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Rachel Dalton
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Introduction: Lee Bontecou's Early Reliefs: A Critical and Contextual Analysis

This thesis will reconsider American artist Lee Bontecou's early reliefs (1959-1965) by examining previous critical, curatorial and art historical interpretations as well as the works themselves. Through a combined approach of contextual and critical analysis, it will argue that, although Bontecou's early work has often been described as avoiding categorization within any one artistic movement or style, the artistic climate in which the works were made—in particular, late abstract expressionism, assemblage and early minimalism—are all relevant to their production. Additionally, the cultural and political environment of the late 1950s and early '60s, especially the massively accelerated consumerism of the '50s and the omnipresent anxiety occasioned by the Cold War, provide vital backgrounds for interpreting the materials and imagery found in Bontecou's forms.

This study of Bontecou's work will start at the beginning of her professional career in New York City in 1959 and extend through the first and most famous period of her constructed reliefs. Her early relief constructions have frequently been described as threatening due to their large scale, aggressive mouth or canon-like imagery and incorporation of materials like saw blades and army surplus remnants.¹ Bontecou's reliefs are predominantly constructed from salvaged canvas that has been stretched across or mounted onto a welded steel armature. These

¹ This sentiment is expressed in a variety of ways in a number of articles, the most frequently republished and read of which is artist and critic Donald Judd's famous 1965 essay "Specific Objects." He describes Bontecou's early reliefs in terms of "An image [that] has never before been so explicit and aggressive. The abatised orifice is like a strange and dangerous object." Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 188-9.

reliefs were almost always kept within a subdued range of grays, blacks and browns. The forms, which range in scale and format, but are mostly of a similar large size to many abstract expressionist works, are designed to hang on a wall. The compositions are frequently organized around a central void that opens into the interior of the form. Painted matte black or sometimes covered in light-absorbing black velvet, the interiors of these reliefs create the illusion of an infinite, saturated black space. The year 1965 has been selected as the end of this period because it marks a significant stylistic change in Bontecou's oeuvre when she embarked on a new series of reliefs that embraced a much wider range of colors and tend to involve less menacing or war-like imagery and materials.

A female artist working in the late '50s and early '60s, Bontecou defied prejudice against women by making a series of constructed reliefs that catapulted her to great success early in her career. By 1960, at the age of twenty-nine, she was affiliated with the premier New York gallery run by Leo Castelli, which then represented such notables as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Abruptly, however, at the height of her fame, after having a major retrospective of her work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (1972), Bontecou seemed to "disappear" from the art world, according to critics and other art periodicals. At least this is the version of the story, recycled through a multitude of articles written on the occasion of her grand "comeback," some thirty years later, when another retrospective of her work, at the UCLA Hammer Gallery included an extensive showing of new pieces made during her apparent "absence." Traveling cross-country from Los Angeles to the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and completing its tour at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Bontecou's triumphant and hyped "return" was deemed a great critical success.

Like most good stories, there is an element of hyperbole to this one. Far from having “disappeared” from the art world, Bontecou continued her career by teaching studio art at Brooklyn College in New York and making work in a converted barn in rural Pennsylvania. Parting amicably with the Leo Castelli gallery in 1977, Bontecou did not actively exhibit any of her new work, although her early pieces in private and museum collections were regularly shown in a range of contexts.² An enigmatic and somewhat taciturn figure, Bontecou in her early work, as well as that shown on her return in 2003, has confounded critics. As friend and poet Tony Towle concluded in 1971, “Her art is finally and irreducibly mysterious.”³ Echoing this sentiment, Elizabeth A. T. Smith, curator of the 2003 retrospective, wrote:

The lyricism and cornucopic sense of visual abundance emanating from her recent sculpture and drawing ... is simultaneously unsettling, otherworldly, surreal, and fundamentally mysterious.⁴

Rather than celebrating this so-called “irreducible mystery” of Bontecou’s oeuvre, this thesis will consider the critical and curatorial approaches toward her early works and go on to develop a contextual analysis of them. By looking closely at the curatorial, critical and art historical literature on the artist, this thesis will serve as a testing ground for the diverse interpretations of Bontecou’s early reliefs. In doing so, it will provide a more comprehensive view of the artistic, social and political climate in which the works were made.

In order to develop a more specific and articulated understanding of Bontecou’s early work made during the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, this thesis will employ German historian Reinhart Koselleck’s theorization of historical time. Before explaining how his theorization will aid in

² Calvin Tomkins, “Missing in Action,” *The New Yorker* (August, 4, 2003): 42.

³ Tony Towle, “Two Conversations with Lee Bontecou,” *The Print Collector’s Newsletter* 2/2 (May-June 1971): 27.

⁴ Elizabeth A. T. Smith, “All Freedom in Every Sense,” in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, ed., Kari Dahlgren (Chicago and Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Hammer Museum, 2003), 180.

this analysis, it is necessary to summarize the basic logic of his argument and define his terminology. In Koselleck's view historical time functions in "multitemporal layers," rather than in terms of the linear, period-driven model generally used in historical research.⁵ "The singular form of a single historical time, which is supposed to distinguish itself from measurable time, is already open to doubt," Koselleck states, noting that, "Historical time, if the term is to have meaning, is tied to social and political units of action, to particular acting and suffering human beings, and their institutions and organizations. They all have certain inherent modes of performance, each of which has its own temporal rhythm."⁶ He then argues that it is more helpful to "speak, not of one historical time, but of the many that overlie one another."⁷ When seen in terms of this multilayered model, history can be viewed as the "conditions of possibility" that frame historical occurrences, and not simply as the study of the causal relations between events in the past.⁸ Considering the history of a particular people or place becomes not only a question of "how it really happened," but also "how could it happen." Thus, historical research is an exercise in determining the possible histories, rather than a single, correct causal structure.⁹

Distinguishing between layers of time, each with its own possible history, is then of primary importance. Koselleck proposes that "historical times can be identified if we direct our

⁵ Koselleck states, "historians... are compelled to adduce medium-range, long-term, or enduring causes for the explanation of unique experiences. The case analysis leads to the formation of hypotheses, and the formation of hypotheses leads to explanations that confront reality with its conditions of possibility. Thus the temporal difference between situative singularity and long-term causes enters into argument, and without this no history can be recognized. This difference survives every paradigm shift. The *temporal multilayeredness* of modalities of experience developed above is thus mirrored in the methodological procedures." Reinhart Koselleck, "Transformations of Experience," in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans., Jobst Welge, eds, Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 59 (my italics).

⁶ Koselleck, "Time and History" in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans., Kerstin Behnke, eds, Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 110.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Koselleck, "Transformations of Experience," 59.

⁹ Ibid.

view to where time itself occurs or is enacted in humans as historical beings: in the relationship between past and future, which always constitutes an elusive present.”¹⁰ He explains:

...on the one hand, every human being and every human community has a *space of experience* out of which one acts, in which past things are present or can be remembered, and, on the other, one always acts with reference to specific *horizons of expectation* [my italics].¹¹

Determining the “space of experience” for a given historical subject, whether of a particular person, institution, or other historical perspective, is a matter of considering what particular past experiences can have an effect on the decisions and actions of given subjects.¹² Thus, the “space of experience” of a particular individual or topic can refer to previous art historical movements, political events, works of art, manifestations of popular culture or any other aspect of the past that effects the subject’s outlook. Conversely, uncovering a specific “horizon of expectations” involves informed imagination or conjecture; it is “the future made present, it directs itself to the not-yet, to the non-experienced, to that which is to be revealed.”¹³ Although based on a particular range of circumstances, the outlook of a given historical subject’s future is always hypothetical, even though the formulation of future possibilities can affect the course of events. “Experience in the past can change the course of time,” Koselleck writes, noting, “the events of 1933 have occurred once and for all, but the experiences which are based on them can change over time... it is the tension between experience and expectation which, in ever-changing

¹⁰ Koselleck, “Time and History,” 111.

¹¹ Ibid, 111.

¹² Koselleck writes, “The historical subject is an almost inexplicable quantity. Think of any famous personality or of the “people,” which is no less vague than “class;” think of the economy, the state, the church, and other such abstract entities or powers.” Koselleck, “On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans., Kerstin Behnke, eds, Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9.

¹³ Koselleck, “ ‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” in *Futures Past*, trans., Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 272.

patterns, brings about new resolutions and through this generates historical time.”¹⁴ Thus, by considering the complex interrelation of past and present in terms of a given historical subject’s “space of experience” and “horizon of expectations”, one can identify different layers of historical time and develop possible histories.

Further complicating the interrelations between the possible histories of different temporal layers is their complex relationship to chronology. Although connected to a biological or mathematical measurement of time, these layers are neither defined nor synchronized by it.

Koselleck describes:

...measures of time that derive from a mathematical-physical understanding of nature are needed... But an interpretation of the interrelations that result already leads beyond naturally, physically or astronomically processed determinations of time. Political constraints on decisions made under the pressure of deadlines, the repercussions upon the economy or military actions of the spans required by means of travel and communication, the permanence or mobility of social modes of behavior in the field of temporally limited political or economic requirements—all this, plus other things, in their mutual interaction or dependence finally forces us to adopt social and political determinations of time, that although they are naturally caused, must be defined as specifically historical. ...In contrast to ...objective determinations of time... one could call them “subjective,” if this is not associated with epistemological devaluation.¹⁵

Therefore, each of the temporal layers of history is separate and acknowledged as “subjective”; each is based on individual political, social, economic, or other circumstances. Moreover, acting in accordance with its own “temporal rhythm,” each layer of time moves at different speeds and with different “velocities of change.”¹⁶ Koselleck groups the different layers of time and their attendant velocities into three tracks: the “short-term,” the “middle term,” and the “metahistorical

¹⁴ Koselleck, “ ‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” 274-5.

¹⁵ Koselleck, “Time and History,” 110.

¹⁶ He writes, “There are structures that endure and there are processes that persist: both necessitate and outlast the respective individual events in which history itself takes place. In other words, there are different velocities of change.” Koselleck, “The Unknown Future and the Art of Prognosis,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans., Todd Presner, eds, Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 135.

duration.” The short-term, which is defined as the “succession of before and after characterizing the constraints of our everyday actions,” progresses the fastest with the least predictability. Koselleck describes the middle-term as “the trends deriving from the course of events,” such as economic crises or war; it moves slightly slower. Changing at the slowest rate, the metahistorical duration “establishes certain anthropological constants” that become “historical structures of experience;” Koselleck notes that these structures can take the form of proverbs like ‘pride goeth before the fall.’¹⁷ These separate and subjective layers of time reveal historical structures through their conflict. Because “the scale of future possibilities can never be outlined on the basis of a single modality or unit of action...” Koselleck explains, “only temporal differences, refractions, or tensions can express the trend toward a new structuring of reality.”¹⁸ Thus, accessing the variable speeds and rates of change of separate temporal layers affects the historian’s formulation of possible histories.

In summary, according to Koselleck’s theorization, historical time is different from natural or mathematical time; it is structured in multitemporal layers that constitute particular, subjective situations. In order to conduct historical research according to Koselleck’s approach, one must first distinguish between the layers of historical time by considering the specific “space of experience”¹⁹ and “horizon of expectations”²⁰ for a given subject. By observing the conflicts between separate temporal layers with their different speeds and velocities of change, one can develop a possible history that takes into account the subjectivity of historical time, while being

¹⁷ Koselleck, “The Unknown Future and the Art of Prognosis,” 144-6.

¹⁸ Koselleck, “On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History,” 9.

¹⁹ This is Koselleck’s term for the range of prior events that affect the outlook of a given historical subject. For a more complete discussion see Koselleck, “Time and History,” 111-12.

²⁰ This is Koselleck’s term for the range of possible futures projected by a given historical subject based upon their particular “space of experience.” For a more complete discussion see Koselleck, “Time and History,” 111-12.

based on actual occurrences.²¹ Thus, rather than being liabilities, the subjective historical perspectives of primary sources, as well as later historical writing on a subject become tools for developing comprehensive accounts. This analysis of Bontecou's early work is in agreement with Koselleck's view of historical time and will employ his concept by considering her reliefs from several perspectives, which each comprise a separate layer of historical time. Discussing these different readings of her forms in terms of the specific "spaces of experience" and "horizons of expectations" that they embody will place different interpretations of her work in high relief as separate historical views that sometimes overlap but are mostly distinct. In doing so this approach will interrogate the so-called "irreducible mystery" of Bontecou's early reliefs by framing the work in terms of a series of historical perspectives that have affected the reception of the work through posing different and sometimes mutually exclusive constructions of meaning or interpretations of form. This thesis will not ignore the vital contradictions between these different receptions; instead, these frictions and contradictions between temporal layers will be used to reveal the major trends of the historical time in which Bontecou's reliefs were made, shown, and critiqued, and, in doing so, it will expand the overall understanding of her work and the different layers of history in which it participated.

Although frequently mentioned in discussions of art during the '60s and included in the collections of major museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Chicago Art Institute, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Bontecou's work has rarely been subjected to art historical analysis. This thesis aims to redress this gap in the literature. Secondly it will propose an alternate approach to analyzing Bontecou's forms that avoids the two major tactics that, so far, have been applied in critical, curatorial and art historical discussions of

²¹ Koselleck, "On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History," 12.

her work. The first approach is to situate or evaluate her early reliefs in relation to a single stylistic category. Her work has regularly been explored in terms of artist and critic Donald Judd's concepts, as enumerated in his famous 1965 essay "Specific Objects," a key minimalist text. Although radically divergent from Judd's characterization of her work, Bontecou's art has also been linked with the stylistic approach that late '50s and early '60s style critics have called "neo-dada" or "assemblage." Rather than analyzing her art in terms of a single style, the second dominant approach to Bontecou's art has associated it with a number of different artistic groups. These associations include minimalism and assemblage, but also reference cubism, futurism, surrealism and abstract expressionism. Although this second mode, which considerably diversifies the interpretations of her reliefs, correctly acknowledges the problems of associating Bontecou's work with one stylistic trend, the breadth of the stylistic associations has not been adequately supported. Because neither of these tactics fully grasp Bontecou's art and its multivalent associations, this thesis will rely on Koselleck's concept of historical time to address her work's place in the culture, politics and dynamic artistic climate in the United States at the time of their making. This contextual and critical analysis of Bontecou's forms will allow for a new and more comprehensive view of her early work that will demonstrate that these so-called "irreducibly mysterious" forms were created and exhibited in relation to a several different historical perspectives or "temporal layers."

Review of Literature

The current scholarship on Lee Bontecou is limited, and much of the most recent work was developed in concert with the 2003 retrospective of her art. Bontecou's work was the subject of one other retrospective in 1972 as well as seven other solo exhibition catalogs and eighteen group exhibition publications. The rest of the literature on the artist is mostly composed of brief reviews (57), critical and curatorial essays (29) and entries in art anthologies (17). Bontecou received frequent reviews during the '60's from critic Dore Ashton (seven) and Judd (four). She has also been the subject of six in-depth art historical essays published in periodicals. In order to provide a clear, but brief, overview of the scholarship on the artist, only a few of the most important or most exemplary works will be discussed.

The literature on Bontecou can be broadly grouped into four main themes. The first, beginning in 1960, connects Bontecou's work to the neo-dada or assemblage production of the late '50s and early '60s. The second and perhaps most dominant trend in scholarship on the artist is the association of her work with early minimalism, starting with Judd's reviews. Feminist interpretations of her work, although scarce, make up the third major theme, emerging in the '70s and continuing to the present day. The fourth trend, beginning in 1992, is characterized by a tendency to view Bontecou's early work as "eccentric and hard to categorize."²² Rather than associating the work with one specific artistic movement, trend, or philosophy, this fourth approach posits a broad range of connections from art history as well as the contemporary popular culture.

²² E. A. T. Smith, "Abstract Sinister," *Art in America* 81 (September 1993): 82.

Assemblage

Although important to this study, writings that relate Bontecou's art directly to assemblage are limited. However, many of the earliest reviews and critical mentions of Bontecou's reliefs do consider her work to be part of the then new and growing trend called "neo-dada" (later termed "assemblage"). In the May 1960 issue of the *Burlington Magazine* art historian and critic George Heard Hamilton took note of Bontecou's work:

The younger neo-Dadaists who have lately come to prominence are enjoying phenomenal success. Although Lee Bontecou has not yet publicly exhibited her new metal and canvas 'paintings', there is a demand for them from private collectors. Both she and Salvatore Scarpitta, like many of the newer painters and sculptors, are accomplished scavengers and have turned the refuse of industrial civilization into a disturbing and mysterious poetry.²³

That same year Bontecou's reliefs were exhibited in the Martha Jackson Gallery's *New Media New Forms*, which focused on this growing trend of constructed works made from various salvaged or scavenged "non-art" materials. After her participation in art historian and curator William Seitz's influential show the *Art of Assemblage*, much of the critical writing on the artist describes her work in terms of this trend.²⁴ Although not directly mentioned in the exhibition catalog's essay, Bontecou's inclusion in this exhibit, which popularized the term "assemblage"

²³ G. H. Hamilton, "Painting in Contemporary America," *The Burlington Magazine* 102/686 (May 1960): 197.

²⁴ For examples see: Charlotte, Willard, "Market Letter- Find of the Year," *Art in America* (March 1960): 4; "The Loft-Waif," *Time* 81/5 (February 1, 1963): 58-59; Gene Baro, "A Gathering of Americans," *Arts Magazine* 37/10 (September 1963): 31. Even as late as 1969 critic Max Kozloff, who in his review of the Whitney Annual for *Artforum*, divided the exhibition into nine separate stylistic categories, grouped Bontecou as "Pop, fetishistic, assemblage, Surreal, and Funk," rather than as "Primary structures, Park Place, and Minimal" with Morris and Judd [Kozloff, "Whitney Annual," *Artforum*.8/1(February 1969): 64].

Later group shows that included Bontecou's work, such as the Jewish Museum's 1964 exhibition *Recent American Sculpture, Boxes* at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles (1964), and *New American Sculpture* at the Pasadena Art Museum (1964), were all organized in terms of shared assemblage characteristics, including constructed, rather than carved or modeled, forms and the use of found materials not previously considered as viable in the context of art.

and helped to consolidate its major themes, provides a new perspective for viewing her early reliefs. Seitz's theorization of the art historical sources and compositional mode of the art he termed "assemblage"²⁵ highlights many aspects of Bontecou's work that are in direct opposition to Judd's later categorization of it.

The most lasting discussion of Bontecou's work in terms of assemblage occurred in a series of anthologies beginning with Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh's 1962 *Collage: Personalities, Concepts, Techniques* and continuing through to 1990 with Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein's *American Women Sculptors*.²⁶ Entries in these anthologies have tended to focus on Bontecou's unique use of diverse materials and to describe her imagery as both enigmatic and intimidating. As assemblage became a less prominent stylistic trend, and was replaced in art criticism by the new emphasis on pop, correlations between Bontecou's work and assemblage declined, though, as has been noted, they did not end completely.

"Specific Objects"

Although Donald Judd wrote brief reviews on Bontecou's work in 1960, 1963, and 1964, his 1965 piece, in combination with his focus on her work in "Specific Objects," has been the most widely referred to in subsequent critical and art historical writings on her work. Theorizing

²⁵ Seitz based the term assemblage on Jean Dubuffet's name for his collaged work. William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Plantin Press, The Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 150, note 5. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotes attributed to Seitz are from this text.

²⁶ The following additional anthologies all discuss Bontecou's work in terms of assemblage: Hugo Munsterberg, *A History of Women Artists* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1975), 101-103; Nancy G. Heller, *Women Artists: An Illustrated History* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 189-191; Daniel Wheeler, *Art Since Mid-Century 1945 to Present* (New York: The Vendome Press, 1989), 170.

Bontecou's art in terms of his conceptualization of 'specific objects,' Judd provides a useful perspective on its dynamic qualities. However, the influence of Judd's approach in later critical and art historical writing has sometimes led to a reductive view of it. Bontecou's works were often critiqued in terms of a perceived connection to minimalism in general and "Specific Objects" in particular, and this approach became the criteria for measuring the success or failure of her constructions. Bontecou's art has also been considered in terms of specific objects in Gregory Battcock's 1968 anthology *Minimal Art*, which includes critic Michael Benedikt's review of her work. In his piece Benedikt praises her sculpture's "architecture" while denigrating its "perversely self-preoccupied detailing."²⁷ His estimation echoes Judd's 1965 statement that Bontecou's more complex reliefs "are less powerful and less interesting."²⁸ Although this opinion concurs with Judd's emphasis in "Specific Objects" on simplified forms, it ignores the intricate details as well as the presence of the artist's hand in the work's construction that is found in nearly all of her reliefs. Similarly, curator Richard Field's catalog essay for the 1975 exhibition *Lee Bontecou: Prints and Drawings, at the Davidson Art Center* also discusses her reliefs in accord with "Specific Objects" and consequently criticizes those aspects of the art that are associated with assemblage. Like Judd and Benedikt, Field depreciates Bontecou's more complex compositions. For Field, "some of the sculptures [have] become so additive they regress to the assemblage style of the fifties and [have] lost touch with the potent suspension between object and illusion that the best works maintained."²⁹

²⁷ Michael Benedikt, "Sculpture as Architecture: New York Letter, 1966-1967," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), 72.

²⁸ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 178.

²⁹ Richard S. Field, introduction to *Prints and Drawings by Lee Bontecou* (Middleton, Connecticut: Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, 1975), 5.

Other critical and curatorial writings do not attempt a direct link to minimalism proper, but instead discuss Bontecou's work as being "proto-" or "post-minimalist." Art historian and critic Robert Pincus-Witten addresses Bontecou in the context of post-minimalism in his 1977 book *Postminimalism* in the chapter "Rosenquist and Samaras: The Obsessive Image and Postminimalism." Pincus-Witten connects the work of Bontecou (and Lucas Samaras) to Eva Hesse's in terms of the "obsessive nature" of some of their constructions. The reference to Bontecou's art in this essay is brief. However, it is important because it marks the continuation of the tendency to categorize her work in terms of perceived connections to minimalism; moreover, it was republished in Pincus-Witten's 1987 book *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art, 1966-1986*, thus adding to the long-term influence of Judd's early categorization of Bontecou's reliefs. Bontecou's work was explored from a similar perspective in the 1996 exhibition at the Weatherspoon Art Gallery *Making Selections and Forging Connections*, in which curator Douglas Dreishpoon selected works for the exhibition from the Weatherspoon's permanent collection that shared a connection with minimalism. He discusses a 1963 drawing and a 1973 lithograph by Bontecou as being "proto-minimalist." Like Judd, Dreishpoon characterizes Bontecou's reliefs as being "unitary" in image and form.

Bontecou's art continues to be seen as adjunct to minimalism in James Meyer's *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (Yale University Press, 2001) and his book *Minimalism* (Phaidon Press, 2000). Although her art is by no means a focus for either study, its inclusion in these survey texts is based on its association with specific objects. In his Yale book, Meyer includes Bontecou in several lists of artists, who at the time were associated with aspects of minimalism. He repeats Judd's assertions that her reliefs occupy a place between painting and

sculpture without becoming either and that her simplified “architectural” forms have a distinctive “unitary” quality.³⁰ According to Meyer, these ideas are not necessarily symptomatic of minimalism as a whole, but are most clearly represented in Judd’s idea of minimalism as expressed in his “Specific Objects” essay. Meyer’s theorization of minimalism as a discursive field rather than a monolithic stylistic category is also helpful for evaluating Bontecou’s connection to minimalism in terms of Judd’s theorization of her work.

The long-standing influence of Judd’s discussion of Bontecou’s work continues even in the 2003 retrospective catalog, in which his review of her early reliefs is republished. For example, critic, curator, and artist Robert Storr, who extensively quotes Judd’s description of Bontecou’s forms, bases his exploration of art historical connections to her work in part on Judd’s structural analysis of her forms. In a comparison between Bontecou’s early reliefs and the works of Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri, he writes:

... Judd’s observations about the figure-ground relations in Fontana as opposed to the conflation of figure and ground in Bontecou are true and, to a lesser extent apply to Burri—although the tension of the stretched cloth from perforated center to generally taut outer edge in Burri’s canvas anticipates, on a flat plane, the amalgamation of image and support in her reliefs...³¹

Thus, even as new efforts move away from the simplistic association of Bontecou’s reliefs exclusively with early minimalism, Judd’s analysis continues to be a dynamic source for investigating Bontecou’s forms.

³⁰ James Meyer, “Specific Objects,” in *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 135-139.

³¹ Robert Storr, “Seek and Hide,” in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, ed., Kari Dahlgren (Chicago and Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Hammer Museum, 2003), 188.

Feminist Interpretations

From Judd's often quoted statement about the bellicose sexuality of Bontecou's forms to more reductive opinions like critic Edward Kelly's description of her work as "the great female archetype in its most ugly and destructive aspect," references to the sexual connotations of Bontecou's imagery are prevalent in the literature on the artist's work.³² Unfortunately, few scholarly feminist analyses of her work have been attempted. Despite this critical neglect, Bontecou's works loom large in the context of the search for exemplary feminist artists who were creating a specifically female imagery in the early '70's. In an important conversation between noted feminist critic Lucy Lippard and well-known feminist artist Judy Chicago, which was published in *Artforum* in September of 1974, Lippard asks, "What about your emphasis on central imagery, or 'female imagery,' which is wildly controversial, to put it mildly?"³³ Chicago replies:

In my mind if something wasn't named it didn't exist. I wanted to name the subject matter I was involved with. ... I never meant that all women made art like me. I meant that some of us had made art dealing with our sexual experiences as women. I looked at O'Keeffe and Bontecou and Hepworth and I don't care what anybody says, I identified with that work. I knew from my own work what those women were doing. A lot of us used a central format, and forms identified with as if they were our own bodies.³⁴

Although in many ways Lippard's and Chicago's search for an essentially female imagery created problematic stereotypes for women artists, the mention of Bontecou's work in this context is of art historical importance. It has had lasting effects on the scholarship and the context in which her imagery has been viewed. Bontecou is discussed in several anthologies of female artists, including early attempts like Hugo Munsterberg's *A History of Women Artists*

³² Edward T. Kelly, "Neo-Dada: A Critique of Pop Art," *Art Journal* 23/3 (Spring 1964): 200.

³³ "Judy Chicago Talking to Lucy Lippard," *Artforum* 17/1 (September 1974): 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

(1975) and Charlotte Rubinstien's *American Women Sculptors* (1990), as well as several editions of Whitney Chadwick's more comprehensive survey *Women, Art and Society*. Her work has also been exhibited in group shows that focused on creating a "lineage" of women artists such as the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery's exhibition *Fiber and Form: The Women's Legacy* (1996).

