sculptures. From the arid ground rows of teeth or thorns spike up, poking through the cracks between the ground and the tree-like roots of the flowers, which are afflicted with a kind of gigantism. Quicksand pits glom together in the foreground, their forms recalling flower heads as much as petaled, multipartite reliefs like the 1961 relief in the collection of MoMA. Smaller flowers dot the landscape, too, both back towards the horizon line and in between the large flowers in the middleground. They are at once buds, stunted runts, and withering and dying, the simultaneity of which exemplifies the collapse of temporalities—prehistoric and futuristic, fossilized and regenerating—that characterizes this environment.

105 From exhibition photographs in the Leo Castelli Gallery Archive at the Archives of American Art, it appears that the first room of the gallery showed the larger fish hanging from the ceiling and the two giant plastic flowers standing opposite each other. Another room of the gallery, located behind the first, featured the smaller flowers and the smaller fish attached to bases, with the drawings on black paper on the walls behind them.
Consideration of the 1969 Rosenfeld/harrisburg drawing elucidates that the small sculptures which were placed by the back walls of the Castelli Gallery exhibition, can be read as maquettes, but also as materializations of the little flowers in the drawing (small because they are developing or dying), and as flowers made small because of perspectival distance, as though they are set far in the background by the horizon. This means the space of the gallery is projected as the underwater or extraterrestrial, gravity-less space in which the fish swim and the flowers are sown on the surfaces of black-paper drawing. Bontecou analogizes the white cube and the drawings’ black, dense, unknowable, faraway space, much as the soot drawings disclose, through inversion, the density of the “empty” white page. The black paper of the drawings of fish and flowers conveys the sense of being on the other side, the dark side, as though having passed through one of the holes in the wall reliefs into this new world order of perennial darkness, into the murkiness and suffocation of nuclear winter. The gallery is now the site of illusionary depth, whereby the small plastic sculptures are perceived as large sculptures much farther in the distance than they truly were.

The fish and flower drawings link the drafted worldscape to the art world, showing the gallery to be a hostile place of increasingly attenuated artistic survival. In this way the drawings dramatize the condition of medium-specific sculpture in the face of its outmodedness by the expansion of the sculptural field, yet they do not take the gallery to be a neutral aesthetic container. The drawings and sculptures in tandem interrogate the site of the gallery while still not hinging the works’ meaning on the “real space” and “real time” of the gallery, as so many contemporaneous practices and critiques did. The gallery is the place sculpture goes to die, but despite the gallery’s hostility, sculpture also went
there to live on as a medium in a way that is not identical to—and that is opposed to—the generalization of the expanded field.

Given that Bontecou’s 1971 exhibition of vacuum-formed plastic sculptures and related drawings suggests that the gallery is an inhospitable environment, it is unsurprising that it was her last show at Castelli. Though I do not mean that her précis on the state of sculpture predicted her departure as, in fact, this finality would only reveal itself upon retrospection (neither Bontecou nor Castelli necessarily knew that it would mark her withdrawal from the art world at the time). In a 2003 interview Bontecou bristled at the characterization of her departure from the art world as “backing away,” indicating that her ability to continue to work was predicated on leaving the gallery system and maintaining that she remained at the center of the art world by teaching:

> I just went because I wanted to work, and also I was having a child and all kinds of things…A lot of things change in your life. And then I was teaching. I hadn’t backed away. You can’t be more involved in the arts than teaching…I was right smack in Brooklyn [at Brooklyn College, The City University of New York]. People say, ‘You dodged the art world.’ Well, heck, they were the art world. I was the art world. I didn't dodge it.106

The next year she affirmed that her withdrawal was gradual: “It was not a conscious thing—‘I am leaving the art world!’—I mean, I was working…” She compellingly insists again that the art world is not irreducible to the commercial and public art world in New York: “But the real art world, which is the studios of all the artists, I never left. Seems to me that’s the real art world.”107

If Bontecou’s post-apocalyptic worldscape drawings project the white cube as sculpture’s graveyard and its iron lung, Bontecou’s art practice still thrived in studios and

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106 Bontecou, as quoted in Tapp, “Lee Bontecou Doesn’t Care What You Think,” 10.
107 Bontecou, as quoted in Wright, “(Re)Birth of a Star,” 71.
classrooms. Perhaps because drawing is, traditionally, a lesser or minor medium, it possesses a special capacity for disclosing these “lesser” or “minor” art worlds. By the same token that blackness in Bontecou’s drawings denotes a struggle for the visibility of sculpture in one art world, it also elucidates the invisibility of others.
Conclusion