More recent discussion of the sexual connotations and political associations of Bontecou's forms have considered them in terms of the body, but without designating a specifically male or female sensibility. In a 1994 article art historian Mona Hadler writes, "The compelling nature of her work, which is not simply political or sexual (as has often been maintained), derives in part from Bontecou's employment of the body as a site for social protest."³⁵ Likewise, Helen Molesworth, curator of the 2005 exhibition *Part Object Part Sculpture*, describes Bontecou's work in her introduction in deliberately feminist tones: "the hole and the mound that are one and the same generate instead a metonymic chain: breast turn into mouths, which become anuses, which are also vaginas and eyes."³⁶ Also in 2005, two unpublished graduate student studies were completed that further explore the role sexism and feminism in the reception and interpretation of Bontecou's early reliefs. Victoria Estrada-Berg's thesis "Art Criticism and the Gendering of Lee Bontecou's Art 1959-1964" discusses the various gendered interpretations of Bontecou's early work in the context of the social climate in which they were made.³⁷ And Elyse Marie Deeb Speaks' dissertation "The Architecture of Reception: Sculpture and Gender in the 1950s and 1960s" explores the growing presence of women

³⁵ Mona Hadler, "Warnings," *Art Journal* 53/4 (Winter 1994): 56.

³⁶ Helen Molesworth, introduction to *Part Object Part Sculpture* (Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 2005), 29.

³⁷ V. Estrada-Berg, "Art Criticism and the Gendering of Lee Bontecou's Art 1959-1964" (MA thesis, University of North Texas, 2005).

sculptors during the '50s and '60s in terms of the changing shape of the medium of sculpture itself.³⁸ Although these recent additions to the literature on Bontecou's work explore her oeuvre in terms of feminist and gender issues, no one broadly addresses the role of this dynamic cultural influence in her art and its reception; instead each brief examination comprises only the restricted range of its specific focus.

Unfortunately, because this thesis, which is structured in terms of Koselleck's theorization of historical time, requires distinct time-based perspectives concerning Bontecou's early reliefs in order to construct a new temporal layer, it remains outside its scope to embark on a full reconsideration of her work in terms of broader-based feminist and gender issues that have cropped up repeatedly over the past four decades. Such a topic both deserves and requires a full-length study in order to plumb thoroughly the depth and breadth of the issues involved. In fact one could view the several different feminist and gendered interpretations of Bontecou's art in themselves as constituting multiple temporal layers. For example, the gendered responses to her early reliefs during the first years of the so-called second-wave of feminism in the early '60s can be considered as separate from later feminist artists' reactions to her work in the '70s. Meanwhile, more recent discussions of her forms in terms of their gender-ambiguous bodily connotations enact another complicated evaluation. For this reason, this thesis will not dwell on the role of feminist interpretations in Bontecou's early work, but instead explores a broader range of stylistic and contextual debates. However, aspects of this vital, but incompletely investigated, layer of historical time will be part of this analysis when it addresses the overall current state of Bontecou criticism and scholarship.

³⁸ E. M. D. Speaks, "The Architecture of Reception: Sculpture and Gender in the 1950s and 1960s" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2005).

Writings on Bontecou's work after 1992

Much of the literature on Bontecou's art after 1992 is characterized by a move away from attempting stylistic determinations or categorizations in favor of establishing a broader, and more open-ended basis for her source material in diverse facets of art history as well as the popular culture of the '50s and '60s. Foreshadowed by critic Carter Ratcliff's 1972 catalog essay, in which he discusses her art's ability to reference visually both biological and mechanical forms, without correlating it with any one identifiable artistic movement or style, this approach to art historical research has become the dominant mode for viewing this artist's work. Hadler's 1992 article "Lee Bontecou—Heart of a Conquering Darkness," draws comparisons with elements of Surrealism and Giacometti's work, but also makes a convincing argument for the social and political context of Bontecou's art. Citing Bontecou's use of such military artifacts as bullets, helmets and gas masks as well as this artist's statements about the inspiration of Sputnik I, Hadler places Bontecou's early reliefs in the context of Cold War culture. Published a year later, Elizabeth A. T. Smith's essay "Abstract Sinister," which was written in concert with her traveling exhibition of Bontecou's work from the '60's and '70's, continues Hadler's expansive contextualization of Bontecou's forms: in her essay she suggests connections between art movements and other visual sources as diverse as analytic cubism, abstract expressionism, gas masks and sea creatures. Closely followed by Hadler's 1994 articles "Lee Bontecou's Warnings" and "Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America 1945-59," which both discuss the critical relevance of World War II and the Cold War for Bontecou's work, this new trend in scholarship gained momentum. These essays and others constitute a new emphasis on a

contextual analysis rather than a stylistic categorization. Supported by Bontecou's acknowledgment that the political and cultural situation in the United States during the '50's and '60's was part of her thought process when making her reliefs, Hadler's arguments, in particular, are some of the most cogent and exciting in the available literature on this artist's work.³⁹

The Chicago-LA catalog for the 2003 Bontecou retrospective continues this trend of contextual analysis and was instrumental in re-establishing Bontecou as a major twentieth and twenty-first century art figure. The essays included in this catalog move beyond earlier scholarship by discussing Bontecou's oeuvre in connection with an even more diverse array of art and visual sources from popular culture, ranging from elaborate automotive designs and images of outer space of the '50s and '60's to the Italian futurists' and Alberto Burri's work.

Smith's catalog essay in this retrospective, entitled "All Freedom in Every Sense," provides pertinent biographical information on Bontecou's life and artistic career. Her discussion focuses on the resistance of Bontecou's work to categorization within any one specific style or movement. Smith writes:

While historians and critics have interpreted Bontecou's work in relation to various movements and artistic directions, ranging from feminist art to aspects of minimalism and post-minimalism to a latter-day manifestation of surrealism, it has consistently eluded direct identification with any of these.⁴⁰

She then cites the diversity of Bontecou's oeuvre as evidence of this resistance:

Rather than having settled into a single style or working method, Bontecou's continuous experimentation with materials and modes of production—while consistent in her use of certain key images or motifs—endows her work with an uncommon vibrancy and vitality.⁴¹

³⁹ Eleanor Munro, "Lee Bontecou" (includes an interview with Bontecou), in *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 384.

⁴⁰ E. A. T. Smith, "All Freedom in Every Sense," 170.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

The problem of how to group or categorize Bontecou's work is often mentioned in scholarship on the artist; however, Smith's statement that Bontecou's work "resists" categorization has not been sufficiently interrogated. The mechanics of this "resistance" need to be explored and questioned in terms of the specific classifications her work defies.

Storr's essay "Seek and Hide" in this same catalogue situates Bontecou's work in relation to many different artists and artistic movements of the twentieth century besides minimalism and assemblage, including cubism, futurism, dada and surrealism as well as the works of Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana, Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois and Yayoi Kusama. Bontecou took offence with Storr's attempt to situate her work art-historically and, according to more than one article, demanded that this essay be removed from the catalog.⁴² A compromise was made between the artist and the museum in which the essay remained intact, and Bontecou's own statement was inserted at the beginning of the soft-cover version of the catalog, since it was not submitted in time to be included in the case-bound edition. Bontecou, however, does not refer directly to Storr's essay in her piece, but later asserts indirectly,

Over the years and to the present day, there has been so much written about my work that has nothing to do with me that when I read it, I don't recognize anything of myself or my work in it.⁴³

Despite this controversy, Storr's essay is valuable for opening up the field of exploration surrounding Bontecou's work, especially in terms of possible connections with Italian futurism and the mid-twentieth-century art of Burri and Fontana. Works by these artists were readily available to Bontecou during the two years she spent in Italy prior to her first solo show. In

⁴² Allan M. Jalon, "Angered artist has her say," *Los Angeles Times*, Saturday, October 4, 2003, E16, E17. Irit Krygier. "Career Interrupted," *Artnet* (October 28, 2003), <<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/krygier/krygier10-28-03.asp>>

⁴³ Bontecou, "Artist Statement," in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, ed., Kari Dahlgren (Chicago and Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Hammer Museum, 2003), 12.

particular, Burri's use of materials in his *Sacchi* series, which were made from salvaged canvas sacking used for wrapping shipments of relief aid sent to Italy after World War II, are compellingly similar to Bontecou's use of reclaimed canvas from laundry bags, military surplus and other sources for her reliefs.

Hadler's essay "Lee Bontecou's Worldscapes," also in the Chicago-LA catalog, explores the black voids in Bontecou's reliefs in terms of a new emphasis in '50s popular culture on outer space and black holes. Hadler cites Bontecou's statements about her excitement on first hearing about the launch of the Russian satellite Sputnik on October 4, 1957.

Since the publication of the Chicago-LA Retrospective catalog, two other in-depth essays have been published. The first, art historian Jo Applin's "'This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object': Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void," published in *Art History* in June 2006, discusses "issues of violence, spectatorial invasion and psychic affect in the large-scale, wall-mounted metal and fabric reliefs."⁴⁴ Although the title of the article references a statement from Judd's 1965 review of the artist's work, it marks a significant step away from his "Specific Objects" and the long-term trend of evaluating Bontecou's works in relation to minimalism. Instead Applin's essay considers the psychological impact of the forms on viewers, thereby constructing a new and vital area for exploration in terms of Bontecou's work.

The second essay, Hadler's "Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades," which is the most recent scholarly consideration of Bontecou, was published in the *Woman's Art Journal* in 2007. Hadler's historization of Bontecou (unlike Storr's emphasis on other artists and art movements) focuses on social and cultural issues, as well as popular cultural images, as important source

⁴⁴ Jo Applin, "'This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object': Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void," *Art History* 29/3 (June 2006): 476.

material for Bontecou's work. This social-historical approach may be the reason for Bontecou's apparent acceptance of Hadler's scholarship. As a fellow professor at Brooklyn College, where Bontecou taught for twenty years, Hadler was able to develop a collegial relationship with the artist and also interviewed her about her work numerous times, so that this second essay includes important primary source material that was worked out in concert with the artist.

Conclusion

In looking closely at the major trends in scholarship on Bontecou's early reliefs one can determine several interpretations that are the result of different perspectives, and, which are relevant to the reception of Bontecou's early reliefs within the artistic scene and popular and political culture of the late '50s and early '60s. Seitz's curatorial writing on assemblage, Judd's critical discussion of the specific object, and Hadler's social art historical analysis posit three particularly distinct and valuable readings. Each of their perspectives represent a different way of looking at Bontecou's art that is in concert with a specific trend or set of events that occurred in the same place and chronological time as that in which Bontecou's early reliefs were created and first accrued meaning.

According to Koselleck, in order to locate these different perspectives historically one must consider how:

The ancient trinity of place, time and person clearly enters the work of a historical author. If place, time and person should alter, then new works would emerge even if they dealt with the same object, or appeared to do so.⁴⁵

Determining the positionality of a particular author in terms of place and time enables one to understand better that individual's historical view.⁴⁶ This idea can be understood in terms of the Kantian concept of the *a priori* principles of space and time. In Kant's view meaningful thought can occur only when situated in space and time;⁴⁷ likewise, for Koselleck, in order to create meaningful interpretations of history one must locate perspectives in place and time. In both constructs the noumenon, whether that be the-thing-in-itself or the truth of historical events, can never be known.⁴⁸ Instead, all interpretations are necessarily based on the imaginative constructions of the perceiver/viewer. Thus, according to Koselleck's Kantian view, placing a particular perspective in space and time is of primary importance.

However, according to Koselleck, this task locating perspectives in historical time is complicated by the unavoidable and continuous passage of chronological time; he states history "constantly passes both the historian and the writing of history by."⁴⁹ In other words, as this historical theorist observes,

Time is no longer the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality. Consequently, history no longer occurs in, but through time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Koselleck, "Perspective and Temporality," in *Future's Past*, 130.

⁴⁶ Koselleck states, "Historicity is supposed to outline both the conditions of possibility for histories ... *and the place that historical research occupies within them*" in order to "clear the historian of the charge of a putative subjectivity." Koselleck, "On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History," 3, my italics.

⁴⁷ In his *Critique of Judgement* Kant views space and time as the necessary preconditions for perception because these two aspects of perception are separate from both the perceiver and the object perceived. He states the "...space stands for the mere *a priori* form that enables us to intuit things," (29). Likewise time or "the successive states of one and the same thing" is another universal law or condition necessary for "the possibility of experience... without which nature as such (as object of sense) cannot be thought." 22

⁴⁸ Kant, 111.

⁴⁹ Koselleck, "On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History," 3.

⁵⁰ Koselleck, "'Neuzeit': Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement," in *Future's Past*, 246.

Thus, as statements made by a particular author in a specific place and time are overtaken by the passage of chronological time, they are transformed even as they are fixed in place and become historical in themselves. Similarly, in Koselleck's theory, temporal layers are defined in terms of the historical locus attributed to a given subject.⁵¹ It then follows that the positionality of both author and subject—that is their different perspectives—affect the historization of interpretations even as they are outdistanced by the force of time and become historicized.

In applying Koselleck's theory of historical time to Bontecou scholarship, art historical, curatorial and critical interpretations of her oeuvre all become historical through the passage of time, as long as they can be located in terms of person, time and place. Seitz's and Judd's embedded curatorial and critical interpretations of the art of the late '50s and early '60s in New York, become particularly noteworthy historical statements about that artistic climate. Their different (almost opposite) perspectives embody separate temporal layers each with its own "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations."⁵² Because Seitz's and Judd's historical views respectively constitute the distinctive trajectories of assemblage and early minimalism they are of special value for this contextual analysis of Bontecou's forms; during the late 50s and early '60s when these radically different stylistic trends were dominant parts of the contemporary New York artistic scene. When constructed as distinct layers of time, Seitz's and Judd's different perspectives allow for the development of separate possible histories for Bontecou's early reliefs

⁵¹ Koselleck proposes that "historical times can be identified if we direct our view to where time itself occurs or is enacted in humans as historical beings: in the relationship between past and future, which always constitutes an elusive present," (Koselleck, "Time and History," 111). He explains that "on the one hand, every human being and every human community has a *space of experience* out of which one acts, in which past things are present or can be remembered, and, on the other, one always acts with reference to specific *horizons of expectation* (111, my italics).

⁵² For definitions of Koselleck's terms "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations" see notes 19, 20, respectively.

that are based on the multiple artistic contexts in which her work was made and accrued meaning.

Hadler's view, like Seitz's and Judd's, is also bound by her particular place and time and so can also be considered historical as it is overtaken by the passage of time (even though she writes with the hindsight of the more than three decades). However, unlike in Seitz's and Judd's writings where the author's position and their subject's position are congruent (they both consider the contemporary artistic scene in which they lived and worked), the layer of time that Hadler describes is not based on her historical position, but on that of her subject, Bontecou. In Hadler's social art historical analysis hypotheses and interpretations are made in terms of Bontecou's embedded perspective as constituted by her "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations" within the confines established by particular political issues and popular culture events of the late '50s and early '60s. Thus, Hadler's analysis is of particular importance to this thesis because it constructs a layer of time in terms of the subject rather than the author, and in doing so provides another view of the place and chronological time in which Bontecou's art was made.

Although there are other perspectives in the current scholarship that can be developed as particular layers of historical time, this thesis, which is a contextual analysis of Bontecou's early reliefs, will focus on those most closely connected to the original place and chronological time of the creation and exhibition of these works—New York in the late '50s and early '60s. Seitz's, Judd's and even Hadler's views are, in different ways, all directly involved in the same location and chronological time as Bontecou's early work. Storr's consideration of her art in terms of Italian Futurism and the work of Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana remains outside the scope of

this analysis because it is primarily located in Italy, rather than New York. Likewise, the feminist interpretation of Bontecou's reliefs in the '70s is not reconsidered in this thesis because it originated at a different chronological time than that of Bontecou's reliefs that were made in the late '50s and early '60s. Because these accounts are positioned in different places and at different chronological times from the original context of Bontecou's art, their perspectives are at a remove from the particular situations investigated by this thesis.

The temporal layers constituted by Seitz's and Judd's curatorial and critical perspectives, as well as Hadler's social art historical view each move at their own velocity and with distinct rates of change in New York during the chronological time of the late '50s and early '60s. Although Hadler's writing is more typical of art historical accounts, it is not privileged as the most correct interpretation; Koselleck's theory enables a nondenominational approach to historical interpretation. In his view, Seitz's curatorial perspective and Judd's critical and artistic perspective, like Hadler's art historical approach or the embedded perspective of the artist herself, each provide valuable tools for investigating the reception and construction of meaning in Bontecou's work. No one version of events is privileged because each can be viewed as an equally valid perspective for determining a possible history for Bontecou's early reliefs within their chronological and geographical location.

Building on Seitz's, Judd's and Hadler's previous curatorial, critical and social art-historical writings, this thesis will consider their separate emphases as constituting discrete temporal layers that reveal the multivalent artistic, social and political climate in which Bontecou worked. It will do so by first reconsidering the early stylistic association of her works with the art Seitz called "assemblage." Using Seitz's theorization, the first chapter will explore the

different velocity and rate of change within the “space of experience” and “horizon of expectations” of *the Art of Assemblage*. Seitz’s embedded perspective can be considered as existing in the present conditional tense as he discusses the quick changes and developments of works when-they-are-being-made. Meanwhile, Judd’s anticipatory view as presented in his “Specific Objects” constitutes another temporal layer. Even though occurring at the same mathematical time, his future perfect consideration of works as will-have-been-made projects ahead by proceeding at a more rapid velocity. The different range of events encompassed by the “space of experience” and “horizon of expectations” of Hadler’s social art historical analysis comprises a third layer of historical time. Although developed in retrospect (unlike Seitz’s and Judd’s), her perspective functions in the past continuous tense where Bontecou’s early reliefs are considered as they-were-being-made. Hadler chooses the most pertinent elements of the popular and political culture of the ‘50s and ‘60s, and constructs a context for Bontecou’s work that reflects the rapid changes, both popular and political, in Cold War culture. By considering Seitz’s, Judd’s and Hadler’s viewpoints as separate layers of historical time, this thesis will construct a nuanced history of Bontecou’s art and its reception that reflects many of the contradictions and connections among these different perspectives

Chapter 1: Lee Bontecou's Early Reliefs and *The Art of Assemblage*

Many of the earliest critical references to Bontecou's work connected it to the stylistic category known as "assemblage,"⁵³ which has been largely ignored since the early '60s. First created during the late '50s and early '60s when assemblage (or "neo-dada") was a major stylistic trend, Bontecou's early reliefs share a similar constructed form and use of materials with other assemblages from that time. Although in a 2002 letter Bontecou denied any connection with assemblage, her work was nonetheless shown in several exhibitions focusing on this approach including William Seitz's *The Art of Assemblage*.⁵⁴ Using Seitz's curatorial view of this artistic movement as a guide, this chapter will re-examine Bontecou's early reliefs in relation to this formal and conceptual mode. If viewed in terms of Koselleck's concept of historical time, Seitz's discussion of assemblage can be understood as a discrete temporal layer with a distinct velocity and rate of change. His embedded perspective provides a present-continuous view of the art of this period: works are discussed at the time when-they-are-being-made and in the midst of the changing artistic scene of the late '50s and early '60s. As such, through the diachronic flow of time, Seitz's curatorial writing, which is located within the specific New York artistic

⁵³ See notes 24, 26.

⁵⁴ June 2002 letter written by Bontecou to Jo Applin quoted in Applin, "'This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object,'" 483. Bontecou's work was included in the 1960 *New Media New Forms* exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, a precursor to Seitz's 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*. Later shows like the Jewish Museum's 1964 exhibition *Recent American Sculpture, Boxes* at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles (1964), and *New American Sculpture* at the Pasadena Art Museum (1964), which were centered around the trend of constructing sculpture from unorthodox materials, also include her work.

scene of the late '50s and early '60s, becomes historical.⁵⁵ Thus, Seitz's curatorial construction becomes a distinct perspective through which the particular "space of experience"⁵⁶ and "horizon of expectations"⁵⁷ of the art known as "assemblage" can be interpreted and established as a separate layer of historical time. Placing Bontecou's reliefs in the context of Seitz's historical perspective will demonstrate how her work can be understood as part of the dynamic stylistic category of assemblage, in addition this perspective will address a vital but often neglected interpretation of her art.

Before beginning this investigation of Bontecou's forms, it will help to consider Seitz's historization and formulation of assemblage more fully, including defining the main terms of his argument. Assemblage has most often been characterized in terms of the use of found, salvaged, or materials that are otherwise new to the fine arts, as well as in terms of a structure related to collage, which relies on construction or assembly rather than carving or sculpting. Seitz presents this alliance of materials and technique as a basic mode for understanding this art. He summarized assemblage works' major features in the following manner:

1. They are predominantly *assembled* rather than painted, drawn, modeled or carved.
2. Entirely or in part, their constituent elements are performed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials.⁵⁸

Even though this often-quoted statement provides a succinct description of the primary characteristics of the art included in the exhibition at MoMA, it has unfortunately led to the common misconception that Seitz defined assemblage as merely a technical category that

⁵⁵ In Koselleck's view one can never escape subjectivity because history "constantly passes both the historian and the writing of history by." Koselleck, "On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History," 3.

⁵⁶ See note 13.

⁵⁷ See note 14.

⁵⁸ Seitz, 6. See note 25.

employs a particular structure and use of materials.⁵⁹ However, Seitz actually proposes a complex historical and theoretical framework for thinking about the collaged, assembled, and even performed works he discusses.⁶⁰

In his catalogue essay Seitz traces the emergence and development of assemblage by looking at the early twentieth-century movements of cubism, futurism, dada and surrealism, thus providing a thorough exploration of the sources for the distinct “space of experience” of this temporal layer. As Seitz asserts, in different ways, each of these movements contributed to the amalgamation of concepts and forms present in the mid-century assemblages he discusses. According to Seitz, analytic cubism’s fragmentation of forms abstracted from reality and synthetic cubism’s incorporation of “non-art” materials are important artistic precursors to the assembled work of his time. He compares Rauschenberg’s combines to Picasso’s famous *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912, figure 1); although separated by forty-six years Rauchenberg’s

⁵⁹ One reason why Seitz’s material-based definition is so pervasive is that the exhibition generated a great deal of controversy through its inclusion of objects made from ‘junk’ or previously discarded objects. The use of “non-art materials” was, at the time, (despite the precedents of cubism, futurism, dada and surrealism) not widely accepted. MoMA received a barrage of criticism for its inclusion of “junk” and “trash” in the exhibition. One particularly noteworthy example is a letter written upon receipt of *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition catalog; it reads, “without wishing to be inaccurate, I maintain that ‘Assemblage’ is in the main a true Waste Land—the greatest collection of junk, literally and figuratively, that has ever passed through the portal of my home,” (Curatorial Exhibition Files, Exh. #695. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York). Reviewers were, oftentimes, not much more open-minded. John Canaday critic for the *New York Times*, wrote that Seitz has “included quantities of current assemblages of trash that, if transformed, are transformed only into trash of a different kind, vicious rather than bland,” [Canaday, “New ‘Assemblage’ Display at Modern Museum is Called a ‘Dazzler’,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1961, Arts section]. Emily Genauer’s review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, titled “An ‘Assemblage’: Art or Plumbing?” has a similar tone. She writes that the most reasonable reaction to the show is “to laugh,” and criticizes the “young artists of varying talent” for their “vulgar” use of so-called ‘non-art’ materials,” [Genauer, “An ‘Assemblage’: Art or Plumbing?” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 3, 1961, Arts section]. The controversy generated over the use of unorthodox materials overshadowed Seitz’s complex theoretical framework.

However, not all of the response to the exhibit was reductive and negative. Ashton’s critical essay, “*BUT, BUT, but...An assemblage of wayward opinion on the Art of Assemblage*,” actually criticizes the generally negative tone the show’s reviews. She describes Seitz as “an outstanding cultural historian” and lauds what she terms his “phenomenological inquiry” into art of the twentieth century [Ashton, “*BUT, BUT, but...An assemblage of wayward opinion on the Art of Assemblage*,” *Arts & Architecture* 79 (1962): 4].

⁶⁰ Seitz writes, “Although the connection is far too dispersive to make precise, the productions known as ‘happenings,’ presented by Kaprow, James Dine, and other New York artists at the Reuben Gallery and elsewhere, had their origin in painting and collage,” (91). Seitz also notes that this idea comes from Allan Kaprow and his, at the time, unpublished manuscript for *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*.

Talisman (1958, figure 2), which looks like a fragment of a graffitied wall with a shelf, is similar to Picasso's collage that resembles a table top. Picasso's innovative use of oilcloth printed with a *trompe-l'oeil* depiction of chair caning creates an important tension in what art historian Robert Rosenblum calls the "traditional mimetic relationship between art and reality."⁶¹ By placing a real piece of oilcloth (with an illusionistic image printed on it) within a context of painted quasi-representational images of objects like a newspaper, Picasso questions the relationship between the categorizations of representation and reality in an art context. Rauschenberg's incorporation of a three-dimensional object—a glass jar, which he positions on a shelf protruding out from the work—and a photograph continue this questioning of the mimetic relationship between art and reality. He brings into play the different manifestations of so-called "reality" in the mimetic reproduction of everyday life in terms of in a photograph, the fact of paint on canvas as highlighted in abstract expressionist work, and the non-illusionistic three-dimensional presence of a glass jar. In both compositions the artist has fragmented and sharply abutted elements from everyday life against the traditional artistic realm of representation and illusion.

While Seitz believed that assemblage continues both cubism's fragmentation of forms from everyday life and the technique of collage, he attests that the politically charged movements of futurism and dada extended assemblage by "struggling to displace the stultifying weight of past styles."⁶² He explains how futurism's emphasis on movement and speed brought a new frenetic energy to the modern media of collage.⁶³ Works like Carra's *Patriotic Celebration*

⁶¹ Robert Rosenblum, "Picasso in and Braque, 1912-1924," in *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1976), 68.

⁶² Seitz, 30.

⁶³ Ibid.

(1914, figure 3), with its swirling flux of text exhibits a force that can be seen as reaching a collision point in John Chamberlain's crunched and contorted metallic forms. According to Seitz, dada's anti-establishment overtones further advance the range and meaning of assembled materials through an exploration of "negative values."⁶⁴ By discovering "beauty and worth in what was commonly held to be distasteful and valueless," Seitz argues that dada works subverted the traditional understanding of positive and negative aesthetic values.⁶⁵ This amplified spectrum of possible beauty paved the way for viewers to find the many artifacts gleaned from the streets and incorporated into works of art in Seitz's show worthy and valuable. Like Kurt Schwitters' dense pastings of paper scraps in *Merz 25: A Painting with Stars* (1920, figure 4), Mimmo Rotella's collage of torn posters entitled *Before and After* (1961, figure 5) celebrates the different kind of beauty that can be discovered in even the most ephemeral and debased materials. Beyond re-defining the perception of aesthetic pleasure, this use of materials can also be understood as an act of redemption for that which was once considered useless. Re-purposed into the artistic realm, cultural detritus like outdated movie posters and advertisements begins to function in a new way.