I have argued that, through hybridity, Bontecou’s work articulates positive relationships to the sculptural medium, and yet hybridity holds the specific medium within a structure of difference that also confirms the general—confirms its pressures, its threats, its competencies, its place in the field of postwar art practice. In Bontecou’s metal and fabric wall reliefs, sculpture is specific while painting, as the generic, is general. This constitutes a reversal of those narrative of 1960s art, especially of assemblage art, Minimalism, and process art, that pair painting with the specific, in the realm of modernist medium specificity, and sculpture with the general, insofar as it was work in three-dimensions which opened onto a postmodernist, post-medium practice exemplified by the expanded field. Bontecou’s reliefs are not simply placed at the cusp of the shift from the specific to the general, straddling both positions, for their gambit is to bring sculpture up to painting’s wall rather than to unfurl paintings into three-dimensionality (therefore, they reverse as well the priority of the natural-historical taxonomies of genus and species). The reliefs’ hybridity represents an alternative to those dominant narratives, as it does not replace the specific with the general, but holds on to both painting and sculpture. What I have wanted to emphasize is that the peculiar manner in which the reliefs hold on to both terms illuminates that shift from the specific to the general even as they do not enact it or mime it. Her reliefs manage this by reformulating the general as “genre.” But it is also through reorienting specificity towards a specificity of materials—in this case materiel or “war equipment”—that her reliefs provide a model
of post-nuclear, inhuman hybridity—that of the organic and mechanical. Through their evocative military-industrial materials, the wall reliefs imagine a worldscape in which not only sculpture but a cyborg creatureliness “go into space,” hybridizing across medium boundaries and the boundaries of male/female, organism/machine, and human/animal.

Bontecou coined the term “worldscape” in relation to her drawings made with soot. These soot drawings engendered the kind of pictorial space Bontecou aimed to incorporate into her sculpture—a space that is, to again quote Klein, “both everywhere and nowhere,” a description not unrelated to the ways that protean plastic is both ubiquitous and ephemeral. These drawings analogize the illusionary density of drawing space and of outer space through a hybrid material, soot, which functions as both the specificity of sheer matter and the generality of the void. They also illuminate the relationships between mediums in her wall reliefs, clarifying that the illusion of depth—the key mark of the genre of painting—is predicated on its mediation by the sculptural apparatus. Bontecou’s doodle-like drawings give form to the hybridity of the organic and the mechanical. The outer space environments she draws disclose iconographic links between her wall reliefs and her flora and fauna forms, so that it is not only the concept of hybridity but her drawing practice, too, which reveals the coherence of those bodies of sculptural work that are routinely regarded as disjunctive. In drawing Bontecou ultimately presents the gallery as a worldscape that is simultaneously hostile to medium-specific sculpture and necessary to the medium’s survival in the face of its outmodedness by the expansion of the sculptural field of practice.

Bontecou’s vacuum-formed sculptures of fish and flowers clarify the affirmation of the value of the specific. In the moment of autonomous sculpture’s obsolescence, these
sculptures recover modern sculpture’s capacity to signify as a monument—in this case, as memorials for the remembrance of an erstwhile version of nature—precisely because of the outmodedness of sculpture’s autonomy and of nature’s autonomy. As both sculpture and nature face extinction by the generalizations of the expanded field and by entropic environmental depredation, Bontecou offers hybridity in this body of work less as a structural device for which an artist might opt and more as an inevitable condition within which one must work if one is to survive as a sculptor (or a species). Here we do not find medium-specific sculpture hybridizing with forms or expressions of art’s generalization as clearly as we see the genetic effects of the evolutionary specialization of species that mandates hybridizing within (and because of) a toxic, synthetic ecology. It is the material plastic that is both specific and general. This self-differing material, resisting and transmuting, supports the analogy between sculpture and nature because plastic, which means both “the art of modeling or sculpting figures” and “causing the growth or production of natural forms, especially of living things,” posed a threat to natural species and modernist art alike. In this worldscape, the specific distinguishes itself from the general through the very means that generalize that worldscape: plastic stands up from the plastic sea of commodity spectacle and environmental pollution; natural species hybridize with the toxic environment and mutate in order to live on; and sculpture capitalizes upon its own outmodedness to give form to its modernist homelessness (and nature’s ecologylessness) and to its displacement to the edges of the expanded field.