Through their absurd conjunctions of unconnected imagery, dada and, perhaps to an even greater degree, surrealism furthered the conceptual basis for assemblage by suggesting an overlay of poetic meaning in their compositions. Although dadaists attempted to subvert logical constructions of meaning, and surrealists relied on the practice of psychic automatism to distance their work from the deliberate creation of conscious messages, Seitz asserts that by placing side-by-side "ordinary but... unrelated elements in a situation where neither belongs" those artists

⁶⁴ Seitz, 35.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 35.

enabled a “poetic transformation” of meaning.⁶⁶ According to Seitz, the diverse histories and contexts of the found object(s) used in both movements, through the process of defamiliarization achieve enigmatic and even poetic implications. Thus, Joseph Cornell’s construction *Space Object Box* (1959, figure 6) with its odd assortment of forms—a fragment of a graph, a cordial glass, a rubber ball—through a type of quasi-alchemical process becomes a lyrical conjunction of everyday forms with otherworldly images of outer space. In a similar manner, the constellation of disparate forms, including a stuffed parrot, a doll’s leg and a man’s hat in Miró’s *Objet poétique* (1936, figure 7) imbue the work with an aura of having some inexplicable meaning or history.

Seitz proposes the reigning mid-twentieth century style of abstract expressionism as part of the diverse field of artistic precursors for assemblage. Just as the earlier movements of cubism, futurism, dada and surrealism reacted both positively and negatively to their predecessors, so abstract expressionism provided a model against which assemblage artists could react. The prominence of critic Clement Greenberg’s formalist interpretation of this style provided a distinctive and even official version for the assemblage artists to reject or sustain as they wished. Based on the increasing purity of each separate medium and his consequent distaste for narrative or literary constructions of meaning in visual works, Greenberg’s trajectory was antithetical to many of the values privileged by such movements as dada and surrealism, which Seitz singles out as important for assemblage.⁶⁷ Thus, the assemblagists’ favoring of

⁶⁶ Seitz, 40-41.

⁶⁷ For example, Greenberg explains his distaste for literary or narrative constructions of visual arts noting that “...when a single art is given the dominant role, it becomes the prototype of all art: others try to shed their proper characters and imitate its effects. ...Literature, for a number of reasons, had won the upper hand, and the plastic arts—especially in the form of easel painting and statuary—tried to win admission to its domain. Although this does not account completely for the decline of those arts during this period, it seems to have been the form of the decline,” [Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*

diverse combinations of media, non-traditional materials, and symbolic constructions of meaning were at least in part intentional subversions of Greenberg's formalist interpretation. Nonetheless, certain abstract expressionist creations were influential in more positive ways: as Seitz notes, Willem de Kooning's interest in popular culture as demonstrated by his use of a magazine clipping of a lipstick-covered mouth in a study for his *Woman* series "intensified the interest in 'pop culture'—in the expendable art and literature that became so important a subject for Rauschenberg, [Jasper] Johns" and other assemblage artists (figure 8).⁶⁸

Seitz regards the growing mode of performative work in the visual arts as constituting one possible and important trajectory for assemblage. "The productions known as 'happenings,' presented by [Allen] Kaprow, James Dine, and other New York artists," Seitz states, "...had their origins in painting and collage."⁶⁹ Although he acknowledges, "many have resembled amateur theatricals," he views the expansion of assemblage themes through performance as a positive occurrence.⁷⁰ Emphasizing the continuous flow of styles and ideas, Seitz asserts, "Art is, has always been, and should continue in a state of ferment and constant redefinition."⁷¹ His historization of assemblage in terms of both past experiences and future expectations outlines the particular range of ideas and forms of the layer of time embodied by his perspective.

Volume 1, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986), 24-25]. Continuing this logic he describes the importance of the purity of each medium writing, "It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized. For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically," (32-33).

⁶⁸ Seitz, 74. de Kooning used a cigarette or toothpaste add for this famous smile, but I have not found the specific source yet.

⁶⁹ Seitz, 91.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 92.

⁷¹ Seitz, 92.

Advancing his discussion of assemblage beyond its historical antecedents, Seitz theorizes that “every work of art is an incarnation: an investment of matter with spirit.”⁷² He continues explaining that

the term “assemblage” has been singled out, with this duality in mind, to denote not only the specific technical procedure and form used in the literary and musical, as well as the plastic arts, but also a complex of attitudes and ideas.⁷³

The “complex of attitudes and ideas” that assemblage embodies is as diverse as the materials and structures that make up its forms and the artistic movements that construct its past; however, as Seitz shows, these works are not totally unconnected. He uses two main concepts to discuss the internal logic that links their disparate forms: the “internal frame,” which is described as “a fragment of actuality erupting within a fictional environment” that causes a breakdown in the separation between the work of art and external reality, and juxtaposition, which is defined as, “setting one thing beside the other without connective.”⁷⁴

In order to provide a more complete understanding of Seitz’s concepts, it helps to consider their source. Both of these ideas were taken almost verbatim from historian and critic Roger Shattuck’s *The Banquet Years: The Arts in France 1885-1918* (1955).⁷⁵ Seitz liberally acknowledges the importance of Shattuck’s theories for his work, both through citations of his

⁷² Seitz, 10.

⁷³ Ibid, 10. The idea of a work of art as “an investment of matter with spirit” is antithetical to Judd’s concept of the specific object, which eschews the humanistic idea of an art object as a container for meaning.

⁷⁴ Seitz, 25, 23. Discussions of the “mode of juxtaposition” and the “frame” also dominated the 1961 symposium for the *Art of Assemblage*. As Shattuck notes in his introduction to the published transcript of the symposium, “The two elements recur, like leitmotifs,” [Shattuck quoted in transcript for “*The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium*,” ed., Joseph Ruzicka in *Essays on Assemblage* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, the Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 122]. The symposium panel included not only Shattuck, but Richard Huelsenbeck, a founding member of Zurich and Berlin Dada; Lawrence Alloway, a British art critic and historian who coined the term “pop art”; Robert Rauschenberg; and Marcel Duchamp. Their discussions highlight the more open-ended and theoretical ramifications of Seitz’s definitions of assemblage, as opposed to the often quoted, but somewhat reductive definition of the artistic mode with which Seitz opens the exhibition catalog.

⁷⁵ Although originally published in 1955, Seitz used a 1958 edition of Shattuck’s *The Banquet Years* for his research. Accordingly, this analysis will use that same edition.

specific usages in the text and in statements made at the 1961 symposium organized around *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition. “Certain of the muscles I have been flexing in the book that goes along with the ‘Art of Assemblage’ exhibition are not really my own,” Seitz confessed, adding that, “I am afraid that some of those muscles are Mr. Shattuck’s.”⁷⁶ Shattuck’s ambitious work is a reconsideration of the origins of the modern avant-garde in France during the so-called “banquet years” from 1885 until the start of World War I. “The twentieth century could not wait fifteen years for a round number,” Shattuck states, arguing that instead, “it was born yelling in 1885.”⁷⁷ In his book Shattuck posits many characteristic themes of twentieth century art, such as an emphasis on “primitive” or child-like approaches, absurdity, dreams and/or hallucinations, and ambiguity that were developed in France in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Published when Shattuck was in his mid-thirties, the work became an important text for emergent artistic trends in the late ‘50s and ‘60s.⁷⁸ *The Banquet Years* is organized around the discussion of painter Henri Rousseau, composer Erik Satie, playwright Alfred Jarry, and poet

⁷⁶ Seitz quoted in the transcript of “*The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium*,” 126.

⁷⁷ Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origin of the Avant Garde in France 1885 to World War I* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 4. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotes attributed to Shattuck are from this book.

⁷⁸ *The Banquet Years* is described in a 2008 essay as “a book which in the decade after its publication came to be associated with the yeasty, unpredictable, improvisational, anti-formalist side of the modern art movement. *The Banquet Years* fit right in with a new mood that was overtaking American campuses and theaters and museums in the 1960’s, and was reflected in the fast-growing enthusiasm for Duchamp, in the performances of the Living Theater, and in the essays of Susan Sontag’s *Against Interpretation*,” [Jed Pearl, “Half Tame,” *The New Republic* (November 5, 2008), <http://www.tnr.com/toc/story.html?id=d60edecb-9038-4b1d-8c89-32d4dea976b9> (accessed July 15, 2009)]. Shattuck’s book received many positive reviews and was reprinted in 1957, 1958 and 1968. Critic Germain Bree, for example, wrote “Unquestionably it sets a standard, proposes a method and opens up a rich field of investigation,” [Germain Bree, review of *The Banquet Years*, by Roger Shattuck, *Modern Language Notes* 75/2 (February 1960): 171-4]. Another critic notes that “It is remarkable how Mr. Shattuck ... has entered into the skin of his four protagonists and succeeded in showing what each of them achieved in his own particular sphere,” [R. H. M., review of *The Banquet Years*, by Roger Shattuck, *Music and Letters* 41/3 (July 1960): 272]. However, Shattuck was also criticized for his theorization of the breakdown of the separation between art and life, which ran counter to established views of the separate and privileged position of art. Critic Sidney Tillium, who also called the book “partisan,” denigrated Shattuck’s theorization as a “deadly generality” that “has long gone unquestioned both as to its accuracy and feasibility,” [Sidney Tillium, review of *The Banquet Years*, by Roger Shattuck, *College Art Journal* 19/2 (Winter 1959-60): 199].

Guillaume Apollinaire. Not until the third, and final part of his book does Shattuck discuss the concepts Seitz uses to theorize assemblage. In the chapter entitled “The Art of Stillness,” Shattuck takes the two major themes of his work—the break down of divisions between art and life, and the fragmentation of form—and crystallizes them respectively into the concepts of the “internal frame” and “juxtaposition.”⁷⁹

Questioning the exact nature of the division between art and life was a major theme in the art of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s. Rauschenberg’s famous statement that he works in the gap between art and life can be viewed as characteristic of the time.⁸⁰ No doubt sensitive to this growing debate, Seitz quotes Shattuck in the following passage:

Interpolations of non-art materials [in a work of art] provided an “internal frame”—a fragment of actuality erupting within a fictional environment. They violated the separateness of the work of art, and threatened to obliterate the aesthetic distance between it and the spectator.⁸¹

Shattuck elaborates on the concept of the internal frame when he writes that, traditionally “the frame of a painting, the format and ‘style’ of a work of literature, the conventions of performance for musical compositions—these factors clearly separate art from reality.”⁸² However, in the “new” work of the avant-garde (in-turn-of-the-century France), Shattuck believes that “the frame had been overrun, and art set itself up as continuous with life.”⁸³ Thus, one can understand that when Shattuck refers to a “fragment of actuality,” he means a fragment or part of what he considers to be reality or everyday life. He continues:

⁷⁹ Shattuck, 255, 256.

⁸⁰ Rauschenberg’s statement that “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to work in the that gap between the two),” has often been cited [John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, “On Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work” (includes portions of interview), *Metro* 1/2 (1961) quoted in Seitz, 116]. From this statement one can view his use of found materials at least, in part, as an interrogation of the medium of painting.

⁸¹ Seitz, 23.

⁸² Shattuck, 330.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 330.

If there is no longer a frame to segregate art from reality by establishing an external boundary, can we find a counterpart inside the composition? ... For Apollinaire, who never developed the idea, the internal frame remained something akin to an internal signature... . But does not the internal frame serve the opposite purpose from an external frame? *A sample of the real world erupts in the middle of a work of art and violates its separateness* [my italics]. The internal frame, being a gap or an intrusion, does not delimit one realm from the other but fuses art with reality.⁸⁴

Viewing Shattuck's argument as particularly pertinent to the contemporary artistic climate as well as that of turn-of-the-century France, Seitz employed the idea of fusing art with reality via internal frames as a means for exploring the use of everyday materials in assemblage art. From this perspective, incorporating materials with previous histories in the everyday world into the realm of art, whether it is a synthetic cubist collage or a Rauschenberg "combine," can be seen as internal frames that infringe on "the separation between art and life."⁸⁵

However, Seitz's and Shattuck's discussion of the fusion of art and life overstates the effect of internal frames and their eradications of the distinctions between actuality and art. If one considers that found materials incorporated into works of art are transformed into art materials then Seitz's and Shattuck's approaches lose their force. These materials no longer exist exactly as they were in the external world. In other words, the canvas from a laundry conveyer belt used in Bontecou's constructions is not the same as a canvas laundry conveyer belt in use at a laundromat. Even though certain tensions between past and current identities do remain, the function and the context of materials inside works of art change so that they are able to fundamentally change one's perception of them: a canvas conveyer belt incorporated into an assemblage is no longer a "fragment of actuality," but an actual component of a work of art.

⁸⁴ Shattuck, 330-331.

⁸⁵ Elderfield, "Collage: Medium and Meaning," in *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 89.

However, in his book on Kurt Schwitter's collage works, art historian John Elderfield nuances this situation when he writes:

No matter how securely the materials are combined and contained by the inherent geometry of the work, a feeling of tension and opposition necessarily remains—as it does in virtually all collages—between the *world of art* which receives the “foreign” materials and the *world of external reality* from which they derived (my italics).⁸⁶

Elderfield's statement provides a less exaggerated and far more realistic description of the concept that Seitz and Shattuck discuss. Rather than viewing the internal frame as actually “fusing” art and life, Elderfield more accurately cites the tension between a fine art context and the external associations of found materials. All future references to the internal frame in this thesis will thus be made with this distinction in mind.

Seitz also invokes Shattuck's concept of juxtaposition. He quotes Shattuck directly when he notes that “the method of assemblage, which is post-cubist, is that of *juxtaposition*: ‘setting one thing beside another without connective.’”⁸⁷ For Shattuck, juxtaposition is part of the ever-present artistic question of form. He positions this compositional device in opposition to earlier art that relied on “transition”.⁸⁸

The unities of Greek Theater amounted to a single value of proximity within the dimensions of place, time, and characterization... The modern sensibility, however, began to proceed... by a violent dislocation of ...[the principles of unity] in order to test the possibility of a new coherence. ...a work of art—play or painting—no longer had a simple *here and now*, but a very complex unity.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Elderfield, 89.

⁸⁷ Seitz, 25. The quote is taken from Shattuck's *The Banquet Years* where he writes, “In shying away from the word ‘unity,’ however, criticism in all the arts has unwittingly settled on another term to convey the idea of how the parts of a modern work of art are put together. Scarcely a page of analysis can be written today without it. The word has been arbitrarily excluded from the preceding chapters; used without definition, it glides too smoothly over basic questions of unity and form as if they had been long since resolved. Yet its general acceptance is significant. This factotum word is *juxtaposition*: *setting one thing beside the other without connective*,” (256, my italics).

⁸⁸ Shattuck, 256.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Juxtaposition, for Shattuck, is not a complete dissolution of unity: rather, it is a method for achieving “a new cohesiveness” through the addition or cancellation of separate elements.

He further explains this concept by separating it into two categories. The first type can be understood in the following manner:

The fur-lined teacup or the lump of marble sugar or the corpse in the baby stroller, such items illustrate the association of two elements that cancel each other out and return us—spiritually and aesthetically—to zero. The process is essentially self-consuming, a reversion to dead level after an initial shock.⁹⁰

More complex and yet correlating with the discussion of Bontecou’s work, the second manifestation “brings together two components whose conflict does *not* cancel out, but *persists*.”⁹¹ Shattuck describes how it “brings as close together as possible, without ignition, elements that create a large difference in potential.”⁹² “We react not to a brief, bright spark that jumps the gap and thus destroys the whole rig,” he asserts “but to a field of forces sustained by the association.”⁹³ These two modes of juxtaposition view art in terms of balancing or reconciling tensions. However, the second mode achieves a “new cohesiveness” or “complex unity” by more fully persisting, rather than canceling out aspects of itself. Shattuck notes that,

Juxtaposition implies succession, even if it is at random or provoked by conflict... Ultimately it becomes apparent that the mutually conflicting elements of montage—be it movie or poem or painting—are to be conceived not successively, but *simultaneously*, to converge in our minds as contemporaneous events.⁹⁴

Shattuck’s “complex unity,” which he counter-intuitively describes as “the art of stillness” is a fixed dynamic of tensions where the connection between two or more elements in a work of art exists, not in physical transition, but in a continuous mental oscillation. This unity, which is

⁹⁰ Shattuck quoted in the transcript of “*The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium*,” 128.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Shattuck quoted in the transcript of “*The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium*,” 128.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Shattuck, 266.

completed in the mind of the viewer, becomes a moment of “arrest” where the opposing tensions of unlike parts are held in balance.⁹⁵ Rather than being a complete fragmentation of formal unity, juxtaposition functions in a number of different ways as a unifying force.

Elaborating on Shattuck’s modes of juxtaposition, and adapting it to the context of assemblage, Seitz writes:

Because overtones and associations as well as physical materials are placed in juxtaposition, it could almost be said that a constellation of meanings can exist independently of the colors, textures and forms which are its carriers. In fact, three levels of operation can be specified: that of tangible materials, that of vision, at which colors and other formal qualities alter each other and blend like tastes or scents, and finally that of “literary” meanings.⁹⁶

Seitz refers to these “constellations of meanings” as the “realism and poetry of assemblage.”⁹⁷

Based on his observation regarding the varying conjunctions of materials, colors, textures, structures and so-called “literary” meanings, Seitz analogizes “the assembler ...[as being] especially akin to the modern poet.”⁹⁸ In his view both use “elements which (unlike ‘pure’ colors, lines, planes or musical tones) retain marks of their previous form and history,” and he continues with the simile, “like words, they are associationally alive.”⁹⁹ Shattuck’s modes of juxtaposition thus provide a theoretical framework for Seitz’s characterization of the constructed works in his exhibition. Composed through a combination of disparate elements, and connoting in addition attendant “literary” meanings related to their constituent materials, and established semiotics these structures are imbued with symbolic or ‘associational’ content.

⁹⁵ Shattuck writes, “Arrest is achieved not by absence of power to move, but by an equilibrium of forces, whence the dynamic nature of works we call modern. The paradox is that even arrest has no final peace, for it continues to be relative motion.” *Ibid*, 270.

⁹⁶ Seitz, 83.

⁹⁷ Seitz, 81. Seitz expands on this analogy of assemblage to poetry by citing the historic roots of the concept in literature as well as the visual arts. In a chapter entitled “The Liberation of Words,” he explores the sometimes fragmentary or oppositional works of Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Marinetti, and Gide.

⁹⁸ Seitz, 17.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

Dependant on Shattuck's formulation of the internal frame and the modes of juxtaposition, Seitz's definition significantly expands the theoretical framework of assemblage. No longer just a technical category, assemblage involves an array of strategies and structures for conveying meaning through the investigation of new forms. Bontecou's assembled early reliefs, which are composed of materials intended for uses outside the field of art, can be viewed in terms of Seitz's and Shattuck's concepts. Utilizing these ideas to discuss Bontecou's early reliefs, situates her works within one of the key stylistic trends of the artistic climate in which they were made. Moreover, Seitz's historical perspective enables the exploration of her forms in terms of juxtapositions of opposing materials, structures, images, and associations that reveal the ongoing tensions that constitute the most dynamic and evocative element of her "assemblages."

In Bontecou's reliefs juxtapositions create tensions in several different ways. The following discussion will first analyze the dynamic tensions in her work in terms of the role her "non-art" materials assume within an art context. It will then consider the vital function of boundary and edge that constitutes moments of juxtaposition within her reliefs. This chapter will conclude its examination of Bontecou's imagery by looking at the poetic associations it puts in play.

Bontecou's use of found materials first inspired the designation of her work as assemblage. Many of her earliest reliefs incorporate salvaged canvas from the laundromat below her studio.¹⁰⁰ Other reliefs rely on a combination of materials that range from the canvas of army tents and knapsacks to leather and silk chamois.¹⁰¹ She also employed in her art such

¹⁰⁰ Munro, 383-384. See note 39.

¹⁰¹ Hadler, "Lee Bontecou—A Heart of a Conquering Darkness," *Source* 12/ 1 (Fall 1992): 39-40; E.A.T. Smith, "All Freedom in Every Sense," 173.

objects as saw blades, grates, metal washers, and pieces of pipe.¹⁰² Although she incorporated a range of found materials like other assemblage artists such as Rauschenberg or Jasper Johns, Bontecou's work appeared to differ from most other art grouped within this stylistic category. If one compares her reliefs to more canonical examples of assemblage such as Rauschenberg's "combines," it is apparent that her works have a different focus. Rauschenberg's use of found materials in such pieces such as *Canyon* (1959, figure 9), which was included in Seitz's *The Art of Assemblage*, is more explicit than Bontecou's, whose *Untitled* (1960, figure 10) was also exhibited in Seitz's show. Each found object used in *Canyon*, including a pillow, a stuffed bird, photographs, postcards, etc, remains a separate entity with a distinct history. Meanwhile, the external references of Bontecou's materials' are less specific.¹⁰³ Rather than highlighting the material's separate and distinctive character, as does Rauschenberg, Bontecou focuses on the creation of a new composite image using disparate elements. As Ashton writes,

Bontecou has succeeded in using rough and "found" materials so that their origin is of minimal interest. If she uses tent and knapsack canvas, rusty wire, and iron to bind it, she manages to evoke an image that has little to do with the purposes for which these materials were once designated.¹⁰⁴

However, the distinction that Ashton makes concerning Bontecou's work ignores the fact that, although her materials are not explicit about their past, they still reference a prior existence. This external reference is a vital part of her work and changes the interpretation of her forms based on her materials and their previous uses.

¹⁰² Hadler, "A Heart of a Conquering Darkness," 39-40.

¹⁰³ Also, although Seitz writes that the exhibition catalog lists the materials incorporated in each work in order to suggest "the limitless diversity that relates assembled art to the world," Bontecou's entry is vague and avoids mentioning the previous context of her materials (81). It reads simply "steel, canvas, cloth and wire," (154). The entry for Rauschenberg's *Canyon*, conversely, is much more detailed; it lists: "oil on canvas on painted wooden boards, pasted printed matter, posters, newsprint, photographs, cloth, metal; stuffed eagle, pillow tied with cord," (162).

¹⁰⁴ Ashton, "Illusion and Fantasy: Lee (Magica Fantasia di Lee)," *Metro* 8 (April): 28.

Even though Bontecou de-emphasizes her materials' former connections to everyday life, their wear and age do reflect their past usage in non-art contexts. In *Untitled* (1958, figure 11), for example, Bontecou employs a variety of canvas and cloth fragments that she attaches to a welded steel frame with a series of intricate wire sutures. Although the artist has cropped the fragments to obscure their original context, several have visible printed letters and numbers on them.¹⁰⁵ Besides the fragments of text, other old seams and patches, stitched by machine and also by hand, hint at the material's previous history. In the center of the composition's left side, the frayed edges of a tear seem to have been caused by prior usage, rather than being artfully cut. Oily and sooty stains mark every piece, thus leaving no doubt that the materials had previous functions, although what those exact histories are remain unknown. Viewed in relation to the completed work, Bontecou's fragments of materials suggest endurance and the passage of time.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Knowing that Bontecou sometimes used canvas from army surplus, one can make the educated guess that these letters and numbers designated the army units to which the tents belonged.

¹⁰⁶ Bontecou's incorporation of a sense of time and endurance through her use of materials and, to some degree, through the structure of her reliefs, which show an accumulation of labor through her many stitches, can be related to the emphasis on process of such abstract expressionist artists as Jackson Pollock. Seitz, who included work by the abstract expressionists Motherwell and de Kooning in *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition, notes that "the current wave of assemblage owes at least as much to abstract expressionism (with its dada and surrealist components) as it does to dada directly," (87).

This acknowledgment of the importance of abstract expressionism for assemblage artists should be seen in the context of artist Allan Kaprow's now famous 1958 essay, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," which Seitz read in the course of his research for the exhibition. In the essay Kaprow suggests that Pollock's 'act of painting' introduces the element of time via process into the work of art. He writes, "I am convinced that to grasp Pollock's impact properly, we must be acrobats, constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung the paint and stood 'in' the canvas and submission to the objective markings, allowing them to entangle and assault us," [Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed., Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 5]. This emphasis on Pollock's "act of painting" necessarily includes the viewer's understanding of his accumulated marks and the performed actions in time that created them. Kaprow continues this thought by noting finally that,

Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound movements, people, odors and touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art... (8-9).

According to Seitz, “certain works of assemblage, with an attraction like that of green-encrusted bronzes or the unnamable artifacts of a people far away or long dead, seem to emit a magical halo: an aura too ephemeral to be ascribed to sensory stimuli, but so existent as to seem measurable.” He explains:

When paper is soiled or lacerated, when cloth is worn, stained or torn, when wood is split, weathered or patterned with peeling coats of paint, when metal is bent or rusted, they gain connotations which unmarked materials lack...meaning and material merge.¹⁰⁷

Seitz’s idea that “meaning and material merge” does not mean that the individuality of the different types of material—metal, wood, cloth—is irrelevant, but rather that their quality of having aged adds another layer to the meanings they suggest. His statements refer to the same patina of time that Bontecou’s and many other assemblage artist’s worn materials suggest. In particular, Alberto Burri’s *Sacco 5* (1953, figure 12), which Seitz also included in his exhibition, shares with Bontecou’s reliefs the indeterminate quality of having survived. Like her reclaimed canvas, the previous history of Burri’s torn sacking is suggested, but not explicitly demonstrated.¹⁰⁸ In both works tensions emerge between the compositions as a whole and the origins of the found materials, thereby joining aspects of art and life. Seen in the context of Seitz’s theorization of assemblage, Bontecou’s recycled materials constitute an “eruption of actuality” within the work of art. Although the “internal frame” does not fully dissolve

Thus, Kaprow makes a connection between Pollock’s work and the new developments of assemblage. In fact Pollock’s paintings sometimes contain such remnants of his process as used up tubes of paint, dirt from the studio floor, pebbles, buttons, keys, coins and tacks [Diane Waldman, “Abstract Expressionists,” in *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 224-5]. Like Bontecou’s use of aged and worn materials, Pollock’s built-up detritus, which accrues through the course of the artists’ actions, also refers to the passage of time.

¹⁰⁷ Seitz, 84.

¹⁰⁸ Jamey Hamilton, “Making Art Matter: Alberto Burri’s *Sacchi*,” *October Magazine* 124 (Spring 2008): 46, 47. Much of the canvas Burri used was salvaged from shipments of war-relief supplies sent to Italy following World War II.

separations between art and life, Bontecou's found materials evoke external references that maintain ongoing tensions within the fine-art context in which they are incorporated.

A similar juxtaposition of disparate elements is basic to the structure of Bontecou's reliefs. Her works emphasize boundary and edge—the moments of juxtaposition—making them the dominant aspects of her work. In doing so her compositions share such visual characteristics with analytic cubist paintings as an overall gray tonality and basic grid-like armature. As in cubist works, boundary and edge are of primary importance. As Seitz notes, the analytic cubist emphasis on the edges between faceted forms, although broken by moments of passage, are precursors to the later synthetic cubist collages that he views as constituting assemblage's pre-history. Seitz speculates, “the ‘analytical’ phase of cubism (about 1909-1912) constituted ... a ‘disassemblage’ of the world of represented objects... [with] each work dismantling a selected aspect to provide raw material for a structured image... .”¹⁰⁹ Although he notes that “in cubist paintings ... and often in collages as well, the ambiguously beautiful device of *passage*—a final attempt to soften the shock of discontinuity—tends to bridge disassociations of image,” he asserts that the structure of Picasso and Braque's analytic compositions involves a series of juxtapositions of faceted forms that highlight and also break up boundaries between shapes.¹¹⁰

Similarly, in his famous essay on collage Greenberg writes:

Each facet [of later analytic cubist works] tended to be shaded, moreover, as an independent unit, with no legato passages, no unbroken tracts of value gradation on its open side, to join it to adjacent facet planes.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Seitz, 21-22.

¹¹⁰ Seitz, 25.

¹¹¹ Greenberg, “Collage,” in *Art and Culture Critical Essays*, ed., Clement Greenberg (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 71.

The composition of Bontecou's *Untitled* (1961, figure 13) is likewise based on tensions between the boundaries of "independent units," coupled with a discrete use of shading. Each section is distinctly delimited from the whole, and the welded armature of the relief establishes forceful outlines. Although the work creates a unified whole, the tension between independent units helps to structure and enliven the composition by allowing boundaries and edges to become the focus.

An even more prominent example of the vital role of boundary and edge in Bontecou's early reliefs is apparent in the overall structure of many of the works, which can be read as frames or explicit boundaries that juxtapose the form's interior and exterior. An early, untitled relief from 1959 (figure 14) exaggerates the frame-like structure of much of Bontecou's work. Its boxy armature projects out from the wall, enclosing a separate space. Rather than having her usual circular opening lead into the work's void(s), a rectangular indentation into a darkened interior echoes the exterior shape. The outside frame surrounds this interior space, and isolates it within the work. In *Untitled* (1960, figure 15), the circular opening of the surface also frames an interior space, thereby forming a void, the dominant image of many of her works, and the metal armature of the structure outlines the boundary between the void and the canvas surface. Successive, concentric, oblong shapes encircle the opening, thus reinforcing the frame of the central aperture. The empty interior space contrasts with the found and salvaged canvas, against which it is placed. Bontecou's inclusion of this empty space can be considered as a separate, private and foreboding world, but alternately it can be viewed as the most pervasive element of the external world confined within the works parameters. Shattuck's description of the internal frame as "a fragment of actuality [everyday life] erupting" within a work of art could be seen as

an apt description of the conic mound that comprises this volcano-like form, opening into a dark abyss.¹¹² The structured frame of Bontecou's work is both elemental and crucial to the image she creates. Her compositions rely on tensions made by boundaries between internal forms as well as between the realm of art and the external world.

According to Seitz, juxtapositions of tensions occur not just between the fine art context and everyday materials or in the actual boundaries that separate shapes and forms but also among the varied associations of objects and images in constructed works. He equates this mental play of tensions with poetry, noting that, "the arrangement of words, each carrying with it 'an image or an idea surrounded by a vague aura of associations' is close to the method of collage."¹¹³ For Seitz, "the poet's most important tool is the metaphor—'the joining of two things which are different.'"¹¹⁴ Although the clashes he discusses are more metaphoric than physical, Bontecou's reliefs can be seen as creating tensions through the varied conjunctions of their imagery and its attendant associations.

In *Untitled* (1961, figure 16) two very different and ever-opposing images overlap, creating tension in the work. On one level, the encrusted layers of the surface resemble the accumulation of detritus around a street drain. Paper, cardboard, wire mesh, and even what look like rubber balls with which a child might play, appear to have accumulated around the edge of the opening in a manner consistent with the flow of water toward a drain. However, just below the surface of the grate-covered hole, is another image—a tooth-filled mouth made from

¹¹² Shattuck's concept of actuality "erupting" or "over-running" the world of art is an exaggeration; however, there is a tension created between the empty space and the emphatically material canvas surface, as well as between the actual space of the interior and the framed art-context of the composition.

¹¹³ Seitz, 13. In this statement Seitz quotes Roger Fry in his translation of Mallarmé cf. *The Poems of Mallarmé*, (New York, New Directions, 1951), 290.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. In this statement Seitz quotes Wallace Fowlie in his cf. *A Guide to French Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1957), 100.

bandsaw blades. The juxtaposed images of drain and mouth create an interplay between the associations of one's everyday experience and an almost archetypal image of menace. The oscillation between these mundane and surreal images achieves a restive balance where neither image dominates, so that the work maintains a situation of consistent flux.

In particular, the multivalent associations of Bontecou's voids, her most repeated image, create tensions in the perception of her work. Many different associations have been attributed to Bontecou's early reliefs. Judd equates her imagery with menacing forms like weapons. He describes her "abatished"¹¹⁵ and "bellicose" relief, stating, "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 a beached mine or a well hidden in the grass."¹¹⁶ A more direct comparison between her objects and weaponry is made by critic Stewart Preston, who finds "sawed-off gun barrels and sinister apertures that look like flame throwers" in her forms.¹¹⁷ Kelly's aforementioned description of Bontecou's voids as "the great female archetype in its most ugly and destructive aspect," though reductive, exemplifies the prevalent observation of the sexual connotations of her reliefs.¹¹⁸ Applin views the work as evoking "biting, chomping jaws" or "a blind staring eye" and notes that the form seems to hang at head height in order "to meet, greet, or possibly eat us."¹¹⁹ However, for Ashton, when viewing "the black vacant centers with their tiers of protective shelves, the mind could just as easily go to wells, tunnels, sequestered and mysterious places that are not necessarily

¹¹⁵ Judd, 188. See note 1.

¹¹⁶ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178-179.

¹¹⁷ Stewart Preston, "What's New at the Modern," *New York Times*, November 25, 1962, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F70910F83E5D157A93C7AB178AD95F468685F9&scp=1&sq=&st=p> (accessed October 2008).

¹¹⁸ Kelly, 200.

¹¹⁹ Applin, 490.

menacing.”¹²⁰ Similarly, Bontecou herself described the black interior of her early reliefs as the unknown, which is neither positive nor negative; she states, “to me it was like the whole universe,” thus connecting her image to the unknown reaches of outer space.¹²¹ In works like *Untitled* (1962, figure 17), many of these diverse references seem equally applicable. One can view the single portal of this form as a window into outer space or, just as easily, as the mouth of a cannon. The central void of another untitled relief (1962, figure 18) reads as a mouth, an eye, or a mysterious tunnel into the abyss. Thus, no one image or association defines the form. Rather, the juxtaposition of different imagistic connotations creates an irresolvable and persistent tension. As this suggested range of associations indicates, this play of opposing interpretations of Bontecou’s imagery is one of the work’s most evocative and dynamic aspects.

Through his employment of Shattuck’s concepts of art’s ongoing juxtapositions and its internalized frames, Seitz’s formulation and historization of *The Art of Assemblage* offers a much more open-ended and far-reaching definition of assemblage than has previously been acknowledged. Bontecou’s forms correspond to this characterization of assemblages: they are constructed, rather than carved or sculpted, and their constituent materials are not part of art’s traditional purview. Although, Bontecou would not define herself as an assemblage artist, her work can be characterized by many of its formal and conceptual modes. Through her use of found materials, which retain a patina of age from their previous histories, her forms exhibit a tension between their suggested past and present function. Similarly, the structure of Bontecou’s forms emphasizes boundaries and edges, which constitute moments of tension between juxtaposed elements. The images created by her forms catalyze a variety of associations; these

¹²⁰ Ashton, “Magic and Fantasy: Lee,” 29.

¹²¹ Paul Trachtman, “Lee Bontecou’s Brave New World” (includes interview with Lee Bontecou), *Smithsonian* (September 2004): 102.

readings play against each other, also adding to the layers of tension crucial to approaching and interpreting her reliefs. Viewing Bontecou's works in terms of Seitz's specific perspective as a curator of an exhibition organized around one artistic trend of the late '50s and early '60s known as "assemblage," places her work within a distinct temporal layer, and provides a method for analyzing many of its (assemblages's) most dynamic and evocative elements. As Koselleck observes:

A specifically historical question can legitimate itself academically only by going back to the historicity that inhabits or precedes it; for the purpose of research it has to unfold its own theoretical premises.¹²²

Thus, Seitz's present-conditional perspective in which he develops a theorization of works when-they-are-being-made creates a useful anchor for locating Bontecou's early reliefs in the midst of the quickly changing artistic scene of the time in which they were created. Over the decades that have ensued since his landmark exhibition, Seitz's curatorial perspective has become historicized; it therefore provides an in-depth view of one historical layer in which Bontecou's art can be situated and interpreted. Seitz's view of Bontecou's work represents a doubling of history in which a mid-twentieth-century artistic development is viewed through the strict coordinates of a contemporary historical means for looking at works that can be regarded as assemblages.

The following chapter of this analysis will reconsider Donald Judd's often-cited interpretation of Bontecou's art. Considering his critical perspective as constituting another layer of historical time, it will show how Bontecou's work can be viewed as existing in a transitional space and thus can be understood from a variety of viewpoints—even those as

¹²² Koselleck, "On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History," 3.

divergent as Seitz's theorization of assemblage and Judd's early minimalist characterization of her works as specific objects totally dependant on their constituent materials

Chapter 2: Lee Bontecou's Early Reliefs as "Specific Objects"

In 1965, Judd's "Specific Objects" subsumed Bontecou's early relief constructions under the discursive terms of what is now called "minimalism." In reviews concomitant with his drafting of this famous early minimalist text, Judd highlights Bontecou's work as a key example of the new trend of three-dimensional work that he termed "specific objects." According to Judd, the specific object constitutes a complete break with the traditional understanding and logic of a work of art. The new work he describes is, for him, the embodiment of a wholly new art form that is created with the purpose of causing direct and unmediated by metaphor positivistic responses to objects in the minds of viewers, without the influence of traditional or historical interpretations and concepts about art. This chapter will analyze Bontecou's reliefs in terms of Judd's concept as explored in his criticism; in addition it will test his view of her work by considering both its useful insights and misapprehensions of these forms. Judd's critical writing on contemporary art, which is located within the artistic climate of New York in the early '60s over time became itself historicized or fixed in place; it constitutes a vital historical perspective for investigating the particular "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations" that delimits the temporal layer of one approach to early minimalism. Although he is far less concerned with the formative role of earlier artistic styles than Seitz, Judd does locate his discussion art historically by comparing and contrasting his new formal criteria with that of the previous reigning artistic style, abstract expressionism. By situating Bontecou's work in terms of this

earlier critical and influential perspective, this chapter will articulate yet another layer of historical time that comprises a viable mode for critically approaching her constructed reliefs.

Made in a period of great flux and change in American art when abstract expressionism became part of the established intellectual genre of modern art and new contemporary concepts and forms like minimalism emerged, Bontecou's work occupies a transitional space. Judd's anticipatory perspective looks ahead to a new "horizon of expectations" where forms develop quickly and are increasingly different from their precursors. Acknowledging that the rapid progression of this new work moves faster than can be explicitly predicted, Judd writes:

A few of the more general aspects [of specific objects] may persist, such as the work's being like an object or being specific, but other characteristics are bound to develop. Since its range is so wide, three-dimensional work [another term Judd uses to describe the specific object] will probably divide into a number of forms. ...Because the nature of three-dimensions isn't set, given beforehand, something credible can be made, almost anything.¹²³

Thus, Judd's viewpoint can be understood in terms of a future-perfect tense; he considers works as 'they will-have-been-made,' and moves ahead at a rapid velocity. However, while projecting forward in time, Judd's perspective is also characterized by a particular historical field of experience that, in part, inspired his conceptual break with traditional understandings of art, and, which was dominated by abstract expressionist forms and concepts. Although in many ways his specific object can be comprehended as the polar opposite to abstract expressionist values and modes, as will be shown, this prior movement affects the logic and tone of his theorization of future works. At the same time, it is also useful to view abstract expressionism as its own distinct temporal layer. Existing in a transitional time, Bontecou's art can be viewed within the "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations" of late abstract expressionism, and, also, as

¹²³ Judd, 184.

part of the development of the very different historical perspective determined by early minimalism. The contradictions and connections between these layers of historical time deepen the understanding of Bontecou's early reliefs and their role in art scene of the late '50s and early '60s.

Before beginning an analysis of Bontecou's early reliefs in terms of Judd's "Specific Objects," it is necessary first to define and then consider the terms of his argument. Judd's essay was originally intended as an overview of recent sculpture; it has since become a key text in minimalist studies.¹²⁴ However, it is not a straightforward enumeration of the tenets of minimalism as it is thought of today. Artists discussed include Bontecou, John Chamberlain, Yayoi Kusama and Claus Oldenburg, none of whom are categorically minimalist. The key points that Judd makes about this developing aspect of contemporary art can be organized into two main concepts: first, the work constitutes "something of an object, a single thing," and second, these so-called objects tend to exclude outside allusions through the power of their particular or "specific" form.¹²⁵ The following section will explore these two primary concepts by further defining the characteristics that distinguish Judd's specific objects.

In order for a three-dimensional form to be considered "something of an object, a single thing," it must be composed with a sense of wholeness or unity that dominates the relationship of internal parts. For Judd:

¹²⁴ Meyer writes, "Minimalism, I am suggesting, is best understood as a dynamic field of specific practices that we could name "Andre," "Flavin," "Judd," "Truitt," "Le Witt," and "Morris." Each of these proper names denotes a way of working, a method or position, distinct from the other five. However, I also want to claim that each of these positions comes into view, is set into relief, when considered in a differential relation to the others. ... To look at minimalism as a field of difference, as a strategic game with potential positions to be occupied...." Meyer, "Introduction: A Minimal Field," in *Minimalism: Art and Polemic in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 4. Also see: James Sampson Meyer, "Specific Objects," 134, note 27.

¹²⁵ Judd, 138.

It isn't necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting. The main things are alone and are more intense, clear and powerful. ... In the new work the shape, image, color and surface are single and not partial or scattered. There aren't any neutral or moderate areas or parts, any connections or transitional areas.¹²⁶

This concept of unitary form, which Judd often terms “singleness,” and this discussion will call “wholeness,” can be most easily understood as the subordination of separate parts in favor of the whole.¹²⁷ Judd privileges the creation of unitary or holistic form because he views wholes as having an immediate powerful visual presence that complex part-by-part structures lack. This perspective should be seen in the context of gestalt psychology. As student at Columbia University, where he received his BA in philosophy in 1953, Judd would have been exposed to this theory, which states that perception is organized around the immediate apprehension of wholes rather than structures part by part.¹²⁸ Seen in this light, one can understand why, according to Judd, a whole—the primary focus of perception—would be more powerful than an accumulation of smaller parts. For Judd, this sense of wholeness and its concomitant immediacy is also a vital characteristic of the specific object because it provides a means of escaping what he views as the traditional rationalistic logic of composition. Rather than focusing energy on the relationship of one part to another and slowly building a unified whole, the specific object avoids

¹²⁶ Judd, 187.

¹²⁷ Judd writes, “So far the most obvious difference within this diverse work is between that which is something of an object, *a single thing*, and that which is open and extended, more or less environmental,” (183, my italics). In a similar essay that also overviews the current state of contemporary art, written the year before, Judd states, “The most unusual part of three-dimensional work is that which approaches ‘being an object.’ The *singleness* of objects is related to the *singleness* of the best paintings of the early fifties,” [Judd, “*Arts Yearbook 7, 1964 Local History*” in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 152, my italics].

For the sake of clarity, this discussion will refer to Judd’s privileged quality of “singleness” as “wholeness.” Likewise, objects will be described as “holistic” rather than “single.” The descriptive terms “wholeness” and “holistic” have a history in the critical writing on minimalism. Unlike singleness, they more directly connote the unitary, rather than part by part, construction of objects that Judd advocates.

¹²⁸ Meyer, “Chapter 2: the Early Years,” in *Minimalism: Art and Polemic in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 35.

relational composition altogether by existing as a “single thing” or whole. Judd describes this practice of relational composition, writing:

In work before 1946 [before abstract expressionism] the edges of the rectangle [the frame] are a boundary, the end of the picture. The composition must react to the edges and the rectangle must be unified, but the shape of the rectangle is not stressed; the parts are more important, and the relationships of color and form occur among them.¹²⁹

In the following excerpt from a famous and often-cited 1966 interview Judd further explains his problem with composition.

Judd: ...I wanted to get rid of any compositional effects, and the obvious way to do it is to be symmetrical.

[Bruce] Glaser: Why do you want to get rid of compositional effects?

Judd: Well these effects tend to carry with them all the structures, values, feelings of the whole European tradition. ...They're [the qualities of European art] innumerable and complex, but the main way of saying it is that they're linked up with a philosophy—rationalism, rationalistic philosophy.

Glaser: Descartes?

Judd: Yes.

Glaser: And you mean to set your work apart from rationalism?

Judd: Yes. All that art is based on systems built beforehand, *a priori* systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world is like.¹³⁰

In order to avoid the so-called “rationalistic” compositional logic of European art, Judd proposed that the specific object would operate as a unitary whole rather than a composition of separate and distinguishable parts.

Judd's formulation of the specific object's resolute wholeness also involves a particular sense of scale, which he describes as “large” or “broad.”¹³¹ This sense of scale is only briefly mentioned in his 1965 essay, but it played a key role in his anticipation of the specific object in

¹²⁹ Judd, 182.

¹³⁰ “Questions to Stella and Judd,” interview by Bruce Glaser, in *Minimal Art A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 150-151.

¹³¹ Judd writes, “Most sculpture is like the paintings which preceded Pollock, Rothko, Still and Newman. The newest thing about it is its *broad scale*.” Judd, 183, my italics.

his earlier critical writing such as his review of Bontecou's 1963 show at the Leo Castelli where he describes the her "new sense of scale" as excluding "everything but the positive elements;"¹³² and his 1964 essay for *Arts Yearbook*, where he argues that the use of a larger scale is one of the strongest and best innovations of the abstract expressionists.¹³³ In a later interview he expands on the importance of scale, noting that

There is an enormous break between that work [European art] and other present work in the U. S., despite similarity in patterns or anything. The scale itself is just one thing to pin down. Vasarely's work has a smaller scale and a great deal of composition and qualities that European geometric painting of the 20's and 30's had.¹³⁴

His clearest discussion of his approach to scale occurs in his 1965 review of Bontecou's reliefs. "In the last fifteen years or so a small number of American artists have developed a new scale," Judd remarks, describing how, "Until recently abstract painting and sculpture retained the scale and the type of unification necessary for the representation of objects in space. The new work has a larger internal scale and fewer parts."¹³⁵ He continues insisting that, "The large scale and the several unusual forms in which it occurs have been intercausative. ... The scale, even considered separately and even more so as it occurs with the other aspects of the reliefs, is pragmatic, immediate and exclusive."¹³⁶ Although this discussion of scale remains somewhat vague, it does indicate Judd's conviction that scale is related to size but is not contingent upon it. This "large" or "broad" sense of scale should be understood as a quality of monumentality or

¹³² Judd, "'In the Galleries' *Arts Magazine*, January 1963," in *Donald Judd Complete Writings*, 65.

¹³³ In his 1964 essay for *Arts Yearbook*, "Local History," another overview of recent art work, Judd states, "Another point is that Abstract Expressionist qualities and schemes have had a large influence on most of the new artists. The inventions of several artists have not been opposed; usually they have been strengthened... The more unique and personal aspects of art, which had been subservient before, were stated alone, *large* and singly." Judd, "Local History, *Arts Yearbook* 7, 1964," in *Donald Judd Complete Writings 1959-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 151, my italics.

¹³⁴ Judd quoted in "Questions to Stella and Judd," 149.

¹³⁵ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

imposing presence that is attained through pared-down forms in combination with above-average size. In the following excerpt from a revealing conversation recorded by the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art in 1965, Judd notes his intention to reference the sort of monumentality associated with ancient art in his forms:

Mr. [Bruce] Hooten [interviewer]: A drawing of yours had a kind of inverted Stonehenge feeling. There was a certain monumentality even though...

Mr. Judd: It was blatant.

Mr. Hooten: What?

Mr. Judd: It is a post and lintel arrangement.¹³⁷

Spoken in Judd's typically terse style, his statements show that this "new sense of scale" is a quality projected by forms that Judd equates with the monolithic or monumental presence of ancient structures like Stonehenge. This relationship helps to clarify his concept by providing an analogy for the type of "broad scale," which he regards as an important characteristic of the holistic quality of the specific object.

The second main theme of Judd's essay is the concept of specificity—that is the object's ability to exclude allusions through its particular form and materials. For Judd, the new three-dimensional work is "specific, aggressive and powerful" because it refers only to the empirical experience of itself, without making external and metaphoric references.¹³⁸ His privileging of the specific nature of a unitary form should be seen in the context logical positivism, which Judd studied at Columbia.¹³⁹ In logical positivist thought, experiential data comprises the only verifiable form to knowledge; consequently, an allusion or suggestion of something beyond an

¹³⁷ "Donald Judd interview, Feb. 3, 1965," interview by Bruce Hooten, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/judd65.htm> (accessed February 2009).

¹³⁸ Judd, 184.

¹³⁹ Meyer, "Chapter 2: the Early Years," 35.

object's experiential structure is unverifiable and, therefore, unimportant.¹⁴⁰ Thus, for Judd, an object's specificity is a function of its empirically sensible form. He emphasizes that the form of the specific object is "neither painting nor sculpture," because the formats of these traditional media automatically allude to spaces, entities or concepts beyond of their actual physical structure.¹⁴¹ Judd delimits painting and sculpture as distinct and highly acculturated types of art.¹⁴² Rather than functioning as blank starting points, each type is circumscribed by its own conceptual baggage. A specific object avoids the set forms of painting and sculpture, in part, by using "new materials" that have not been previously employed in the context of fine art, and so are free from the acculturated meanings associated with such traditional media as oil and canvas or bronze. He describes this pointed use of new materials in the following manner:

Most of the work involves new materials, either recent inventions or things not used before in art. Little was done until lately with the wide range of industrial products. ... Materials vary greatly and are simply materials—Formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, Plexiglas, red and common brass, and so forth. They are specific. If they are used directly they are more specific.¹⁴³

The specific object is further separated from painting through its exclusion of illusionistic space, which, in Judd's opinion, is, "one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art."¹⁴⁴ He writes:

Except for a complete and unvaried field of color or marks, anything spaced in a rectangle on a plane suggests something in and on something else, something in its surround, which suggests an object or a figure in space, in which these are clearer instances of a similar world—that's the main purpose of painting.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ David Pears and Anthony Kenny, "Mill to Wittgenstien" in *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Kenny (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 262-3.

¹⁴¹ David Pears and Anthony Kenny, "Mill to Wittgenstien," 181.

¹⁴² Judd writes that painting and sculpture "are particular forms circumscribed after all, producing fairly definite qualities. Much of the motivation in the new work is to get clear of these forms." Judd, 181.

¹⁴³ Judd, 187.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁴⁵ Judd, 182.

Judd continues by arguing that the new three-dimensional work is more powerful than painting because, “Three-dimensions are real space. . . . Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface.”¹⁴⁶ By functioning in three-dimensional space, which Judd calls “actual space,” the specific object precludes the possibility of illusion and so cannot refer to any other external or mental space or anything other than its own structure. It is important to note here that Judd’s use of the term “actual” and Shattuck’s use of the same word designate two distinct concepts. While Judd’s “actual” refers to the “real” or “three-dimensional” space and materials of the specific object, Shattuck refers to the whole of everyday life or “reality” not normally included in the work of art. All further uses of the term “actual” in this chapter should be understood in terms of Judd’s definition. In summery, Judd’s concept of specificity should be understood in terms of the two characteristics of using “new” materials and avoiding illusionistic space by excluding any references beyond an “object’s” empirically sensible form, whether to the acculturated meanings of new materials before entering the world of art or the non-actual space of illusionistic painting.

Judd’s final and, perhaps, most complicated designation of specificity deals with allusions, rather than illusions. For Judd, the set forms of painting and sculpture function as “containers” for artistic meaning. “Three-dimensionality is not as near being simply a container as painting and sculpture have seemed to be, but it tends to that,” he observes, noting that painting and sculpture “are particular forms circumscribed after all, producing fairly definite qualities.”¹⁴⁷ This statement is perhaps best understood in the context of abstract expressionism. An abstract expressionist painter, for example, takes a set form—paint on canvas—and through

¹⁴⁶ Judd, 184.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 181.

the act of painting suffuses that medium with a particular set of individual meanings. The painting is made to refer to something outside of its structure; the resulting form thus becomes a container for conveying meaning. The specific object, by contrast, has no set historical format and, according to Judd, holds no further meaning beyond its visible structure. A more particular example of how a work of art can refer to something outside its actual structure occurs when art works are read anthropomorphically. In an unpublished essay on Claus Oldenburg that was later anthologized as part of his collected writings, Judd tersely outlines his problem with “anthropomorphism.” For him, anthropomorphism

..is one of the main aspects of old European art. Any remnants of this is a liability in the work that they are part of. The philosophy and its formal means are backwater: anything new is mainstream.

The real or usual anthropomorphism is the appearance of human feelings in things that are inanimate or not human, usually as if those feelings are the essential nature of the thing described.¹⁴⁸

Rather than referring to a set of anthropomorphic characteristics, the specific object, by avoiding allusions to human forms or other characteristics, refers only to itself. This self-reflexive logic can be understood as a basic distinction that Judd makes between a specific object and any other nonspecific object, like a table or a chair, which are part of a group of forms obeying an external logic and set form, and that, therefore, allude to entities, items or concepts other than their particular structure.¹⁴⁹ For Judd, the specificity of an object is contingent on its ability to avoid allusions to other spaces, images, forms or any symbolic or metaphorical content.

¹⁴⁸ Judd, “Claus Oldenburg,” in *Writings Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 191.

¹⁴⁹ The exception to this is Oldenburg. In an unpublished article on his work Judd argues that Oldenburg’s enlarged soft forms, subvert their own allusions to the exterior form to which they relate, through the defamiliarizing shift in scale, material, and context, affected by the artist. He writes, “Oldenburg has taken this anthropomorphism to an extreme and made the emotive form, with him basic and biopsychological, the same as the shape of an object, and by blatancy subverted the idea of the natural presence of human qualities in all things. ... Oldenburg exaggerates the

Now that the two main ideas of Judd's "Specific Objects"—wholeness or "singleness" and the exclusion of external references or "specificity"—have been defined and analyzed, this chapter will employ these concepts when looking at Bontecou's early reliefs. First this analysis will consider Judd's view that Bontecou's early reliefs constitute "something of an object, a single thing." The second and final section of this chapter will re-examine Judd's assertion of the specificity of Bontecou's reliefs in terms of their form, material, imagery and content. A vital part of these evaluations will include looking at her work in terms of the layer of time constituted by abstract expressionism, which provides a dynamic counterpoint to Judd's perspective, and is also a dominant factor in the historical range of experience on which his theorization is based. Discussing Bontecou's work in this way will provide a contextual underpinning for her forms within the tensions and refractions of the many layers of the historical time that comprise the early '60s artistic scene, and, in doing so, this approach intends to avoid the reductive categorization of her reliefs as merely auxiliary to minimalism.