I have also sought to develop hybridity by differentiating it from its offhand uses as synonym for “mixed-media” or for objects that are neither painting nor sculpture, in short from those invocations of hybridity that declare the end of the distinctiveness of
separate mediums. When we discover in Bontecou’s work a model of the hybrid that is asymmetrically specific and general, that unfixes established notions of the relations between mediums, that enables mediums to “belong without belonging,” to again cite Derrida, can we also trace through a history of work in the postwar period that does not relinquish the medium, and that does not guide us straight to the morass of international mixed-media installation? Or can we better see the ways in which post-medium work resists the generalizations of aesthetics, commodity spectacle, and environmental depredation in its formulations or reformulations of the medium? I am not suggesting that we will necessarily uncover neglected practices or rethink received ones that present the pictorial generically and the sculptural specifically, in the exact manner that Bontecou’s reliefs do; though I have come to regard works like Eva Hesse’s *Hang Up* of 1966, John Chamberlain’s polychrome crushed automobile parts, and Salvatore Scarpitta’s bandaged canvases just this way (Fig. 75).¹ More significantly, I am suggesting that the concept and structure of hybridity might open up new spaces for thinking about how mediums relate to their materials and genres and to each other as forms and discourses in the postwar period.

This dissertation has also sought to elaborate upon the concept of hybridity as it bears on the integral relationship between art history and natural history, especially in

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¹ Bontecou is often named as an important influence on Hesse. An entry in Hesse’s journals, written following a 1965 visit to Bontecou’s studio, reads, “I am amazed at what that woman can do…. This was the unveiling to me of what can be done…the complexity of her structures, what is involved, absolutely floored me.” Hesse, as quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 56, as cited in Elizabeth A. T. Smith, “All Freedom in Every Sense,” in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective* (2003; repr., Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and Los Angeles: Hammer Museum with Yale University Press, 2008), 176. Anna Chave also cites Hesse’s journal entry on Bontecou (“Loose pages dated December 12, 1965, stapled into Eva Hesse, diary, dated on cover March 26, 1965, Eva Hesse Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio”) in her “Sculpture, Gender, and the Power of Labor,” *American Art* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 30.
terms of taxonomies and autonomies. The second major lesson we learn from Bontecou illuminates critical and scholarly blind spots to intersections between art and ecology in the postwar period. The reception of Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures in 1971 was tepid. A couple critics were put off by the work; several others found it anodyne; more than anything, the sculptures were barely received at all. Besides Mellow’s unfavorable review, only a smattering of several-sentence long, rather lukewarm reviews appeared, in *The Village Voice* and *Das Kunstwerk* and in obscure papers, *Manhattan East* and *The Patriot Ledger*. Neither Dore Ashton nor Donald Judd, who had so vociferously and steadily championed Bontecou’s wall reliefs, had anything to say about them. Bontecou’s retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 1972 included the plastic sculptures, but Castelli did not show them following their initial exhibition. In terms of reception, they went extinct.²

It would seem that Bontecou’s sculptures were not received in the 1970s because they were too sculptural—in the round, figurative, unique, studio-made, gallery- and market-friendly—in an expanded field of practice in which sculpture was but just one term and in a milieu in which performance, video, and conceptual art practices triggered the “dematerialization of the art object.”³ However, might it be that the art world was not ready to receive the complexity of Bontecou’s ecological concerns? Might we now take seriously Mellow’s epithet, “a strange naturalist all along”? A nuanced reading of the complexity of Bontecou’s ecological concerns, as they are worked out in her vacuum-

² Only one can be found in a public collection worldwide.
formed plastic sculptures in particular, demands taking seriously overlooked critical engagements between art and ecology in the postwar period.

In a review of Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher’s co-edited volume, *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, which is among the first books to rigorously incorporate ecocriticism into art history, Yates McKee observes that the topic of the relation between art and ecology was “almost entirely off the agenda of avant-garde art criticism in the 1980s and 1990s.” He attributes this to theories of postmodernism which were thought to involve “a shift from nature to culture” (Leo Steinberg’s formulation for Robert Rauschenberg’s flatbed pictures). On the one hand, then, art history’s myopic focus let nature remain naturalized or neutralized. For example, some promulgated a conception of the earth as raw, pure material “out there” to be shaped like clay or carved like stone by certain earthworks artists. On the other hand, the academy understood nature as yet another cultural practice. Rather than view nature as extraneous and “out there,” this second tendency was to claim that there’s no there there.