"Something of an Object, a Single Thing"

Judd's concept of the specific object has been highly influential in the criticism and scholarship on Bontecou's work. Following Bontecou's work throughout the early '60s, Judd reviewed shows at the Leo Castelli in '60, '63 and '65 and included her work in critical essays about the current state of contemporary art in '64 and, of course, in '65 when he wrote "Specific Objects." Judd's developing ideas about unitary or single objects and a broad or monumental

accepted or chosen form and turns it into one of his own. ... Oldenburg needs three dimensions in order to simulate and enlarge a real object and to equate it with an emotive form." Judd, "Claus Oldenburg," 189.

sense of scale played a large role in his reviews of Bontecou's work. In a piece in 1963, Judd describes her reliefs, stating,

The quality of Bontecou's reliefs is exceptionally single. Often power lies in a polarization of elements and qualities, or at least in a combination of dissimilar ones. The four obvious aspects of the reliefs—the broad scale, the total shape, the structure, and the image—combine exponentially into an explicit quality and are the aspects of a single form. The new scale excludes everything but the positive elements: there is no field in which the structure or the image occurs; there is no supporting context. The entire shape, the structure and the image are coextensive. ...It is actual and specific and experienced as an object.¹⁵⁰

This passage emphasizes the degree to which Judd's writing on Bontecou's work prefigures his later famous essay.¹⁵¹ The concepts of unitary form and monumental scale are already established, as are the beginnings of his thoughts on the new three-dimensional works as "specific objects." This excerpt demonstrates that, for Judd, Bontecou's reliefs uniquely characterize qualities that will be identified as key aspects of the specific object. In order to more fully explore the characteristics that Judd praises, it helps to look at one of the works that Judd was reviewing at the time—an untitled relief, made in 1962, which was published in the article (figure 19). Although Judd's assertion that this relief is "exceptionally single" seems counterintuitive given the complexity of the form, it is worth reconsidering. Accordingly, this thesis will put aside, for a moment, any apparent inconsistencies in Judd's interpretation of Bontecou's forms in order to look at the work from his perspective. First, this section will consider his designation of Bontecou's work as "exceptionally single." It will then examine his statement that her work exhibits a new and enlarged sense of scale.

¹⁵⁰ Judd, "In the Galleries," 65.

¹⁵¹ This passage is also repeated almost verbatim in Judd's more famous 1965 review of Bontecou's work. He writes, "The power of Bontecou's reliefs is remarkably single. The three primary aspects, the scale, the structure and the image are definite and powerful. They combine exponentially. They do not contrast much; they have nearly the same quality and are nearly the same form." Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178.

As discussed earlier, the degree to which a three-dimensional work of art can be regarded as “something of an object, a single thing” is a defining characteristic for any work considered as a specific object.”¹⁵² For Judd, “the entire shape, the structure and the image [of Bontecou’s reliefs] are coextensive.” He separates the major aspects of her forms into three parts—the dominant image, which is the void; the total shape, which is the external frame; and the structure, which constitutes the projecting form of the relief. However, as Judd notes, when viewers look at the work in terms of these three major elements, they find the three components are so interconnected that they cease to be individual parts and resolve into a holistic object.¹⁵³ For example, the welded steel structures of the projecting forms of her reliefs are also the compositional lines of the images that define the edge of the void (or, in this untitled work, voids). Likewise, the shape of the relief—its rectangular frame—is coexistent with the base of the form. Rather than relying on the *a priori* structure of painting, the frame becomes an integral part of the unit as a whole. In other words, the edge of the frame is the edge of the object, and not the demarcation of a “supporting context” or a “field in which the structure or the image occurs.”¹⁵⁴ The overlapping of structure, shape and image that Judd highlights is most apparent in Bontecou’s earlier, simpler reliefs like *Untitled* (1959, figure 20). Like the untitled relief with multiple voids, this 1959 structure is inseparable from the dominant image of the void, and the line that forms the shape of its edge is also a necessary structure of the form. Similarly, the total shape is congruent with the box-like structure of the relief, thus negating any distinction between

¹⁵² Judd, 183.

¹⁵³ Judd writes, “The three primary aspects, the scale, the structure and the image, are simple, definite and powerful. They combine exponentially. They do not contrast much; they have nearly the same quality and are, nearly the same form. The scale the structure and the image are most nearly identical in the simpler reliefs.” Judd, “Lee Bontecou,” 178.

¹⁵⁴ Judd, “In the Galleries,” 65.

figure and ground. Works similar to the 1959 relief would have been among the first of Bontecou's forms that Judd saw when he began reviewing her art in 1960. The relative simplicity of her earliest structures seems to have shaped his understanding of her later forms. When looking at this 1959 work, one can much more easily see the three basic parts that Judd describes and understand how, as a group, they tend to resolve into one unitary form.

In his 1963 review, Judd also cites the "broad scale" of Bontecou's reliefs as a vital aspect of her work that contributes to its object-like quality. As mentioned earlier, this "broad" scale is not so much a size requirement as it is a relativistic designation of the internal relationship of parts that produces a sense of monumentality. This approach to scale is a function of the aforementioned unitary or whole quality of the object where all the parts resolve into a single form. According to Judd, by virtue of their unitary form and lack of separate relational parts, Bontecou's works, though often quite large, project a monumental sense of scale beyond their actual size. In his 1965 review of her work, Judd explains

The scale and economy [of parts] are integral to the explicit, minatory power of Bontecou's reliefs. ...If a work is to assert its own values and existence, it is necessary that its essential parts be alone. The essential parts must then occupy all the space available—which is why the greater scale and economy are mandatory.¹⁵⁵

Bontecou's work fulfills this aspect of the specific object because, at least in Judd's estimation, the parts of her reliefs are few—limited to protruding structure, total shape, and image—and occupy "all the space available." The sense of large or monumental scale, therefore, is not contingent on the size but, rather, the ratio of parts to whole. When viewers are confronted with even a relatively small relief, such as the 1959 piece mentioned above, which is thirty-one inches tall by twenty-seven inches wide, the form has an imposing presence. The dark void appears to

¹⁵⁵ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178.

engulf a huge space, in part, because it is large in relation to the rest of the relief. Although the void is actually far smaller than the average window, for Judd, Bontecou's relief projects a monumental presence that exceeds its physical measurements.

From a proto-minimalist perspective, Judd's characterization of Bontecou's forms as having a unitary or "single" quality and a monumental sense of scale is convincing. As has been shown, Judd's consideration of Bontecou's early reliefs was an active part of the development of his concept of the specific object. However, not all of her reliefs fulfill the qualities that Judd privileges in his version of her work. Those that do not he denigrates. He notes in 1965 that Bontecou's "complex... [early reliefs] are less powerful and less interesting," and admonishes the artist that "some reductions should be next."¹⁵⁶ As the following analysis will show, Judd's interpretation is based in a large part on the earlier art historical movement of abstract expressionism. Made, as they were, during a period of flux and transition in contemporary art, when abstract expressionism was no longer in the hegemony of cutting-edge art and the new forms that would later become known as minimalism, pop and conceptual art were emerging, Bontecou's works are open to multiple (and sometimes conflicting) readings. While Judd's "Specific Objects" was part of a rapidly developing and changing stylistic trend, the "velocity of change" of abstract expressionist art was slowing; it no longer embodied the spearhead of the avant-garde as it once had. Considering Bontecou's early reliefs in terms of the separate "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations" of abstract expressionism provides a vital counterpoint to Judd's interpretation of her work, which in many ways is an overlay of a developing stylistic trend on this previous construction.

¹⁵⁶ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178.

In fact, Bontecou cites abstract expressionism as the only artistic group or movement to have direct importance for her work; she states:

...over all of us spread the most wonderful period of Abstract Expressionism. It gave young artists a burst of energy and a desire for boundless freedom to break away individually and find new paths.¹⁵⁷

For her, the works of artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning exemplify the power and energy of individual artistic freedom. Bontecou was very familiar with abstract expressionist works: as an art student in New York during the mid '50s, it would have been impossible to avoid them. According to New York reviewer Calvin Tompkins, "Abstract Expressionism was dominant then, and Lee [Bontecou] worked under the spell of de Kooning and Kline."¹⁵⁸ She remembers the vibrant intensity of the abstract expressionists Pollock, de Kooning and Kline, describing, in her own words, how "they'd get drunk and be spouting *art*, not gallery talk! ... They were just so alive, and the paintings were. I loved it. I got energy from it."¹⁵⁹ Also, when questioned about the possible social content in her work Bontecou made the following unlikely association, "not too blatant [the social content]. I think the example is like de Kooning's *Women*. I love them... He's captured some of the women's spirit, and humor, and the paint—it's all wonderful to me."¹⁶⁰ She believed then and continues to think that her connection with the abstract expressionist artists, in terms of both its and her emphasis on artistic freedom, is more philosophical than formal.¹⁶¹ However, in addition to this privileging of freedom, when one looks closely at her compositions other correlations with abstract

¹⁵⁷ Lee Bontecou, "Artist Statement," 12.

¹⁵⁸ Tompkins, "Missing in Action," 38. See note 2.

¹⁵⁹ Lee Bontecou quoted in Trachtman, "Lee Bontecou's Brave New World," 102.

¹⁶⁰ Bontecou, interview by Alan Artner, *Chicago Tribune Online Edition* (February 29, 2004), <http://www.chicagotribune.com/features/arts/chi-040229bontecou-story>.

¹⁶¹ Bontecou states that her art has come out of a drive to encompass "as much life as possible—no barriers—no boundaries—all freedom in every sense." Lee Bontecou in a letter to Jo Applin, 2002, quoted in E.A.T. Smith, "All Freedom in Every Sense," 171.

expressionist works are evident. For the purpose of placing in context Judd's view of those characteristics that make Bontecou's work "something of an object, a single thing," the works' formal connections to abstract expressionism will be discussed first. In the second section of this analysis, which will analyze Judd's concept of specificity, other more metaphorical issues of content in Bontecou's art will be considered in terms of the abstract expressionists' privileging of symbolic meaning.

Seen in terms of the abstract expressionist perspective, the qualities of having a holistic, unitary form and imposing sense of scale, which Judd highlighted, also take on very different meanings. Instead of exemplifying the characteristics of emergent specific objects, Bontecou's works can be seen as exhibiting a sense of 'overallness' and large scale, of a different kind that is more typical of certain types of abstract expressionism.¹⁶² Likewise, the "space of experience" of abstract expressionism provides a more intuitive art historical context for her compositions, which, though unified, have complex structures that, like the New York School work, demonstrate an interest in both cubism and surrealism. The following analysis will consider Bontecou's early reliefs from the separate temporal layer of abstract expressionism. It will show how Bontecou maintained the position of a transitional figure in the art scene of the late '50s and early '60s by exploring some of abstract expressionists' most important generative ideas in new ways.

¹⁶² In order to maintain a clear distinction between the unified compositions of abstract expressionist works and the unitary form of Judd's specific objects, abstract expressionist works will be described as "overall" or as having a sense of "overallness," while specific objects will continue to be referred to as "holistic" or as having a sense of "wholeness." The use of the term "over-all" has a long history in discussions of abstract expressionism. For example, in a 1947 review Clement Greenberg writes, "Pollock ... tends to handle his canvases with an *over-all evenness*..." [Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock" in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 125, my italics]. Although, most often the term is used to refer to Pollock's compositions, the characteristic of overallness is also exhibited in the so-called color field abstract expressionists work of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still and will be used accordingly. Irving Sandler, "The Color-Field Painters," in *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 148-9.

Before beginning this analysis, it is necessary to note that Judd's concept of the specific object, although written in opposition to the Greenbergian modernism that championed abstract expressionism, is in many ways rooted in this critical approach.¹⁶³ "Abstract Expressionist qualities and schemes have had a large influence on most of the new artists," Judd observes, noting that, "The inventions of... several [of these] artists have not been opposed; usually they have been strengthened."¹⁶⁴ In "Specific Objects" Judd cites the work of Pollock, and many of the color-field or non-gestural abstract expressionists as providing a new emphasis on the overall shape or perimeter of the canvas as basic to the composition of the work.¹⁶⁵ He writes:

In the paintings of Pollock, Rothko, Still and Newman, and more recently of Reinhardt and Noland, the rectangle is emphasized. The elements inside the rectangle are broad and simple and correspond closely to the rectangle. The shapes and surface are only those that can occur plausibly within and on a rectangular plane. The parts are few and so subordinate to the unity as not to be parts in an ordinary sense. A painting is nearly an entity, one thing, and not the indefinable sum of a group of entities and earlier references.¹⁶⁶

Judd views the primary contribution of these abstract expressionist painters as being the first to acknowledge the fact that painted canvas is an object, rather than a window into illusionistic

¹⁶³ James Meyer argues that, "From his earliest reviews Judd demonstrated a strong attachment to this Greenbergian principle [the linear development of art in terms of distinct media]. He esteemed Pollock and Newman because they had developed "powerful" painting and, inversely, criticized Duchamp for inventing fires that the dadaist failed to tend," (Meyer, "Specific Objects," 140). Meyer continues, noting, " 'Specific Objects' was clearly beholden to Greenbergian modernism even as it superseded Greenberg's model. ... Unfortunately, the continuity or overlap between Greenberg and Judd that has become more apparent in recent years was buried under the flood of anti-Greenbergianism that 'Specific Objects' unleashed. ... his simultaneous proximity to and distance from Greenberg—was a formidable challenge to modernism itself, opening up, perhaps more than he himself would have liked, the field of theory and practice of postmodernism." Meyer, "Specific Objects," in *Minimalism Art and Polemics In the Sixties*, 141.

¹⁶⁴ Judd, "Local History," 151.

¹⁶⁵ Judd, 182. Also, in an earlier essay for the *Arts Yearbook* in 1964 Judd wrote, "It is likely that someone will derive something new from Abstract Expressionism. If Ellsworth Kelly can do something novel with a geometric art more or less from the thirties, or Rauschenberg with Schwitters and found objects generally—which is a twenty-year jump or more—then someone is going to do something surprising with Abstract Expressionism, with loose paintings." Judd, "Local History," 150.

¹⁶⁶ Judd, 182.

space. For Judd, many of the abstract expressionist's works emphasize the shape of the picture plane, and, in doing so, reveal their own 'objectness' more clearly than ever before in a painting.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, in Judd's interpretation, "the paramount quality and scheme of Abstract Expressionism was the singleness of the format and [al]so of the quality. The more unique and personal aspects of art which had been subservient before, were stated alone, large and singly."¹⁶⁸ As has been indicated in this thesis, these qualities of "singleness" and large scale became key characteristics of Judd's "specific objects." However, Judd's belief that abstract expressionist works privilege the characteristics of wholeness and monumental scale is very different from this art's concerns with allover compositional unity and use of large formats. These two different perspectives, although connected, provide vastly different readings of Bontecou's transitional forms.

Unlike the specific object's "singleness," the abstract expressionist correlative of overall compositional unity is based upon the complex interrelation of painterly elements, part by part. As has been mentioned, Judd decried this relational strategy of composition because he saw it as a continuation of an outmoded tradition. His concept of the specific object was intended to break free of this type of logic and avoid the superfluous consideration of "compositional effects." Conversely, abstract expressionists were intent on achieving unified compositions and accomplished this primarily through the complex interrelation of internal parts. However, many of the artists emphasized that, although composed, their works should appear natural and not studied. Rothko explained in an interview that, "When the unity is successful, you can't tell how

¹⁶⁷ Judd wrote that, "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." Judd, 182.

¹⁶⁸ Judd, "Local History," 151.

[it was] achieved—because I do not know myself.”¹⁶⁹ Similarly, De Kooning stated that he wanted his compositions to seem as if they “had grown naturally, like a flower.”¹⁷⁰ Abstract expressionist artists constructed all-over compositions using a variety of formal modes.

However, whether through the broad fields of color of Newman, Rothko and Still, or the dense application of gestural marks of some of Pollock’s and De Kooning’s works, the resultant forms were thoroughly cohesive wholes comprised of related parts. In many of his works, according to Rothko, it is virtually impossible to tell exactly how the end result was achieved. In his *Untitled* (1949) the atmospheric layers of paint shift and merge, circumventing any designation of fore- or background (figure 21). The individual marks or layers are too integrated to allow a cataloging of how each element functions in the composition.

Also unlike Judd, the abstract expressionist concern with compositional unity is tied to their emphasis on communicating their individual subject matter. For example, Pollock’s over-all application of gestural marks has been interpreted as a visual manifestation of universal themes. In works like *One* (1950, figure 22) the many gestures, lines and drips create a continuum of marks that cannot be separated into distinct parts like figure and ground. According to Polcari, this quality had thematic significance for Pollock who saw the dissolution of separate entities as a manifestation of the collective unconscious through the filter of his personal interaction with the canvas.¹⁷¹ Although one can understand how, for Judd, a mature Pollock like *One* can feel like a large shape of color where edges become the work’s dominant

¹⁶⁹ Rothko quoted from “Notes from an interview by William Seitz, March 25, 1953” in *Mark Rothko Writings on Art*, ed., Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 85.

¹⁷⁰ C. B. Pepper, “The Indomitable De Kooning” (includes an interview with Willem de Kooning), *The New York Times Magazine*, November 20, 1983, 91 quoted in Polcari, “Chapter 9: Willem De Kooning: A Fever of Matter” in *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 296.

¹⁷¹ Polcari, “Chapter 8: Pollock Ancient Energies,” in *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 243-245, 247-249.

structure and the relation of interior parts is subordinated to the unitary form, this is a later view that Judd imposed on a series of works made with entirely different intentions from his specific objects. The abstract expressionists' emphasis on subject matter will be discussed more fully in the second section of this chapter.

It is considerably easier to understand the unity of many of Bontecou's works in terms of the abstract expressionist's overall compositional balance than it is to comprehend them in terms of Judd's holistic quality of object-ness. In particular, De Kooning's statement that he wanted his paintings to seem as if they had developed organically reflects a sensibility similar to her work. Bontecou's *Untitled* (1962, figure 23) looks like a defunct machine, while *Untitled* (1964, figure 24) can be construed as a fossil of some ancient organism. Rather than appearing like a logical ordering of shapes, lines and colors, her compositions appear to be intuitively arrived at, giving them a naturalized appearance. In other words, the logical strategies behind the ordering of her forms are so integrated into the overall work that they cease to seem like compositional strategies at all. Like a mechanic building an engine for a specific function, or the biological developing of an organism from a single cell, the objects appear to result from an inductive logic that relates to traditional aesthetics, but not the *a priori* conditions Judd described. Although Judd's interpretation of the object-like unity of Bontecou's forms is not inaccurate when employed as a diagnostic tool for looking at the completed work, it ignores the fact that her compositions were arrived at through an organized and intuitive manipulation of individual parts into a complex relational balance. That the unity of Bontecou's early reliefs was arrived at through a careful, part by part, relational mode of composition is apparent in the complexity of her forms. Line, shape, three-dimensional form and subtle variations of color all interact to

create a balanced and integrated whole. Continuing this exploration of Bontecou's complex compositional mode in terms of her art's connection to aspects of abstract expressionism, the following discussion will examine the impact that cubism and surrealism have had on her forms.

The connections between abstract expressionism and the earlier twentieth-century movements of cubism and surrealism have often been noted.¹⁷² Most often surrealist influence on abstract expressionism is discussed in terms of the concept of psychic automatism, while the role of cubism is seen as an early stylistic exposure to an armature of imbricated forms to which many of the abstract expressionists reacted. Art historian Robert Hobbs describes this two-fold response in the following manner:

The cubist grid provided a basic modernist vocabulary while Surrealism supplied a working method; the two forms combined to form basic tools that were determinant without being constraining. Cubism provided a means for structuring even the most inchoate doodles occurring from psychic automatist procedures; and, more importantly it was fluctuant enough to provide a needed indeterminacy.¹⁷³

In De Kooning's *Attic* (1949, figure 25), the overall network of fluctuant shapes that Hobbs refers to as the "cubist syntax" of abstract expressionist works can be seen with relative ease.¹⁷⁴

Amid the curving forms, moments of more rigid geometry occur, often, as nearly perpendicular angles. Although they do not form a fully realized grid, these angles can be seen in connection to the logic of analytic cubist works, which provided Picasso and Braque with infrastructures for

¹⁷² For more on these connections see: Irving Sandler, "The Great Depression," in *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 20-23; Ashton, "The Advent of Surrealism," in *The New York School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 1992), 85-98; and Polcari, "Chapter 1: The Psychology of Crisis: The Historical Roots: Surrealism, Modernism and Abstract Expressionism," 21-29.

¹⁷³ Robert Carleton Hobbs, "Early Abstract Expressionism: A Concern with the Unknown Within," in *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years*, eds., Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 18.

¹⁷⁴ Hobbs states, "Cubist ideas likewise had been around and for a longer period of time than surrealist ones. American avant-garde artists even in the teens of this century had become deft adherents of Cubism. Perhaps the reason why a *cubist syntax* was used by so many Abstract Expressionist artists during the forties is that they simply could not get away from it and, furthermore, probably did not want to." Hobbs, 18, my italics.

exploring form. This remnant of the cubist grid helps to ensure an over-all quality in the composition by balancing each quadrant or section against the others. Also, even though the surrealist contribution of psychic automatism—a process of drawing without plan or preconception that is intended to put the artist in contact with the subconscious mind—is most often cited as a direct connection to abstract expressionism, other aspects of surrealism were influential. In particular, surrealist themes of metamorphosis and transformation, as exemplified by the variety of biomorphic forms in their paintings, were of interest to abstract expressionists.¹⁷⁵ Polcari defines “biomorphism” as the surrealist “fusion of man and nature, of plant, animal, and even cosmological forms in a form-language.”¹⁷⁶ Biomorphs are perhaps most readily apparent in works like Yves Tanguy’s *The Great Mutation* (1942, figure 26): the old master finish of his carefully shaded abstractions highlights the metamorphosis of organic shapes in his painting, despite the work’s clear distinction between fore- and background. However, this element is also present in De Kooning’s *Attic* where curvilinear forms slip one into the next. This “slippage” between forms further agglomerates the continuum of lines and shapes, thus producing a unified whole. As one form, color, shape or line blends into the next, it becomes difficult to determine figure from ground or part from part. The combination of surrealist biomorphism and the remnants of the cubist grid in many abstract expressionist works is a key factor in their over-all compositional unity.

De Kooning’s *Attic* shares this synthesis of cubist geometry and surrealist biomorphism with many of Bontecou’s relief works, and through this synthesis, both works achieve a particularly unified composition. In Bontecou’s 1972 retrospective catalog Ratcliff notes,

¹⁷⁵ Polcari, 25

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 25.

In describing Bontecou's steel and canvas constructions, mechanical and biological allusions suggest themselves before artistic ones—for these works are *fabricated*, not sculpted or painted in a traditional sense. One sees the “skeletons” of buildings and boats, the “flesh” of sails and tents. There are the shapes of turbines and jet motors, of lighter-than-air masonry and of metal plate construction. On the biological side, skeletons and flesh are returned to their animal origins. One sees carapaces, shells, exposed membranes—animal tissues.¹⁷⁷

Similarly, Ashton views De Kooning's *The Little Attic* (1949, figure 27) as exhibiting, “a perfect balance between the curving shapes with their memory of the biological dynamics, and the mechanical or the geometric.”¹⁷⁸ Polcari too notes a synthesis in De Kooning's resolution of the geometric and curvilinear, stating:

The climax of this mode comes in the great paintings *Attic* and *Excavation*, which consist of sharp-edged, truncated forms in an all-over field of continuous fragmentation. Shapes have both linear and curvilinear edges, suggesting the conjoining of manmade and organic forms.¹⁷⁹

Although neither directly cubist nor distinctly surrealist, Bontecou's reliefs, like De Kooning's *Attic*, combine elements of both. In works like *Untitled* (1960, figure 28) there is a complex interplay of the geometric and the curvilinear. A stretched and askew grid radiates outward from the void. Echoing the curved shape of the central cavity, the artist warps and transforms the grid-like structure into more organic forms that resemble the composite patterns of crenellations on seashells. Blended together, this continuum of shapes bonds the composition into unified or all-over form. When seen from an abstract expressionist perspective, the veiled references to cubist and surrealist forms in Bontecou's reliefs become apparent. These separate formal elements become part of the over-all character of her reliefs through their dynamic interplay.

¹⁷⁷ Ratcliff, Carter, “Lee Bontecou,” in *Lee Bontecou* (Chicago, Illinois: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1972), unpaginated.

¹⁷⁸ Ashton, “Willem de Kooning,” in *Willem de Kooning*, ed., Charles Chetham (Hazardville, Connecticut: The Meridian Gravure Co., Smith College Museum of Art, The Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1965), unpaginated.

¹⁷⁹ Polcari, 282.

Although Judd viewed this unified quality of her forms in relation to the separate concerns of his “Specific Objects,” in fact, it is more likely that such relational compositional logic was as basic to Bontecou’s process as it was to the abstract expressionists.

Just as Judd’s concept of the unitary form of the specific object is different from the abstract expressionist pursuit of an overall composition, his preference for the “large” or monumental sense of scale of the specific object is different from the abstract expressionist use of a larger format. As has already been mentioned, Judd’s definition of the specific object’s sense of “broad scale” was a consideration of the internal ratio of parts to whole and a function of the unitary power of the object, which created a monumental presence. Unlike Judd, many abstract expressionists chose to work in a larger format in order to give their paintings a more intimate or human scale. As Rothko writes in his 1951 statement on “How to combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture,”

I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however—I think this applies to other painters I know—is precisely because I want to be intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon experience as a stereopticon view or with reducing glass. However [when] you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command.¹⁸⁰

For Rothko, working in a bigger size provided a larger space for the viewer to enter, and thus a more intimate viewing experience because the work was composed on a human scale. The roughly human size of many abstract expressionist works is perhaps most noticeable in the context of a museum. For example, when one moves from the early twentieth-century rooms in the Museum of Modern Art in New York with their Picassos, Braques, Kandinskys and Mirós into a room of abstract expressionist works by Pollock, Kline, Still, and Newman, a jump or

¹⁸⁰ Mark Rothko, “How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture,” in *Mark Rothko: Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 74.

break in size is immediately noticeable. Their paintings do not float in the center of the wall, but often extend almost to the floor. Existing in human scale, or a little larger, these works meet the viewer on more equal terms. Just as Judd emphasizes a mixture of holistic forms that achieve a monumental presence regardless of their physical measurements in combination with generally larger actual size in order to create a particular sense of scale, abstract expressionist works often combine a sense of overallness with a large size. Rothko's *Number 5* (1950, figure 29) projects a broad sense of scale that is a function of both its large physical size as well as its paired-down range of constituent parts.

The format of Bontecou's early reliefs, though variable, were often human sized or slightly larger. Like the abstract expressionist's works, her work's human scale helps to create a more intimate viewing experience by confronting the observer at eye level. Works like *Untitled* (1959-1960, figure 30), which measures fifty-eight inches tall by ninety-nine inches long, are almost mural size. The dual voids of this work loom slightly over the viewer. From a standard distance of three or four feet its over eight-foot breadth wraps around the viewer's frame of vision, creating an intimate "environment" for a single person to "enter." However, even though they are composed on a human scale, many of Bontecou's forms, as Judd suggests, have a monumental presence. The intimacy achieved in the process of the viewer's experience of her work contributes to this sense of monumentality: the closer one stands in relation to the engulfing voids of this relief, the larger and more imposing the work seems.

Thus far, Judd's concept of the specific object has been discussed in terms of its attributes of having a holistic or "single" form and a "broad" or monumental sense of scale. When Bontecou's forms are viewed in terms of Judd's perspective, they accord with it. However,

when seen from the opposing perspective of abstract expressionism, which Bontecou herself notes is a primary influence on her work, these characteristics take on different meanings. The object-like trait that Judd cites in her forms and that he views as avoiding so-called traditional “compositional effects” becomes, instead, a product of that same relational mode of production; stylistic antecedents in cubism and surrealism, thus become part of the art historical context of her reliefs. Similarly, the monumental sense of scale, which, for Judd, is a component of the holistic quality of her forms, can also be understood in terms of the abstract expressionist’s use of human scale. Her transitional works thus correlate with contradictory readings that reflect the separate temporal layers in which they were made and developed.

While continuing to observe the diverse interpretations of Bontecou’s reliefs in relation to the different historical perspectives of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, the following section of this analysis will discuss her work and its unique form, materials, imagery, and content in terms of the “specificity” that Judd ascribes to his unitary objects.

“Specific, Aggressive and Powerful”

For Judd, the specificity of Bontecou’s early reliefs resides in the four main characteristics or qualities that are exemplified by works of art when they are considered as objects: they are “neither painting nor sculpture;” they are made from “new materials, either recent inventions or things not used before in art;” they do not create an illusion; and, finally, they do not explicitly reference any content other than their particular structure. In particular, Judd’s observation that her works occupy a space between the set forms of painting and

sculpture provides a revealing perspective through which one can view her forms. However, his analysis of her work, at the same time, creates a series of contradictions when he formulates her reliefs as specific objects. For the sake of clarity, this discussion will examine separately Judd's attributes of specificity as represented in Bontecou's works and the ways these works in turn contradict his concept of the specific object.

Like the opening statement in "Specific Objects," the first sentence in Judd's 1965 review of Bontecou's work declares that the work is "neither painting nor sculpture."¹⁸¹ By this he means that as a three-dimensional structure, it is not a painting, and, that as a wall piece of a rectangular format, which occupies the traditional space of painting, it is not a sculpture. For Judd, being "neither painting nor sculpture" means that such works as Bontecou's move away from the medium specificity of Greenbergian modernism and function as a new form, which is free from the acculturated meanings associated with both painting and sculpture. Considered in this way Bontecou's work occupies an in-between space. However, since the work *is* three-dimensional, and the work *does* occupy the space of painting, it would be more accurate to say that her works are sculptural reliefs that displace painting's primary position and incorporate some of its formal characteristics. Optimally, in interpretations of her work, the attendant meanings and formal logic of these set art historical forms remain in play. For example, although sculpted in three-dimensions, the subtle interrelation of tones in her canvas reliefs can be described as "painterly." Their intricacy and tonal range, in combination with the complex balance of clearly delimited shapes of her relief's surfaces, have been compared to analytic

¹⁸¹ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178.

cubist works.¹⁸² Throughout the rest of this analysis, instances where aspects of painting and sculpture merge in Bontecou's forms will be of central importance.

Perhaps the most striking area where the acculturated meanings of painting and sculpture come into play in Bontecou's reliefs is in her distinctive use of materials. According to Judd, part of the specific or explicit quality of his objects resides in the use of "new materials, either recent inventions or things not used before in art." Taking into account the fact that these reliefs were made in the late '50s and early '60s, Bontecou's use of found objects and fragments fits into a recent tradition of salvaging materials that includes the works of Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and other assemblage artists. However, Bontecou's use of worn and stained canvas as a found component in her art, also references the long tradition of fine art painting. If considered in the critical climate of the late '50s and early '60s, when Greenberg's trajectory of the media of painting that highlights the flatness of the format was the predominant interpretation of non-objective art in general and abstract expressionism in particular, Bontecou's projection of flat canvas into three-dimensions becomes blatantly subversive. The fact that the canvas is reclaimed from previous non-art uses intensifies its subversive nature because the purity of the medium is soiled. Seen in this light, it is odd that Judd does not mention this aspect of her use of materials himself. His "Specific Objects," which represented a concrete opposition to Greenberg's and his protege Michael Fried's approach is particularly critical of the importance Greenberg places on the separate and distinct trajectories of art based on media.¹⁸³ Thus,

¹⁸² She writes, "...Bontecou's reliefs display a keen formal awareness of... their often surprising asymmetrical compositions and their Cubistic fragmentation of form (Bontecou's predominant palate of tans and browns may also allude to the near-monochrome phase of Analytic Cubism, ca. 1910-11)." E. A. T. Smith, "Abstract Sinister," *Art in America* 81 (September 1993): 84.

¹⁸³ Both Greenberg and Fried published articles in the '60's that respond to Judd's critique. See: Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture" in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (Los Angeles: University of

Bontecou's incorporation of reclaimed canvas, although it is a material with a long usage in the fine art painting, makes the work, according to Judd's program, more "specific," rather than less so. The attendant art historical meaning of her selecting canvas for this sculpture makes the relief's distinction from the formal mode of painting more apparent by referencing its similarity to this medium and also its difference from it.

Another aspect of Bontecou's works that blurs the distinction between painting and sculpture is the illusionistic image of the void, which dominates in many of her compositions. As noted earlier, Judd regarded works made in three-dimensions or "actual" space as "intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface."¹⁸⁴ He views most paint on a flat surface, especially when different colors, shapes, lines or marks are introduced, as automatically creating spatial illusions. In his positivist view, the illusion of space that is not "actual" lacks the focused, single and unitary quality of a three-dimensional object, and, therefore, is less powerful. As has already been discussed, for Judd, Bontecou's reliefs exhibit the characteristics of a "single" unitary object; however, his explanation of this quality includes a peculiar statement that "the image is an object, a grim abyssal one."¹⁸⁵ He goes on to cite the "image" as one of its major characteristics that through its "tripled identity" makes the form a "remarkably single" object.¹⁸⁶ Contradictorily, the importance Judd places on Bontecou's resultant "images" would seem to make the separation between the specific object and the illusionistic space of painting less defined because the concept of image connotes a mental picture and not an object in "actual" space. The mental space of an image is thus the illusionistic space of western painting that Judd

California Press, 1968), 180-186; Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed., Gregory Battcock (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 116-147.

¹⁸⁴ Judd, 184.

¹⁸⁵ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

has clearly articulated as problematic. Consequently, the act of identifying Bontecou's relief's as images lessens their power as specific objects. Judd explains this apparent contradiction by noting that,

Usually an image is a form which primarily suggests something else; so far an image has been ambiguously descriptive; it has been dependant and intermediate. Bontecou hasn't changed the nature of the image but has extremely changed its emphasis. The dominant image, the central hole surrounding canvas, is not primarily allusive or descriptive. *The black hole does not allude to a black hole; it is one* [my italics].¹⁸⁷

Thus, in Judd's positivist view where an empirical sensation produces an unmediated and direct experience of an object, the image of Bontecou's forms and the form itself are one and the same. However, this idea that Bontecou's voids can be thought of as "actual" holes rather than representations of them poses the larger, and, perhaps, unanswerable question, of whether the "holes" in many of Bontecou's reliefs can really be perceived in the same manner as a "real" or "everyday" hole in the ground or in a wall. If one looks closely at the work Judd used to illustrate his 1965 review of Bontecou's reliefs—*Untitled* (1961, figure 31)—certain contradictions surface; the creation of an image of an apparently infinite depth, which is not "actual," is a critical aspect of her forms.

Standing nearly seven feet tall and over seven feet wide and extending outward from the surface of the wall by nearly three feet, this untitled work is one of Bontecou's largest reliefs. This work, like nearly all of Bontecou's early reliefs, is made from worn and stained canvas attached to a welded steel frame with a series of small wire "stitches." The structure of the work is organized around a single, slightly off-center, ovoid opening. Conforming to the circumference of the opening is a series of arcing forms that project out from the surface. Concentric lines around the central aperture form a rim, which is recessed into the form.

¹⁸⁷ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178.

Because Bontecou has blocked all light from entering the interior and painted the inside with matte black paint, so that when one looks into this opening, which is positioned at eye level, one appears to be staring into a void of unknown dimensions.

Although the central void in this work appears to be an infinitely deep space, its actual space is much less impressive, extending only a few inches behind the canvas-sheathed armature before ending in the flat backing of the wall itself. Judd's hole is then an illusion, and not an actual hole. In fact, the illusion of an infinitely deep hole is carefully cultivated by a variety of formal decisions. The projecting structure of the relief hides the black interior in shadow, thus intensifying the darkness and camouflaging the fact of the wall's presence. Each part of the protruding structure, which is made of several cubic forms, also contributes to the illusion by exaggerating the apparent depth of the form. The corners of the cubic armature are not right angles, but instead are slightly askew; thus creating dramatic lines that seem to protrude farther into viewer's space than actually occurs. Heightening the illusion of depth, the projecting cubic forms contrast with the shadowy space of the central hole. Within the intricate composition of parts that make up the frame around the central opening are a series of roughly parallel shapes that create lines, which exaggerate the depth of the frame itself. Shading on portions of the canvas surface also amplifies the relief's three-dimensional structure. The concentric rings around the interior frame of the void are shaded darker along the outer edge, thereby highlighting the breaks between various sections and creating the illusion that these parts are separated in space. On the projecting cubic forms, the interior panels are darkened, while the exterior ones are lighter in tone, thus making recessed void seem deeper than it actually is. Each element of the work exists in actual space, but is also enhanced by Bontecou's illusionistic shading, and the

exaggerated perspectival lines of the form, making her three-dimensional form both actual and illusionistic.

Bontecou has explained that, at least in part, her famous relief sculptures were created with the intention of constructing illusory depth. In a 2004 interview, she described her thought process when first constructing her relief works:

I was looking at those early pieces I had made [terracotta covered structures shaped like birds and figures]. Those things you had to walk around. I don't know, there was something that bugged me...Its just a lump of... It's a piece of sculpture sitting on a thing. There was something missing for me. Even if it was beautiful, it was limiting. I wanted the illusion you can get from a pencil drawing or a painting. The depth and nuances... and the black, and space.¹⁸⁸

Bontecou made her early reliefs partly in pursuit of an illusion that freed her from the limitations of the “actual space” of the terracotta forms she had been creating. To a large degree, drawing led the way to this illusionistic synthesis of painting and sculpture. While living in Rome in 1957 on a trip funded by a Fulbright, Bontecou discovered that she could draw with her welding torch.¹⁸⁹ By turning down the oxygen of the torch, which in combination with acetylene gas produces a flame, she found that the torch exuded thick soot that could be used to create remarkably smooth, inky-black shading (in fact, the shading described in *Untitled* (1961) appears to have been made by the same method of drawing with the acetylene torch). “It was so deep,” Bontecou said referring to the blackness of the soot drawings that “it gave you a feeling of outer space.”¹⁹⁰ Excited by this quality, she brought the resulting drawings back to the United States and continued her explorations of their inky depth; the results of these investigations became her famous reliefs.

¹⁸⁸ Karen Wright, “Rebirth of a Star: Lee Bontecou is Back with a Bang” (includes an interview with Bontecou), *Modern Painters* 17/2 (Summer 2004): 66-67.

¹⁸⁹ Munro, 383-384. See note 36.

¹⁹⁰ Bontecou quoted in Tomkins, 39.

Although eclipsed by the many reviewers who connected Bontecou's work to Judd's concept of the specific object, Dore Ashton emphasized Bontecou's creation of illusionistic space and its central importance to the interpretation of the work.¹⁹¹ Ashton's 1963 review, "Illusion and Fantasy: Lee," situates the power of Bontecou's work in her repetition of the image of a central void and her creation of an illusion of an infinite depth.

Bontecou's passion for elaborate recession is curious. By repeating a generally curvilinear movement, but altering each contributing shape, she indulges in an almost traditional fantasy. The yearning for a central meeting point is not too different from that of Palladio whose stage sets were so excessively stressed in terms of vanishing-point perspective that they went beyond the logic of perspective altogether, becoming imaginative curiosities.¹⁹²

Ashton's correlation of Bontecou's work with the illusionistic depth of Palladian stage sets contradicts Judd's understanding of her works as "specific objects" by situating the power of the form, not in "actual space," but in a world of "illusion and fantasy." Her reading of Bontecou's work is also much more closely aligned with the artist's own statements. As Bontecou points out:

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. I could push a part of the structure way, way back. I could go way deep, and the blackness played its part in that too. Or I could come up forward with lighter grays. Or even different colors. You were free to vary the values, as you liked.¹⁹³

As this statement attests, Bontecou's increasingly famous reliefs were the culmination of a search for a way to incorporate the illusionistic depth of either drawing or painting within a three-dimensional structure. In doing so, she created works that, as Judd asserts, exist in the

¹⁹¹ Although she wrote seven reviews of Bontecou's work between 1962 and 1966, Ashton is much less often cited in discussions of Bontecou's work. However, in a 2004 interview Bontecou mentions Ashton as one of the few critics with whom she agreed. Lee Bontecou, 2004 interview by Alan Artner, unpaginated. See note 147.

¹⁹² Ashton, "Magic and Fantasy," 29.

¹⁹³ Munro, 384.

space between painting and sculpture. However, while fulfilling this requirement of Judd's specific objects in a variety of ways, her reliefs at the same time break many of the carefully enumerated strictures of his famous essay particularly in terms of their illusionism.

According to Judd, the key to an object's specificity is its ability to avoid references beyond its physical structure. Whether that be through (1) eschewing the set forms of painting and sculpture, which carry the baggage of those acculturated traditions; (2) using materials new to the context of art; or (3) avoiding illusion in favor of actual space, each of his artistic strategies represents a means for removing any allusions. The most basic of these exclusions is the circumvention of formal characteristics that might suggest associations to aspects of the world other than that particular object's concrete form or, even worse in his view, intended metaphorical content. As has been mentioned, Judd sought to avoid the conventions of traditional painting and sculpture as a means to avoid constructing artistic forms as repositories for meaning. In particular, Judd abhorred anthropomorphic allusions. However, in a moment of striking contradiction, he posited some of the most enduring examples of anthropomorphic readings of Bontecou's forms. He writes:

The image extends from something as social as war to something as private as sex, making one an aspect of the other. ... Black orificial washers are attached to some pieces; some have bandsaw blades within the mouth. This redoubt is a *mons Veneris*. "The warhead will be mated at the firing position." The image also extends from bellicosity, both martial and psychological—aspects which do not equate—to invitation, erotic and psychological, and deathly as well.¹⁹⁴

This statement, perhaps the most quoted passage in Bontecou scholarship, would seem to contradict Judd's categorization of her reliefs as specific objects that deflect interpretations

¹⁹⁴ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 179. This was written in his 1965 review of Bontecou's work, which was published in April several months before his "Specific Objects." However, Meyer, who interviewed Judd about his famous essay, notes that "Specific Objects" was originally drafted in 1964.

involving associations to anything other than the work's actual form. When he describes the central hole as the "mouth" of the work; the washers as "orificial;" and the protruding structure of the relief as a "mons Veneris" (literally hill of Venus), the form itself assumes a human persona: it is both "bellicose" and "inviting."¹⁹⁵ In Judd's reading, Bontecou's works are suffused with allusions to the human body and human presence, the very things that he decried.

Judd, however, makes a distinction between the traditional use of anthropomorphism, to which he objects, and Bontecou's "anthropomorphic image." He writes:

Three-dimensional work [specific objects] usually doesn't involve ordinary *anthropomorphic* imagery [my italics]. If there is a reference it is single and explicit. In any case the chief interests are obvious. Each of Bontecou's reliefs is an image.... The nature of Bontecou's single image is not so different from that of images which occurred in a small way in semi-abstract painting. The image is primarily a single emotive one, which alone wouldn't resemble the old imagery so much, but to which internal and external references have been added.¹⁹⁶

According to Judd, since Bontecou's reliefs do not explicitly describe any human anatomical parts or characteristics through their forms, these connotations are merely idiosyncratic and personal associations, but are not intrinsic to the forms themselves. He continues, noting that "the image does suggest other things, but by analogy; the image is one thing among similar things."¹⁹⁷ This obtuse statement is somewhat clarified by a comment Judd makes in a 1967 interview, when he argues that "a lot of things look alike but they're not necessarily much alike."¹⁹⁸ In other words, for Judd, resemblance is not always a failure to exclude the extrinsic. As long as the shared characteristics are not too blatant or intentional, he tacitly condones such associations. However, by mitigating his earlier strictures against symbolic content or other

¹⁹⁵ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 179.

¹⁹⁶ Judd, 188.

¹⁹⁷ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 178.

¹⁹⁸ "Questions to Stella and Judd," 163.

constructions of meaning, Judd makes Bontecou's work an exception to his formulation of the non-allusive specificity of the object.¹⁹⁹ As such, her reliefs become a qualifying example and the avoidance of references other than their concrete form becomes a matter of degree, and so directly contradicts his argument for the specific nature of the objects he discusses.

Despite Judd's efforts to downplay the allusions, associations or subject matter other than physical structure in Bontecou's reliefs, her work, like that of the abstract expressionists, does involve a level of symbolic or allusive content. By again considering Bontecou's work from the alternate perspective of abstract expressionism, one can see how mythic references are basic to her form. Unlike Judd's specific objects, in abstract expressionist works associational content is invited and sought. In a 1943 letter to the editor of the *New York Times* signed by Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb and partially ghost-written by Barnett Newman, these artists articulate the basic importance of subject matter to their artistic production.

It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academicism. There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.²⁰⁰

From this very direct statement, one can see that, as opposed to the Greenbergian formalist interpretation of abstract expressionism as a formal and media-specific innovation, content was imperative. In his *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, Polcari characterizes the major themes of abstract expressionist subject matter by grouping them into four categories: "the return to origins," "the human continuum," "conflict and the dualistic pattern of human life," and

¹⁹⁹ Judd, "Claus Oldenburg," 189.

²⁰⁰ "Rothko and Gottlieb's letter to the editor, 1943," in *Mark Rothko: Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 36.

“new beginnings, creativity, potency, change and transformation.”²⁰¹ The unifying component of these four major themes, which were shaped by a variety of artistic, philosophical, literary, and anthropological theories and writings, is a search for universals.²⁰²

Bontecou does not intend to explore in her works the same subjects as the abstract expressionists. However, her reliefs do incorporate similar references to some of their works—primarily that of the void. Works like Pollock’s *The Deep* (1953, figure 32) and Newman’s *Pagan Void* (1946, figure 33), which were more explicitly concerned with creating a concrete image that symbolized or explored the origins of human kind, share similar imagery with many of her reliefs. In a review of Bontecou’s work written in 1963, Ashton interpreted the voids as an image of the over-arching human desire and search for origins:

The circularity of Bontecou’s central shapes can be seen as an inspired evocation of a deep-seated human hunger for the *axis mundi*, the central point around which the cosmos circulates. Her image recalls Mircea Elidae who has written so persuasively of the symbolic importance of the center, the consecrated point on which all so-called primitive mythologies are based. It is at this point, this cosmic space-qualifier, that the three cosmic regions—heaven, earth and hell—inevitably meet in all legends.²⁰³

Ashton is quick to admit that this somewhat grandiose associational content is not part of Bontecou’s stated intentions, but rather that “the intensity of her expressions and the currents of authenticity that one feels so strongly lead one to sense for a moment the depth and inexpressible sources of her imagery.”²⁰⁴ In a statement published in the exhibition catalog for curator Dorothy C. Miller’s *Americans 1963*, Bontecou wrote:

I’m afraid that I am rather vague about expressing philosophies of art and especially about my own work. I can only say that I do not know if what I am doing is

²⁰¹ Polcari, “Chapter 2: Propraedeutics: the Intellectual Roots of Abstract Expressionism,” in *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 33-34.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 31-56.

²⁰³ Ashton, “Illusion and Fantasy,” 29.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

art nor do I have any real concern. I just want to do what I believe and what I want to do, and what I must do to get what I want—something that is natural and exists in us all.

My 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 exist in us all and which hangs over all the young people today. The individual is welcome to see and feel in them what he wishes in terms of himself.²⁰⁵

In contrast to Ashton's interpretation, Bontecou's own discussion of her work suggests a more political message, particularly in her mention of the "fear" that "hangs over all young people today"—a fairly direct reference to the Cold War and the nuclear threat. However, Bontecou's assertion that she wants "something natural" that "exists in us all" does hint at the abstract expressionist search for universals, although her statement as a whole avoids any explicit theoretical implications or mythic overtones.²⁰⁶ She wants to "express our relation" to "other worlds" and to provide a "glimpse" of the "fear, hope, ugliness, beauty and mystery" that is a part of life in "this world." Although not acknowledging any specific subject matter, Bontecou's statement contradicts Judd's devaluation of metaphorical content and clearly demonstrates her intent to communicate some form of meaning, however ambiguous, other than the positivistic experience of the her reliefs' physical structure.

²⁰⁵ Bontecou quoted in *Americans 1963*, ed., Dorothy C. Miller (New York: MoMA, 1963), 12.

²⁰⁶ Polcari has suggested that the New York School, a group of artists that constitute the second generation of abstract expressionists, exhibit a similar distance from the explicit theories of the original abstract expressionists [Polcari, "Chapter 12: Vernacular Abstraction: The Domestication of Abstract Expressionism," in *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 359-362]. According to Polcari, they favor a more naïve and anti-intellectual exploration of personal emotions (Polcari, "Chapter 12," 359-362). This distance from explicit theories about psychology, human origins, or mythology, as Polcari argues, was connected to the pervasiveness of Sartrean existentialist philosophy (Polcari, "Chapter 12," 354-359). By the late '50s this philosophy had become a part of popular culture; one did not have to actually read Sartre's writings in order to be familiar with its general concepts. In fact, existentialist ideas were so prevalent that the 1957 musical film *Funny Face* parodies Sartrean existentialist ideas with the character Dr. Emile Flostre and his philosophy of empathicalism. Themes like personal freedom, and the role of choice in constituting ones identity were Sartrean existentialist ideas that served as a largely unacknowledged theoretical backing for many artists at the time (Polcari, "Chapter 12," 356-357). Bontecou's emphasis on the individual forming their own interpretation of her objects and the vital freedom of the artist should be considered within this context of the culturally naturalized Sartrean existentialism. This area of study presents an interesting possibility for future research.

Bontecou's forms uniquely achieve some aspects of Judd's concept of the particular specificity occurring in his objects. However, while her works align congruently with certain aspects of his ideas, they do so by contradicting many of his assertions. Her forms do not constitute a complete break with other more traditional or historical understandings of art making, although they do re-present many earlier concepts in a new and open-ended manner. Rather than being "neither painting nor sculpture," her work's structure and materials embody and recontextualize aspects of both. Also, contrary to Judd's view of the specific object as removing illusionistic imagery, illusion and image—two basic elements of painting—are seamlessly combined in her relief works with an "actual" three-dimensional form. Judd, himself, makes Bontecou's work an exception to his own strictures when he describes the anthropomorphic allusions of her reliefs. Instead, the more metaphorical and allusive content of her work agrees with the abstract expressionist emphasis on symbolic content as integral to form. Through her synthesis of painting and sculpture—which includes not only her unique structure and use of materials, but also her incorporation of illusionistic imagery with its attendant exterior associations ranging from Palladian stage sets and bodily orifices, to more amorphous visuals that connote a search for human origins—Bontecou's work exists in an in-between space.

This consideration of Bontecou's early reliefs as specific objects is not intended to refute Judd's interpretation. Rather it is meant, through a close reading of both Judd's influential writings and Bontecou's early work, to expand and nuance his discussion of these forms. However, given the aforementioned contradictions with Judd's concepts, Bontecou's work should not be understood as only proto-minimalist. As has been shown, her early reliefs, which were made during a time of change and flux in contemporary art, are transitional works that can

be understood from several conflicting perspectives that represent different layers of historical time. In Koselleck's view:

Again and again one is faced with the aporia that enduring formal criteria are themselves historically conditioned and remain applicable only to phenomena that can be historically delimited.²⁰⁷

Thus, the different "formal criteria" of Judd's specific objects and abstract expressionism must be interpreted as historical views that can only be fully understood within the context of their own particular historical time. Even though Judd's analysis highlights important aspects of Bontecou's forms, it is important to note that his interpretation was made in accord with the new stylistic approach he was then developing, and which was influential to the stylistic category now called minimalism. Looking back at Bontecou's forms that had already been created, and were, in many ways, inspired by the previous reigning style of abstract expressionism, which involves a different set of "historically conditioned formal criteria," Judd reinterpreted these works according to his own distinctive and radically new critical and historical perspective. By understanding Bontecou's reliefs in terms of both the temporal layers of early minimalism and late abstract expressionism, one is able to place them within the very different art historical contexts in which they were made and exhibited. These opposing perspectives underscore the dynamism of the artistic climate in the late '50s and early '60s. As has been shown, Bontecou's forms should not be viewed as ancillary to minimalism; instead, they occupy an influential and transitional space in the rapidly changing art of that time.

The following chapter will continue this analysis of Bontecou's forms and their art historical context by exploring the broader popular and political scene in which her work was

²⁰⁷ Koselleck, "On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of Art History," 3.

made as proposed by Mona Hadler. In doing so it will place her art within the milieu of the anxiety and expectation of the Cold War

Chapter 3: The Social and Historical Context of Lee Bontecou's Early Reliefs

Bontecou describes main influences on her work in terms of an ambiguous merging of “wonders and horrors.” She explains:

Since my early years until now, the natural world and its visual wonders and horrors—man-made devices with their mind-boggling engineering feats and destructive abominations, elusive human nature and its multiple ramifications from the sublime to unbelievable abhorrence—to me are all one. It is in this spirit that the primary influences on my work have occurred.²⁰⁸

As her statement attests, Bontecou does not adopt a definitive judgment of the world, but rather revels in its ambiguity. Although her work does not establish a clearly defined political position, Mona Hadler argues that Bontecou's early reliefs are fundamentally connected to the diverse social issues of the late '50s and early '60s. While the previous chapters of this thesis investigate Bontecou's art in terms of two different layers of historical time that are both part of the dynamic mid-twentieth century New York artistic scene, Hadler's social art historical interpretation places Bontecou's work within the very different space of contemporaneous United States politics and popular culture. Even though Hadler's perspective is different from Seitz's and Judd's, and even though her analysis is more typically art historical than Seitz's curatorial writing and Judd's critical essays, this thesis does not privilege her interpretation over the other temporal layers that have been explored. Like Seitz's and Judd's perspectives, Hadler's analysis of Bontecou's reliefs and their context in mid-century American culture is developed as an equally valid possible history.

²⁰⁸ Bontecou, Artist Statement, 12.