The view of the environment as an independent externality and the view of nature as a signifier only left little room for the reception of the ecological subtleties of Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures—hence their neglect. Though her sculptures analogize the obsolescence of the autonomy of nature and that of the autonomy of modernist mediums, they do not elegize a pure, pre-discursive natural world sullied by culture, pollution, and waste. Not only does the ethic of survival evinced by her sculptures confound the rhetoric of disaster and repair, the sculptures insist that it is far too late to “save the earth” anyhow. At the same time, they do not purport that nature is a

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modernist myth, for the realism of the environment has real purchase in Bontecou sculptures. The obsolescence of the autonomy of nature is not confirmed by a poststructuralist baring of the ideology of nature, but rather by the sculptures’ plastic representations of the natural world’s hybridization with humanity and humanmade devices, with all their ecological impacts, of which climate change is now the most urgent.

As scientific research makes irrefutable the anthropogenic nature of climate change (and the disastrous events that attend it, from the melting of the polar ice caps to human displacement known as ecological refugeeism), and as green studies is no longer dismissed as “tree hugging,” we can better understand the criteria by which the art world welcomed environments, earthworks, and land art circa 1970, but not Bontecou’s chemical-age flora and fauna. The environment in question in the well-received, avant-garde art practices of the early 1970s was not the environment of plants and animals, but the environment of art—the phenomenological conditions of viewership, the architectural or historical coordinates of site, the ideological space of the institution. In 1971 and the several decades following, critics were not able to receive Bontecou’s ecological contention that the natural world and “man-made devices with their mind-boggling engineering feats and destructive abominations” have hybridized. They were least of all able to receive the notion that hybridity (the genetic plasticity of the flora and fauna species) is at once a sign of the obsolescence of nature’s autonomy and the key to its future survival. Indeed, the affirmative, survivalist aspect of the work is obfuscated still by those interpretations that position Bontecou as a prophet of doom.
Thus, the multiple temporalities in which Bontecou’s memorials speak also pertain to their being ahead of their time and to the lateness of their reception (a reception still deferred). The vacuum-formed sculptures’ reception follows their own grammatical logic, for only now can we see what these flowers that are made of plastic used to look like.
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Illustrations
Figure 2. Eliot Elisofon, *Leo Castelli*, 1960.
Figure 4. *Lee Bontecou in Skowhegan, Maine, 1954.*
Figure 5. Ugo Mulas, *Lee Bontecou, Wooster Street*, 1963.
Figure 6. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1957. Private Collection.
Figure 7. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1958. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
Figure 17. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1962. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles.
Figure 18. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (57)*, 1961. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.
Figure 21. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1960. Rhode Island School of Design Art Museum, Providence, Rhode Island.
Figure 27. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961. The Menil Collection, Houston.
Figure 29. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1969. The Art Institute of Chicago.
Figure 37. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1960. The Art Institute of Chicago.
Figure 40. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.
Figure 41. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail; pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.
Figure 43. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail; pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.
Figure 44. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail; pictured in storage crate), 1962. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.
Figure 46. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.
Figure 47. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (1964)*, 1964. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York.
Figure 48. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (1964)* (oblique view), 1964. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York.
Figure 49. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (pictured in storage crate), 1961. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 52. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961. Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.
Figure 55. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1970. Collection of Valerie Giles.
Figure 60. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail), 1969. Collection of the Artist/Freedman Art Gallery, New York.
Figure 63. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1969. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles.
Figure 64. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (detail), 1969. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles.
Figure 65. Lee Bontecou’s eight-foot-tall vacuum-formed plastic sculpture, 1969, location unknown.
Figure 68. Lee Bontecou, *Grounded Bird*, 1957. Private collection.
Figure 71. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1969. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
Figure 72. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (rear view), 1969. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
Figure 73. Sy Friedman, *Installation shot of Leo Castelli Gallery*, 1971.
Figure 75.   Eva Hesse, *Hang Up*, 1966. The Art Institute of Chicago.