According to Koselleck, history “from that which is experienced to that which is scientifically digested, is always realized within social and personal perspectives that both contain and create meaning.”²⁰⁹ Thus, Hadler’s contextual analysis, which investigates Bontecou’s professed social perspective within the artist’s own contemporary culture, provides the basis for an interpretation of her early reliefs in terms of how they accrue meaning from several of the different cultural contexts in which they were made, including temporal layers comprised of certain political issues and popular culture events occurring in the ‘50s and ‘60s. As such Hadler’s interpretation can be understood only in terms of the specific “space of experience” and “horizon of expectations” of the historical time she describes: hence, in a basic way Hadler’s perspective is developed in accordance with past events and views. She historicizes Bontecou’s art by placing it within a particular time and place that has already been overtaken by the historical force of time. Even though, Koselleck would view Hadler’s perspective as also having the potential to become a historical document as times passes by, this thesis will not consider her work as historical in the same manner as Judd’s and Seitz’s since their views can be understood as primary sources in terms of their direct observation of their contemporary artistic climate.

In other words, Hadler’s perspective and that of the art historians and critics following her lead is different from that of Seitz’s and Judd’s respective theorizations of assemblage and specific objects because her view is retrospective rather than embedded. Unlike Seitz’s consideration of a current mode of art or Judd’s anticipatory view that looks ahead toward a new stylistic trend, Hadler’s approach is necessarily removed from the time in which Bontecou made

²⁰⁹ Koselleck, “Perspective and Temporality: A Contribution to the Historiographical Exposure of the Historical World,” in *Future’s Past*, 138.

her early reliefs. Although her perspective is not embedded in the same chronological time and place as Seitz's and Judd's, Hadler uses Bontecou's embedded viewpoint to help ground her analysis in the temporal layer she explores. This interpretive focus on Bontecou's stated intentions situates the artist's perspective as yet another perspectival view, rather than a privileged understanding. This usage does not make Hadler's statements more correct than those of Seitz or Judd: rather, each constitutes a different and equivalently credible possible history. As such Hadler's interpretation can be viewed in terms of a past-continuous perspective: Bontecou's works are discussed as they-were-being-made, rather than in terms of Seitz's present-conditional perspective approach to works when-they-are-being-made or Judd's future-perfect consideration of when they will-have-been-made. Consequently, the velocity of the time Hadler describes is necessarily different from that of her vantage point. While the historical layer of time she discusses, and in which Bontecou participated, is fast moving and punctuated by new trends in popular culture and continuous Cold War challenges, Hadler's own perspective is much slower and more deliberate than contemporaneous events since she looks back from a later time and can more leisurely choose those aspects of the '50s and '60s that she views most influential for Bontecou. Although her approach is informed by the hindsight of the last three decades, Hadler's interpretation provides an account of a layer of historical time that is consonant with several of the original contexts in which Bontecou's work was created and then assumed meaning.

Hadler develops her contextual analysis of Bontecou's forms in four essays written from 1992 to 2007.²¹⁰ Although the articles focus on different aspects of Bontecou's oeuvre, each

²¹⁰ Hadler, "Heart of a Conquering Darkness," 39-44, see note 87; Hadler, "Warnings," 56-61, see note 32; Hadler, "Lee Bontecou's Worldscapes," in *Lee Bontecou a Retrospective*, ed. Elizabeth A. T. Smith (New Haven: Yale

shares the premise that the politics and popular culture of the time were important sources for the artist and that her work “conveys a strong political message articulated by the forms themselves.”²¹¹ In support of this view Hadler builds an iconographic interpretation of Bontecou’s art where the structures, shapes, and materials of her early reliefs are associated with images and themes of the politics and popular culture of the ‘50s and ‘60s. However, even though Hadler asserts that her interpretation is “not simply a case of discovering another iconographic source for ...[Bontecou’s] imagery, nor of reducing her complex artistic process to one of influence or to a conscious political agenda,” this approach does tend to limit the work to single deterministic political evaluations.²¹² Hadler partially counteracts the deterministic conclusions of iconographic analysis by proposing multiple readings based on different aspects of the politics and popular culture of the time. Frequently she situates Bontecou’s art in terms of ongoing oppositions, which she terms an “an art of contrasts.”²¹³ She describes Bontecou’s forms as “organic-mechanical” and as conflating “the chthonic prehistoric with the visionary cosmic.”²¹⁴ For Hadler, the “oppositional language” of Bontecou’s works “transcend dichotomies of the cosmic and terrestrial, infinite and finite, technological and natural, hopeful and brutal.”²¹⁵ Furthermore, according to Hadler, the “oppositional language” of Bontecou’s art is congruent with the general social and political situation of the late ‘50’s and early ‘60s.²¹⁶

University Press, 2003), 200-211; Hadler, “Lee Bontecou: Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades,” *Women’s Art Journal* 28/1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 11-18.

²¹¹ Hadler, “Heart of a Conquering Darkness,” 39.

²¹² Hadler, “Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades,” 15.

²¹³ Hadler, “Warnings,” 57.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58; Hadler, “Worldscapes,” 205.

²¹⁵ Hadler, “Worldscapes,” 209. Hadler writes, “The complexity of its [*Untitled* (1961)’s] effect stems from its oppositional language, embodying many of the dichotomies present in her oeuvre. It encompasses characteristics of both painting and sculpture; interior and exterior forms; organic and inorganic materials... There is a constant play between interior and exterior, light and shade, near and far.” Hadler, “Heart of a Conquering Darkness,” 39.

²¹⁶ Hadler, “Heart of a Conquering Darkness,” 39. See note 215.

“The marvels of space,” she writes, “along with a pronounced military component—the memory of the carnage of World War II, the menace of the Cold War arm’s race, and the growing fear of nuclear devastation—pervaded the age.” Hadler also notes, “Bontecou’s work embodies the paradox of the space-age, especially in her pairing of the cosmic and the brutal.”²¹⁷

The different “spaces of experience” and the concomitant “horizons of expectations” of the time that Hadler describes are characterized by extreme conflicts. Bontecou’s generation grew up during the Great Depression and World War II, but came of age at a time of unheard of prosperity in post-war America. Thus, their experiences ranged from periods of great sacrifice and violence to other times of unprecedented luxury. During the Cold War, the United States seemed to be approaching a “space-age,” representing great technological advances coupled with unprecedented prosperity, but the period was threatened, at the same time, by nuclear devastation.²¹⁸

Quoting artist Joseph Cornell, who was an admirer and correspondent of Bontecou’s, Hadler characterizes her black-mouthed voids as “warnings” to the world against the terrible prospect of nuclear annihilation that mid-twentieth century America faced during the Cold War.²¹⁹ She cites the mass of post-apocalyptic movies, which responded to the “nuclear anxiety

²¹⁷ Hadler, “Worldscapes,” 202.

²¹⁸ The term ‘space-age’ denotes the period of American emphasis on space exploration following the Soviets’ successful launch of Sputnik in 1957. According to popular culture historian Thomas Hine, “The immediate reaction to the national bout of insecurity touched off by the launching of Sputnik was overwhelming. ...The United States starting building bigger rockets and launching lots of satellites, of course, and by the early 1960s, these satellites began to have a direct impact on the lives of ordinary people. ...Even before satellites provided any services to the average American family, they had an impact on home decoration and product design...” [Hine, *Populux* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 131]. Although, it is difficult to trace the precise origin of the term “space-age” it was part of popular advertising language as early as 1958. Hine, 129.

²¹⁹ Hadler, “Warnings,” 56. Cornell wrote, “In other days there were the ‘mouth of truth’ and the lion’s mouths of the 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.” Joseph Cornell, file entry on Lee Bontecou, February 1, 1962, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[and] formed the subject of nearly a thousand films from 1945 to the present, with 1958 representing the peak year for bomb films,” as a backdrop for the menacing depths of Bontecou’s voids.²²⁰ Art historian Kristen Swenson continues this logic noting that,

Bontecou’s sculptures of the early 1960s corresponded to an extreme moment in cold war tension...In these uneasy times, politicians were pushing for more bomb shelters in response to elevated weapons testing by the Soviet Union, the United States, and other countries.²²¹

Hadler and Swenson connected Bontecou’s early reliefs to apprehensions surrounding the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962 when a nuclear attack on the United States came closer to occurring than ever before.

However, as Hadler observes, Bontecou’s works not only reflect the Cold War anxieties, but also the hopes and achievements of the time. The newly expanded quest for knowledge of outer space, following the Soviet’s successful 1957 launch of Sputnik I that prompted the race to the moon, was presented in terms of technological advancement leading to a better society.

President Kennedy expresses the great hopes for scientific achievement in his 1962 “Address on the Space Effort,” stating:

We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people. For space science, like nuclear science and all technology, has no conscience of its own. Whether it will become a force for good or ill depends on man, and only if the United States occupies a position of pre-eminence can we help decide whether this new ocean will be a sea of peace or a new terrifying theater of war. ...space can be explored and mastered without feeding the fires of war, without repeating the mistakes that man has made in extending his writ around this globe of ours.²²²

²²⁰ Hadler, “Worldscapes,” 204.

²²¹ Kristen Swenson, “‘Like War Equipment. With Teeth’: Lee Bontecou’s Steel-and-Canvas Reliefs,” *American Art* 17/3 (Autumn 2003): 74.

²²² Kennedy, “Address on the Space Effort (September 12, 1962),” in University of Virginia Miller Center of Public Affairs Presidential Speech Archive, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3371> (accessed August 12, 2009).

Even though embarked upon in a time of fear that was in many ways caused by the increasingly devastating power of technology, particularly advances in space exploration and armaments coupled with Cold War politics, the space effort was characterized by faith in science. Bontecou's images of endless voids can be seen in terms of the new and exciting possibilities of space exploration that Hadler describes:

When asked to elaborate on her experience of the launch of Sputnik... [Bontecou] recalls the poetic imagery, the blackness of space, the vastness of the heavens...which prompted her to conceive of the worldscapes, with their velvety black drawings that developed into small black boxes ...²²³

As Hadler suggests, there are many parallels between Bontecou's sculptures and drawings of deep voids and the new understanding of the vacuum of space.²²⁴ Seemingly endless black depths confront viewers with an illusion of the emptiness of space. Some of Bontecou's earliest reliefs, which she called "worldscapes," even contain planet-like spheres within their void-like interiors, while in drawings like *Untitled* (1962) the black is punctuated by a single star-like point of light (figures 34, 35).²²⁵ When viewed in terms of the new emphasis on outer space, Bontecou's reliefs can be considered more optimistically; they become mysterious rather than menacing. As Hadler demonstrates, both the more hopeful excitement for the possibilities of space exploration and the potentially devastating outcomes of nuclear war are part of the context in which Bontecou's forms were made and in which they accrue meaning.

However, despite Hadler's emphasis on Bontecou's "art of contrasts" and its embodiment of the paradoxical political and social context in which the works were made, her analysis never fully articulates the contrasting and multivalent construction of meaning in Bontecou's reliefs.

²²³ Hadler, "Worldscapes," 203.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

²²⁵ Hadler, "Heart of a Conquering Darkness," 39.

Thus, in order to extend Hadler's groundbreaking analysis of Bontecou's forms, it is necessary to define and explore further the different modes of Bontecou's so-called "oppositional language." Rather than simply describing Bontecou's work as "paradoxical" or "contrasting," this chapter will reconsider the specific ways in which Bontecou's art is composed of oppositions and contrasts that create a fundamental ambiguity in the work. Likewise, instead of referring to a general "political message" or "complexity of messages," this reconsideration will propose several particular and often opposing political interpretations that co-exist in the form and thus create a field of possible meanings that interact forming ambiguous tensions in the work.

We can advance the literary analogy Hadler makes when she refers to the "oppositional language" of Bontecou's forms and develops a valuable tool for extending her analysis by citing literary critic William Empson's theorization of ambiguity. His consideration exhorts a flexibility from the term that lends itself to investigating the dynamic construction of meaning in this work. Although his approach is representative of New Criticism,²²⁶ Empson's articulation of how ambiguity functions can be used without situating the term within the modernist ideology of that school of thought, which runs counter to Hadler's analysis. Rather than accepting New Criticism's view that all possible meanings are already inherent in the formal structure of a work

²²⁶ The scholar and poet John Crowe Ransom first used the term "New Criticism" in his 1941 book *The New Criticism*. This school of critical thought avoids interpretations that base meaning on anything outside the work of art including the biography of the artist, social history etc. Ransom writes, "... the new criticism is damaged by at least two specific errors of theory, which are widespread. One is the idea of using psychological affective vocabulary in the hope of making literary judgments in terms of feelings, emotions, and attitudes of poems instead of in terms of their objects. The other is plane moralism which in the new criticism would indicate that it has not emancipated itself from the old..." [Ransom, preface to *The New Criticism* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), xi]. For advocates of the New Criticism the construction of meaning is inherent in the work of art. According to Ransom, modern poets who adhere to the ideals of new criticism "are committed to an unprecedented degree of indeterminateness in the meaning" of works of art (334). This indeterminateness is "of the positive sort" and is achieved directly and intentionally (333).

of art, this thesis will proceed from a readerly perspective and will elaborate on Hadler's interpretation of Bontecou's early reliefs and the cultural context in which they were created.²²⁷

Empson provides a clear articulation of the "ambiguity of 'ambiguity'" in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.²²⁸ In his expansive definition "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternate reactions to the same piece of language" can be considered ambiguous.²²⁹ He proceeds from the perspective that no word

...can be reduced to a finite number of points and if they could the points could not be conveyed in words. Thus a word may have several distinct meanings; several meanings connected with one another; several meanings which need one another to complete their meaning; or several meanings which unite together so that the word means one relation or one process.²³⁰

For Empson ambiguities are not the property of a single chain of logic, and so, rather than including only the relatively simple instance of expressing two meanings in a single word or symbol, his definition ranges from the type of pointed conflict of puns and allegories to the complicated interplay of alternate meanings expressed through both the conscious and

²²⁷ According to literary historian Jennifer Ashton in her discussion of the art and criticism of poet Laura (Riding) Jackson, who was opposed to the postmodern emphasis on the readerly accrual meaning in a work of art, ...it is not just the so-called "moral autonomy" of the poem that the [postmodern] language movement seeks to attack, but its ontological autonomy. ... Depriving a poem of that autonomy thus becomes a way of opening it to the agency of the reader.

... (Riding) Jackson's own commitment to the autonomy of the poem is also deeply opposed to the New Critical one. For from her perspective, the New Criticism's conception of autonomy [that all possible meanings were already inherent in the work] was never autonomous enough; it was always already too much like the loss of autonomy through readerly agency...[Jennifer Ashton, "Laura (Riding) Jackson and the New Criticism," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98].

Thus, as Ashton points out, the problematic issue of unchecked subjectivity exists in both Empson and company's theorization of the nearly infinite possibility of meaning in the autonomous work of art and what Ashton terms the "postmodern" perspective, which emphasizes the viewer's perspective. However, the so-called postmodern view seems to provide a better structure for corralling and analyzing possible meanings because it provides the additional data of the viewer's particular perspective as well as the information present in the work of art itself. Using Koelleck's theory of historical time the subjective perspective of a viewer can be considered as constituting a particular layer of time and used to develop a range of possible histories for a given subject.

²²⁸ Empson, *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984). First published in 1930.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²³⁰ Empson, 5.

unconscious combination of words, sentences and ideas to create situations that can be “fortunately confusing” or mark a full and intentional contradiction.²³¹ Although Empson’s definition is literary in origin and he viewed all meanings as anticipated by the work of art, thus ensuring its autonomy, his concept can be extended as a tool for interpreting visual ambiguities. Like words, colors, structures, materials, objects and images have a specific range of meanings or associations that effect the interpretation of the form, and the interplay of these semiotics create a wide range of possible meanings that depend on viewers’ knowledge and inclination.

Although Empson offers seven different defined types of ambiguity, the complicated interplay of meaning in Bontecou’s forms is best understood in terms of a distillation of three of these—Empson’s first, fourth and seventh types of ambiguity. In Empson’s first type “a detail is effective in several ways” such as “comparisons with several points of likeness” or “antithesis with several points of difference.”²³² What is of particular importance about this type is that it leaves “the reader vaguely [open] to invent something,” but does not make this invention an explicit part of the obvious meaning; rather it is left “at the back of his [or her] mind.”²³³

According to Empson’s fourth type, ambiguity occurs when “alternate meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author.”²³⁴ The following discussion will first enumerate these types before using them to analyze Bontecou’s work. In this type new meanings are created as two or more “sharply distinguished states of mind ...react with one another to

²³¹ Ibid, unpaginated.

²³² Empson, unpaginated.

²³³ Ibid, 23.

²³⁴ Empson, unpaginated.

produce something different.”²³⁵ This new understanding is often the result of a “fortunate confusion” of different interpretations.

In his seventh and most complex explanation, ambiguity occurs when two alternate meanings that are expressed by a single word, sentence or symbol are opposites “as defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division.”²³⁶ Empson notes that the notion of ‘opposites’ is particularly amorphous and hard to define because “it corresponds to nothing in the real world.”²³⁷ Instead a pair of opposites becomes a mental scale that is based on a particular context and can “be extended between any two points, though no two points are in themselves opposites.”²³⁸ However, once set up as opposites the two distinct meanings produce an intensity of conflict that Empson then compares to “a check pattern” where “neither colour is the ground on which the other is placed.”²³⁹ For him the conflict of opposites is “at once an indecision and a structure;” it causes a state of “equilibrium” between the two meanings.”²⁴⁰ Although Empson delimits these three types of ambiguity into separate categories, there is a lot of slippage between them. His distinctions of these types allow his reader to arrive at clearer explanations of their individual structures, even though no one type fully excludes the others.

Using Empson’s categories of ambiguity will enable the following discussion to undertake a more detailed analysis of the multivalent constructions of meanings in Bontecou’s forms and their relationship to the politics and popular culture at the time of their making. This

²³⁵ Ibid, 150.

²³⁶ Empson, 192.

²³⁷ Ibid, 192.

²³⁸ Empson, 192.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ He writes, “Even when there is a more serious difference between the two meanings, it often does not matter which of the two ‘opposites’ is taken [as the correct meaning], because the sentence already contains a paradox which includes both of them. For these and similar reasons, poetry has a surprising amount of equilibrium.” Empson, 203.

analysis will also extend Hadler's by proposing new correlations between Bontecou's art and aspects of the late '50s and early '60s social scene including the mechanisms of consumer culture and the arms race as well as other political and social concerns. Key to expanding and enriching Hadler's historical perspective will be a consideration of how the multivalent associations of Bontecou's early reliefs in terms of how the time in which they were made collaborates in establishing a dynamic mixing of meanings, with no one interpretation being a single determinate. Instead of attempting to resolve this fluid state into a static conclusion, this chapter will look at Bontecou's work in terms of a horizon of possible interpretations that takes into account, not just this artist's particular perspective, but also a broader range of contemporary cultural concerns.

This analysis will begin with a discussion of Bontecou's works in the contradictory context of the growing consumer culture and social issues pertaining to newly developed modes of design and advertising. The mechanisms of the Cold War are inseparable from this burgeoning consumerism and the United States' economic dominance following World War II. Frequently described in relation to weaponry and aggression, Bontecou's forms, as the second section of this analysis will demonstrate, reference the paradox of the arms race. While her imagery connotes aggression, it simultaneously alludes to a disquieting sexuality; the third contextual facet that this chapter explores will consequently look at the indeterminate relationship between Bontecou's reliefs and the re-emergence of feminism in the early '60s. Finally, while continuing to suggest both the threat of nuclear annihilation and the possibilities of space exploration, that Hadler advances, this chapter will also consider how Bontecou's forms can be understood in terms of the growing environmental concerns of the era. Using Hadler's

research as a basis, this analysis will demonstrate how Bontecou's early reliefs occupy an ambiguous space among the "wonders and horrors" of the period.

Following World War II, Americans experienced a period of unheard of economic growth. Born in 1931, Bontecou began her professional career as an artist in the postwar era in the midst of this great prosperity. However, her reliefs stage an ambiguous conflict between the growing consumer culture of the United States and the increasing wastefulness that it entailed. As Hine notes, the wartime industries that brought the United States out of the depression were smoothly transferred to a postwar consumer-based economy.²⁴¹ He states:

Productivity rose at a rate of better than two percent a year for most of the decade after World War II. American industry was using half the world's steel and oil. American consumers were able to buy three-quarters of the cars and appliances on earth. Real income, after very modest inflation, was on the rise. Indeed by 1953, the average income per person was half again the figure in 1929, and although the special conditions of the war made comparisons difficult, it is clear that nearly all this growth occurred after 1945.²⁴²

The rapid growth of the economy initiated the new problem of sustaining it. Once a family already had a car, refrigerator, toaster and lawnmower, the incentive to buy more had to be created. Endangered by a lack of want, as design historian John Heskett notes, manufacturers, retailers and advertisers responded to this dilemma by creating new markets and products that helped to establish ongoing desires that would sustain and even enhance current levels of production; this was accomplished in a large part through advertising and design.²⁴³

As cultural historian Giles Slade has cogently argued, a key figure who pioneered this new relationship between design and advertising is the entrepreneur and designer Brook Stevens,

²⁴¹ Hine, 15.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁴³ John Heskett, "The Desire for the New: The Context of Brook Steven's Career," in *Industrial Strength Design: How Brook Stevens Shaped Your World*, ed., Glenn Adamson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 3.

who popularized the term “planned obsolescence.”²⁴⁴ Put simply, planned obsolescence is a marketing and product design concept that encourages new venues for goods through a variety of means. Although the term was used as early as 1932, Slade asserts that Stevens made it a vital part of the postwar American economy.²⁴⁵ Stevens defined planned obsolescence as a tool for inspiring “the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little bit sooner than is necessary.”²⁴⁶ However, the term actually encompassed several different strategies that are most clearly described in Vance Packard’s *The Waste Makers* (1960), a pointed critique of this new economic motivator. Packard writes:

The phrase “planned obsolescence” has different meanings to different people. Thus many people are not necessarily defending deliberate shoddy construction when they utter strong defenses of obsolescence in business ... we should refine the situation by distinguishing three different ways that products can be made obsolescent...

Obsolescence of function: In this situation an existing product becomes outmoded when a product is introduced that performs the function better.

Obsolescence of quality: Here, when it is planned, a product breaks or wears out at a given time, usually not too distant.

Obsolescence of desirability: In this situation a product that is still sound in terms of quality or performance becomes “worn out” in our minds because a styling or other change makes it seem less desirable.²⁴⁷

Marketing the idea of planned obsolescence to both consumers and industries through brochures and articles with titles like “The Great Strides of Industrial Design are Yet to Come Through Planned Obsolescence” (1953) Steven’s proposal proved both influential and lucrative. As Slade

²⁴⁴ Giles Slade, “The Fifties and Sixties,” in *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 152; Heskett, 1-2.

²⁴⁵ Slade, 152-3; Heskett, 4. The term ‘planned obsolescence’ is first recorded in print in 1932. It was used by a Manhattan real estate broker Bernard London in his pamphlet *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*. Slade, 72-73.

²⁴⁶ Brook Stevens, untitled brochure (1953) quoted in Heskett, 4; Slade, 153.

²⁴⁷ Vance Packard, “Progress Through Planned Obsolescence” in *The Waste Makers* (New York, David McKay Company, 1960), 54-55.

concludes, the practice of regularly updating products, often without material improvement, became widespread.²⁴⁸

The stylistic changes resulting from the practical application of planned obsolescence included, as Hine observes, a new space-age style characterized by curving organic forms that resembled the aerodynamic bodies of planes as well as the spindly and irregular forms of satellites.²⁴⁹ Hine further articulates this space-age component of '50s design by noting how it became more pronounced after the successful launch of Sputnik, but had roots in earlier World War II technologies, including, in particular, jet planes.²⁵⁰ As both Hadler and Hine assert, much of '50s automotive design was based on warplanes and jets. For example, Hine points out that the aerodynamic shape of the Lockheed P-38 Lightning, a World War II fighter jet, inspired the tail fin, an iconic element of '50s automotive design, on such cars as the 1958 Buick Riviera Coup (figures 36, 37).²⁵¹ Likewise, he notes how the more angular shape of the 1955 Plymouth Belvedere echoed the form of the Douglas F-4D Skyray, named for its distinctive, manta-ray-like shape (38, 39).²⁵² As this space-age look developed, it moved farther from its formal connection with aerodynamic designs and become more biomorphic. As Hine observes, cars began to appear as if they had faces; headlights became eyes and their elaborate grills were big toothy grins.²⁵³ Eventually, as art historian Kristina Wilson makes clear, the originally functional

²⁴⁸ Heskett, 4; Hine also notes that, "... the automakers were well aware of the disappearance of the seller's market for automobiles which had begun immediately after the war... the overall number of cars sold stopped increasing. ... The great expansion of the auto market was over, as nearly everyone who needed one had one. The automakers were faced with the challenge of selling automobiles to people who didn't really need them. Thus, they depended on styling to make people desire the car..." Hine, 84.

²⁴⁹ Hine, 83-85, 131-2.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-89.

²⁵¹ Hine, 83-4.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 85-87.

²⁵³ Hine, 96.

aerodynamic forms became stylistic additions on household products with no need for streamlining such as irons and refrigerators (figures 40, 41).²⁵⁴

Hadler argues that the structures of Bontecou's work share this space-age aesthetic. In Bontecou's reliefs, Hadler sees "remnants of fighter planes morph into swelling avian shapes that are ... close to the bulging futuristic design of the late fifties automobile, with its omnipresent tail fin."²⁵⁵ Although Hadler offers no specific examples, when one looks closely at Bontecou's forms, their similarities to '50s aeronautic and automotive designs become apparent. Her intricate framing of the central void in *Untitled* (1960, figure 28) resembles the elaborate taillights of cars like General Motor's 1959 Eldorado Convertible (figure 42). Inset into the body of the car multiple rims around the taillight echo the repetition of the many frames encircling the work's interior void. Similarly, the central form in a large circular graphite drawing from 1963 (figure 43) shares the rocket-like front of a 1951 Studebaker (figure 44). In the drawing two circular shaded areas seem to project light like headlights as they bracket the rounded central shape, mirroring the bulbous curves of the Studebaker. Even the grates that cover hidden mouths in *Untitled* (1961, figure 45) resemble the elaborate toothy grills of such cars as the 1950 Jaguar XK-120 (figure 46).

Likewise, the unique fusion of geometric and curvilinear in Bontecou's forms reference the fuselage and wingspan of airplanes. As Hadler's research demonstrates, Bontecou has a longstanding interest in aeronautic design. Bontecou remembers how she would often go to the

²⁵⁴ Kristina Wilson, "Brook Stevens, the Man in Your Life: Shaping the Domestic Sphere, 1935-50," in *Industrial Strength Design: How Brook Stevens Shaped Your World*, ed. Glenn Adamson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 2003), 13-17.

²⁵⁵ Hadler, "Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades," 13-14.

Idlewild airport to watch jets take off, and would build model airplanes in her spare time.²⁵⁶

Bontecou acknowledged, “I generally have an interest and a love, actually for airplanes. They’re sculpture flying in the air.”²⁵⁷ For Hadler, works like *Untitled* (1964, figure 47)—an over twenty-one foot mural at Lincoln Center’s Ballet Theater—conjures “both natural and mechanical notions of flight.”²⁵⁸ Seen from Hadler’s perspective, the sculpted, swooping curves of the relief houses three voids that may reference the shape of jet engine turbines. Although Hadler does not specifically mention another relief with aeronautic imagery, works like *Untitled* (1962, figure 17) resemble the fuselage surrounding a jet or rocket engine. Like a real turbine, the complex form appears to have been designed for airflow with strategic ventilation gaps between projecting forms. Although, like all Bontecou’s works from this period, it is constructed from materials that appear worn and old, the sleek sculpted form correlates well with the space-age aesthetic of the time.

In order to extend Hadler’s characterization of the affiliation of Bontecou’s reliefs with the space-age aesthetic of the time, one must also consider the dark side of the mid-twentieth-century prosperity and planned obsolescence. By the early ‘60s a great increase in waste, which corresponded with America’s growing consumerism, was becoming readily apparent. The topicality of the problem can be gauged by the fact that Packard’s *The Waste Makers* was a number one bestseller for six weeks in 1960.²⁵⁹ In humorous but troubling hyperbole, Packard describes an imaginary city of the future:

²⁵⁶ Tomkins, 40, see note 2; Hadler, “Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades,” 15.

²⁵⁷ Bontecou, interviewed by Michael Workman, “War Machines,” *Newcity Art* (February 19, 2004), <http://art.newcity.com/>.

²⁵⁸ “Young Sculptor Brings Jet Age to Lincoln Center: It’s Art, But Will it Fly?” *Life* 56/ 15 (1964): 43-44; Hadler, “Worldscapes,” 207; Swenson, “‘Like War Equipment. With Teeth’,” 78.

²⁵⁹ Slade, 162-3.

In Cornucopia City, as I understand it, all the buildings will be made of a special paper-mâche. These houses can be torn down and rebuilt every spring and fall at housecleaning time. The motorcars of Cornucopia will be made of a lightweight plastic that develops fatigue and begins to melt if driven more than four thousand miles ... Every Monday the people ... will stage a gala launching of a rocket into outer space at the local Air Force base. ... Wednesday ... [the] Navy will send a surplus warship to the city dock. It will be filled with surplus playsuits, cake mix, vacuum cleaners, and trampolines that have been stockpiled at the local United States Department of Commerce complex of warehouses for surplus products. The ship will go thirty miles out to sea, where the crew will sink it from a safe distance. The heart of Cornucopia City will be occupied by a titanic push-button super mart built to simulate fairyland. This is where all the people spend many happy hours a week strolling and buying to their heart's content.²⁶⁰

Packard's focus on the wasteful practices of the consumer economy in his book questions the true value of the new prosperity in which the growing range of consumer products is balanced by an equal increase in waste. Embedded in this culture, Bontecou's forms, as will be shown, present a complicated view of progress, consumerism and waste.

By re-presenting in her art materials salvaged and scavenged from cities such as worn canvas, saw blades, metal washers, and bits of pipe, Bontecou brings into focus the refuse of a wasteful society and thereby enacts an implicit critique of its over-consumption. These re-presented materials are transformed by their new context, but still inflect the overall reading of the work of art with the histories suggested by their prior uses. The scraps of fabric and other artifacts are not included readymade in the work of art, but are cut, welded and otherwise altered to fit into a new context. In addition to Bontecou's choice of materials, her construction highlights the wastefulness of planned obsolescence. Reliefs like *Untitled* (1959, figure 48) emphasize a handmade quality over the more popular slick industrial finish of the space-age aesthetic and seem built to last. Numerous "stitches" of wire hold the canvas to the frame; the repetition of the sutures highlight the amount of labor involved in the construction of these

²⁶⁰ Packard, 4-5.

forms. Her reliefs appear to have been salvaged or repaired—the opposite of the new emphasis on expendability and replacement in the consumer economy. Seams are patched, often more than once, creating layers of reconstruction. The histories of the materials like worn canvas and rusty saw blades combine with the composite forms’ suggested histories, and thus intensify the appearance of the forms having endured over time and having pasts outside the fine art context in which they typically are viewed. Bontecou’s use of discarded materials and adherence to a handmade aesthetic contrast sharply with the consumer culture that emphasized modern styling and continual updating.

A survivor of the Depression and World War II, Bontecou prided herself on making do with relatively little and avoiding waste. In 1977 she told an interviewer how she built her own plumbing in her first studio.²⁶¹ Because the loft was unheated, she drilled holes in the floor so that heat from the Laundromat below could rise through.²⁶² Bontecou considered the prosperity of the United States with a critical eye. Spending her summers in an area of Nova Scotia that was rural and poor, she took a jaundiced view of American luxury and rampant consumerism, stating,

I think I was lucky to get two perspectives on life: the American one ... and the Canadian one where ... people were very international even though they were fishermen and had absolutely nothing. In America everyone was loaded and had everything they wanted....²⁶³

These experiences and proclivities toward “making do” provide a vital context for the handmade and repaired appearance of her art. In combination with the aerodynamic look of many of her forms, their handmade construction and salvaged materials create a haunting discontinuity in her

²⁶¹ Munroe, 385.

²⁶² Ibid, 383.

²⁶³ Munro, 380.

work. Her reliefs celebrate the space-age aesthetic at the time that they critique the wasteful practices of the culture that produced it, and her art reveals the seductive shapes of the era, at the same time that it underscores their cost. Reflecting a complicated state of mind concerning the culture in which she lived, Bontecou's pairing of seeming opposites creates a powerful ambiguity or contradiction in her forms that oscillate between reveling in the creations of the space-age and criticizing its extravagance.

The rampant mid-twentieth-century consumer culture and its concomitant wastefulness was inextricably tied to the mechanisms of the Cold War. Noting that defense spending, which had reached massive proportions, was a major economic catalyst, Packard outlines how,

In 1959, when stock market prices dipped briefly after President Eisenhower announced that he was meeting with Russian Premier Khrushchev, some financial analysts reported that the dip was caused by 'peace jitters' among traders. ...On the other hand, in May 1960, when the Russian capture of the U-2 plane was followed by the collapse of the summit meeting, Wall Street stock-market prices advanced during seven successive days.²⁶⁴

Key to the rise in consumerism and consumer goods during the '50s, as Packard points out, was the bourgeois and American idea of shopping as a patriotic duty where each dollar spent was marketed as not just fulfillment of personal needs and wants but also as a sign of ones' confidence in America.²⁶⁵ Mainstream Americans viewed a strong economy as a viable defense against the Soviets. Describing this logic as "growthmanship," Packard notes how many politicians "pointed to the Russian claims of rapid growth as justification to increase its total output," thus propagating the idea that any output adds "to the military potential of the nation

²⁶⁴ Packard, 16.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 17-18. Also, curator and writer Jody Clowes writes, "Against the drab backdrop of Soviet-style communism, the twin joys of ownership and fashion were reconfigured as essential freedoms, and the pursuit of happiness increasingly suggested the pursuit of wealth and style." Clowes, "Ego-inspiring Styling and the American Dream," in *Industrial Strength Design: How Brook Stevens Shaped Your World*, ed., Glenn Adamson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 29.

whether it involves more deodorants, more hula hoops, more electric rotisseries, or more pinball machines.”²⁶⁶

In this climate planned obsolescence became an economic weapon; it was used both to expand the economy and the arms race. As Slade notes in his essay “Weaponizing Planned Obsolescence”:

...the arms race drew its strength from technological parity, as successive weapons systems rendered older systems dangerously obsolete and vulnerable to first strikes. Since Sputnik I, American military strategists had bet on the vitality of the American economy against the costly national restructuring required in a Soviet Union devastated by WWII. The Pentagon believed that by developing newer, more sophisticated, and more costly weapon systems as often as it could, the West could force the Soviets to overextend themselves economically.²⁶⁷

It was widely believed that the growing economy, along with the driving force of technological advance coupled with recurring obsolescence, would be a strong Cold War tactic. In his 1956 State of the Union Address, President Eisenhower stated:

In these days of unceasing technological advance we must plan our defense expenditures systematically and with care, fully recognizing that obsolescence compels the never-ending replacement of older weapons with newer ones.²⁶⁸

Thus, American military strength was deeply tied to its economic dominance and vice versa.

Viewed within the context of the Cold War, Bontecou’s imagery, which has often been described as aggressive and menacing, is related to this coupling of militarism and obsolescence albeit in a manner that is implicitly critical of the status quo rather than a mere ratification of it.

²⁶⁶ Packard, 20-21.

²⁶⁷ Slade, “Weaponizing Planned Obsolescence” in *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 232.

²⁶⁸ Eisenhower “State of the Union, 1956,” in AMDOCS: Documents for the Study of American History, <http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/texts/dde1956.htm> (accessed August, 29, 2009); also quoted in Slade, “Weaponizing Planned Obsolescence,” 232.

Moving beyond the observations of the general war-like and military connotations of her forms, Bontecou's early reliefs can be understood in terms of a more explicit connection to the mechanisms of the arms race. As new technologies were invented one after the other, each outperforming the earlier designs, a strange type of equilibrium was achieved where newer and more deadly models always already replaced earlier weapons. Many of Bontecou's forms resemble war equipment with their multiple mouths and protruding barrels, but since they are made with recycled canvas often taken from used military surplus, they also appear in need of replacement.²⁶⁹ Even though they appear dangerous, her forms exude an aura of dilapidation: their worn, stained and broken-down facades suggest machines already past their prime. An early work from 1959, originally titled *Gun*, joins the imagery of space-age technology with dilapidation (figure 49).²⁷⁰ Bontecou characterized the form as an "out-of-this-world gun," however, it also looks like an antique salvaged from an earlier war. When seen in terms of the mid-century arms race that was fueled by the ongoing advances and concomitant obsolescence of technology, this work can be interpreted as symbolic of both the futility and waste caused by the military-industrial system in which each new technology is soon out-dated.

While Hadler also interprets Bontecou's aggressive forms in the context of the Cold War, she views them in terms of "moral urgency" and "anger" at the mechanisms of war, rather than enacting a specific critique of the arms race.²⁷¹ She supports this interpretation by citing Bontecou's statements about her concern over the traumas of war and its importance to her art. "I was angry" Bontecou acknowledges, noting how she listened to United Nations programs on

²⁶⁹ E.A.T. Smith, "All Freedom in Every Sense," 173.

²⁷⁰ Hadler, "Warnings," 58. According to Hadler, who interviewed Bontecou, *Gun* was the original title. However, in the 2003 retrospective Bontecou follows her more typical practice leaving works untitled.

²⁷¹ Hadler, "Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America," *Art Journal* 53/4 (Winter 1994): 19.

the radio while working.²⁷² “I used it like background music,” Bontecou stated, remembering how “the anger became part of the [artistic] process.”²⁷³ Made partly in reaction to the ongoing military conflicts of the time and her memories of the atrocities of World War II and the Korean War, the meaning of her work was altered by her intense response. Hadler describes Bontecou’s reaction in the following manner:

Bontecou’s indignation deepened with the outbreak of war in Korea. Her persistent feelings are expressed clearly in *Prisons*, a group of small rectangular metal pieces executed in the early sixties. One of the prison constructions [*Untitled* (1963, figure 50)] has striations that recall prison uniforms... the piece also incorporates garment racks... that display the threatening grin... of a figure trapped behind a vertical grid of iron bars.... Given her sensitivity to World War II, could Bontecou have forgotten the prisons, the camps, the barbed wire? When one of her pieces entered the collection of the Jewish museum, she considered it a ‘memorial to my feelings.’²⁷⁴

For Hadler, the works express Bontecou’s deep concern and rage over the injustices of current and past wars by reflecting violence back on the viewer. She sees “the grid of entrapment” of the *Prisons* and the sharp edges of protruding wires that appear in most of Bontecou’s reliefs as enacting metaphorical violence on the viewer.²⁷⁵ Bringing the bloodthirsty tools of war into view in a confrontational way, the forms, fortified with an array of evil looking mouths and barrels, seem to target onlookers.

Others have viewed Bontecou’s war-like forms as parodying the aggressive posturing of the Cold War. As Swenson notes:

Bontecou’s reliefs fetishize the accoutrements of war, transforming utilitarian equipment into grotesque fantasy. The steel-and-canvas sculptures manage to evince at once the real threat of war and a defiant, ironic attitude toward war’s actuality, similar to the sense of unreality that colored doomsday tales of nuclear holocaust such as Stanley Kubrick’s

²⁷² Munro, 384.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Hadler, “Warnings,” 59.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 59.

notorious film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). In these reliefs, artifacts of fear—jagged blades, gas masks, and helmets—are presented in a context that parodies the tools of war.²⁷⁶

According to Swenson, the overtly aggressive imagery of works like *Untitled* (1961, figure 13) appears as a humorous, although ultimately serious, exaggeration of the Cold War's fear driven over-production of weaponry. Many of Bontecou's reliefs, as Swenson observes, seem primed simultaneously to "fire projectiles, tear flesh, and perhaps exude poison gas through vents or holes."²⁷⁷ Their surfaces are covered with tooth-filled maws and weapon-like protrusions that exceed any logical function and become absurd displays of force. In fact, the hollow canvas and steel constructions exist as false fronts with no machinery behind them to enact any real violence. Even though the threats of the Cold War were far from empty, Bontecou's hollow forms point to the ridiculous void behind the bellicose pretences of the era.

According to these three perspectives Bontecou's work alternately makes a pointed commentary on the military industrial complex, expresses her moral outrage by reflecting violence back on the viewer, or enacts a Dr. Strangelovian parody. Even though all interpret the war-like imagery of Bontecou's early reliefs in terms of the Cold War, they remain distinctly different. No one reading is allowed to dominate because each interpretation embodies aspects of the others and enhances the imagery with multiple layers of meaning. While Hadler's interpretation hinges on Bontecou's metaphorical attack on the viewer, from Swenson's perspective the reliefs also target onlookers, although from a different angle. Instead of inspiring anxiety, for Swenson the works ridicule the ludicrous reality of Cold War politics and the fears it on which it fed. At the same time, this chapter's new interpretation of Bontecou's reliefs in

²⁷⁶ Swenson, 75.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 74.

terms of the mechanisms of the arms race cannot be viewed without taking into account the emotional tenor of other views. Bontecou's moral outrage, which Hadler cites in her forms, still colors her art; a feeling of darkness and malice emanates from the reliefs. The amalgamation of possible interpretations produces a new understanding of the work that reveals the complexity of the Cold War situation and Bontecou's experience of it.

Further issues beyond the new level of consumerism and the Cold War also complicate the layer of time in which Hadler situates Bontecou's reliefs. Although Hadler primarily focuses on the political and social issues concerning the Cold War, she also suggests connections between Bontecou's work and the social issues raised by the women's movement in the early '60s. Posing a series of questions, Hadler writes:

...the central vaginal imagery, championed by Chicago and others, has added meaning—in the linking of politics and sexuality. Can we not apply the question that has been asked about Samson—"Is man's murderous energy the same thing as their sexual energy?"—to Bontecou as well? Is not her "angry sexuality" an appropriate antiwar statement?...Does she not empower her "aggression of monumentality"?²⁷⁸

Thus, for Hadler the combination of the aggressive and the sexual in Bontecou's forms becomes an empowered re-casting of female sexuality.²⁷⁹ "Bontecou's employment of the body as a site for social protest," while allowing her to express her anger at war, also subverts the stereotype of the female gender's passive sexuality.²⁸⁰ Furthermore, as Hadler observes, Bontecou's early reliefs were made during "the decade of sexual revolution," thus adding another facet to the layer of time she describes.²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ Hadler "Heart of a Conquering Darkness," 43-44.

²⁷⁹ Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 179.

²⁸⁰ Hadler, "Warnings," 56.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

Although Hadler is not specific in her discussion of the links between Bontecou's art and the women's movement, there are key historical events that demonstrate the rejuvenated momentum of feminist activism in the early '60s and offer new insights into Bontecou's constructions. In particular, Betty Friedan's 1963 publication of *The Feminine Mystique* is often cited as the starting point for the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States. In *The Feminine Mystique*—a study on the problematic social and cultural situation of the '50s housewife—Friedan argues that the “core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique.” A cultural construction of the female gender, the “feminine mystique” is the idea that “the highest value and only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity.”²⁸² Although influential, Friedan's ideas were not entirely new; as she notes they were gathered from personal experiences and interviews, as well as magazines, newspapers, and other books: her work became a meeting point for a range of issues confronting women at the time.²⁸³ “By 1962 the plight of the trapped American housewife had become a national parlor game,” Friedan asserts, explaining how, “whole issues of magazines, newspaper columns, books learned and frivolous, educational conferences and television panels were devoted to the problem.”²⁸⁴

Of particular importance for this analysis is Friedan's argument that the feminine mystique was perpetuated in part by the housewife's role in the economy. She writes:

Why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house*? In all the talk of femininity and women's role, one forgets that the real business of America is business. ...the

²⁸² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), 77,43.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 22-25.

²⁸⁴ Friedan, 25.

perpetuation of house-wifery, the growth of the feminine mystique, makes sense (and dollars) when one realizes that women are the chief customers of American business.²⁸⁵

According to Friedan, American business had a vested interest in marketing not only their products but also the feminine mystique itself, which metaphorically ‘sells’ women on the role of wife and mother.²⁸⁶ Thus, it follows that new technologies were marketed to women as helpful tools for fulfilling their biological roles.

Although she does not use the term “biological determinism,” Friedan describes how in the 50’s women were defined by their biological function as mothers: their only official role became nurturing others. As she notes “the old prejudices—women were animals, less than human, unable to think like men, merely born to breed” that earlier feminists had fought, survived in the contemporary culture.²⁸⁷ Like a machine a woman’s purpose was determined by her physical function. As advertisers recognized, the increasing role of technology in the home created a paradoxical tension; although new technologies made housework easier, they simultaneously devalued the role of women in the home.²⁸⁸ Consequently marketing experts observed that women wanted to buy cake mixes rather than pre-made cakes, clothing patterns rather than pre-made clothes and portable vacuum cleaners rather than built-in cleaning systems.²⁸⁹ In a world of outlandish space-age expectations, the fear of being made obsolete by technology constituted a much more viable threat than it would today. For example, in a 1962 *New York Times* article on the changing domestic labor industry, the author predicts that by the

²⁸⁵ Friedan, 206.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 226.

²⁸⁷ Friedan, 103.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 226-7; Hine, 127-8.

²⁸⁹ Friedan, 226-7; Hine, 126-7.

'70s, many suburban homes will include robotic maids.²⁹⁰ These fears of social obsolescence posed vital questions about the problems of biologically determined constructions of gender: if one could be so easily replaced by a machine what was a women's importance as a human being.

Looking at Bontecou's early reliefs in terms of the biological references posited by Hadler and others, one is clearly aware of their mechanical imagery.²⁹¹ Her constructions synthesize the two opposites, creating an uncomfortable pairing of the bodily and the industrial that creates an ambiguous third element: her reliefs are hybrids that simultaneously present antithetical associations. Although Bontecou does not acknowledge an active consideration of feminism or intent to comment on women's issues in her work, her forms provide an uncanny visual manifestation of this slippage between biological and mechanical function that speaks to the determinist construction of gender in the space-age.²⁹² As Hadler notes, the combination of the natural world with space-age technologies was a prevalent visual theme of the time and so cannot be directly tied to women's issues; nevertheless, the gendered reception of Bontecou's

²⁹⁰ Joan Cook, "The Domestic Worker, '62, Is a Part-time Helper, Full-Time Headache," New York Times Article Archive, (November 22, 1962)
<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F60E14FA345A177B93C0AB178AD95F468685F9&scp=1&sq=Part-Time+Helper&st=p>

²⁹¹ It is important to note that "cultural expectations regarding gender directed the reception of Bontecou's art," particularly in the early '60s (Estrada-Berg, unpaginated). For a full overview of this issue see graduate student Victoria Estrada-Berg's 2005 thesis (V. Estrada-Berg, "Art Criticism and the Gendering of Lee Bontecou's Art 1959-1964" (MA thesis, University of North Texas, 2005). A brief account of this component of Bontecou scholarship is also provided in the literature overview for this thesis.

²⁹² "I'm not really involved with the Women's Movement: it's nothing new to me," Bontecou states, reiterating that, "I mean, I've been doing it all my life," (Munro, 37). In a much later 1993 interview she also noted that, "As far as the sexual thing goes, it was never an issue... The sexual world is wonderful, but it isn't everything... it was sort of a surprise when [that interpretation] kept coming up," (E. A. T. Smith, "Abstract Sinister," 87). However, in the late '50s and early '60s when Bontecou created her reliefs, the rigid construction of gender roles, would have been irritatingly, if not painfully apparent. Bontecou broke the mold of traditional femininity by making large, aggressive sculptural forms. She admits her frustration at the response of patrons and critics who were shocked and sometimes disappointed to learn that she—a petite blond woman—was the creator of her monumental works (Bontecou interviewed by Alan Artner, unpaginated, note 147).

forms colors her use of the imagery with specific associations and so cannot be completely separated from it.²⁹³

In works like *Untitled* (1962, figure 52) natural forms are overlaid with machine parts. The relief swells outward from the surface forming a vaguely breast-like protrusion, while a toothy mouth, which was read as vaginal by some, is visible inside.²⁹⁴ These anthropomorphic formations with their quasi-sexual connotations are covered with buttons, dials and knobs and appear as if they are waiting to be turned on or set in motion. *Untitled* (1958-9, figure 53), a rare freestanding sculpture in Bontecou's oeuvre, looks like an appliance that has come to life. Standing on four legs and fitted with a telescopic eye and an unsettlingly large mouth with hair-like wires sprouting from the surface, the work references the science fiction vogue for automatons. In Bontecou's 1963 relief from her prison series (figure 50) the bodily elements are more tightly restricted and caged by their mechanical components rather than actively merged as in her four-legged construction. Echoed in a later drawing from 1964 (figure 53), this composition communicates the idea of entrapment. Bontecou's early reliefs do not directly reference feminism or the women's movement; however, her forms reflect the uneasy tension between biology and technology enacted in the modern home during the '50s and '60s. In this ambiguous situation no single meaning is cemented, but many associations proliferate.

From Bontecou's acknowledged anti-war sentiments to her work's latent connections to the gender politics of the era, her art can be understood in terms the complex array of conflicting social tensions in the space-age. Yet another facet of the diverse political pressures of the era that affects the understanding of Bontecou's forms is the growing awareness in the '50s and '60s

²⁹³ Hadler, "Worldscapes," 206.

²⁹⁴ Judd, 179; Kelly, 200.

of pollution and concern for the environment. Even though Bontecou does not posit a direct correlation between her early reliefs and growing environmental concerns, she and does acknowledge that her works from the late '60s—vacuum formed-plastic fish and flowers, some of which appear to wear gas masks—are intended to comment on the immanent problems of pollution (figures 54, 55). Bontecou states:

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.' My making them out of synthetics was a way of saying what would happen....²⁹⁵

Although Bontecou continues, noting, "really nothing is so clear-cut, so black, white and gray," her statement reveals her sensitivity to environmental issues.²⁹⁶ While Hadler briefly mentions the role of environmentalism in Bontecou's work by citing the fact that her use of plastic to represent natural forms should be understood in terms of the growing negative connotations of this material that was viewed by some as "a cancerous growth in society," she does not explore Bontecou's early reliefs in terms of this vital social issue.²⁹⁷ The following section will further extend Hadler's analysis by positing connections between Bontecou's art and the increasing environmental concerns.

In many ways the new environmental awareness of the late '50's and early '60s can be seen in relation to post-World War II fears of nuclear fallout. Although knowledge of the devastating effects of radioactivity was not widespread in 1945, by late the '40s it had entered the public consciousness. Dr. David Bradley's 1948 *No Place to Hide*, which partially describes the effects of radiation on human and animal life as well its lingering presence in nonliving

²⁹⁵ Munro, 386.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Hadler, "Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades," 16.

tissues, was one of the earliest public discussions of the potential dangers.²⁹⁸ Awareness of the perils of nuclear technology gradually increased: in 1959, the year Bontecou began making her reliefs, larger than normal traces of the radioactive isotope Strontium 90 were found in milk and in young children's teeth, sparking a campaign to ban nuclear testing.²⁹⁹ Increasingly sensitive to the impact of new technologies on the environment, Americans uncovered many other troubling problems. In fact, marine biologist, writer and environmentalist Rachel Carson frames the arguments in her 1962 bestseller *Silent Spring*, which exposed the harmful and insidious effects of the pesticide DDT, in the context of nuclear anxieties.³⁰⁰ She writes:

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 germ cells to shatter or alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends.³⁰¹

Thus, the fallout of nuclear detonations indirectly raised sensitivity to other environmental issues.

Of particular importance to the interpretation of Bontecou's reliefs is the problem of the over consumption of natural resources. In *The Limits of the Earth* (1953) environmentalist Fairfield Osborn discusses potential problems resulting from the exponential increase in the consumption of natural resources in the United States since World War II.³⁰² He writes:

²⁹⁸ David Bradley, *No Place to Hide* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1948); Paul Boyer, "The American Medical Profession and the Threat of Nuclear War" in *Fallout* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio state University Press, 1998), 66.

²⁹⁹ Boyer, 82-3.

³⁰⁰ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962). First published as a series of articles in the *New Yorker*.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, 8. In an essay entitled "Silent Spring" in deference to Carson's book, curator Elizabeth Sussman also points out the Bontecou's awareness of environmental concerns in relation to her vacuum formed plastic sculptures from the early '70s. Sussman, "Silent Spring," in *Lee Bontecou: Vacuum-formed Sculptures and Related Drawings* (New York: The Grenfall Press, Knoedler and Company, 2007), 12.

³⁰² Fairfield Osborn, *The Limits of the Earth* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1953), 71.

it is estimated that by the year 1975 the demand for minerals, as a whole, will increase by 90 percent, for timber products by 10 percent, for agricultural products by about 40 percent, while the need for total energy will double and those for water for industrial use alone will almost triple. We Americans have used as much of the earth's riches in forty years as all people, the world over, have used in four thousand.³⁰³

Although not a best seller at the time, the work was liberally quoted by Packard in *The Waste Makers*. Echoing Osborn, Packard writes:

The virgin continent that American settlers fell heir to a mere three centuries ago is being stripped of its material riches at an ever-accelerating rate. This wealth has made chronic optimists of the people of the United States.... They have come to assume there will always be more where that came from. ...Today, however, the weight of the evidence does not support much optimism. ...Americans are consuming considerably more materials than they produce. ..[and] must now depend on other lands for most of the "strategic and critical" materials that are essential to the nation's defense.³⁰⁴

If seen in terms of the heightened levels of consumption of both industries and consumers, which Osborn and Packard describe, the many-mouthed grins of Bontecou's industrial forms assume yet another dimension of meaning. They reference not just weapons of war, but also the insatiable appetite of the growing economy. In *Untitled* (1964, figure 56) four tooth-filled mouths emerge from the surface of her relief, anthropomorphizing and exaggerating the ravenous demands of its quasi-industrial form as they appear to be smiling hungrily. In Bontecou's *Prisons* series, which are built in part from deconstructed garment racks, the grinning cavities not only reference industrial forms, but are made from implements of the burgeoning sales industry that fed growing levels of consumption.³⁰⁵

Similarly, the soot covered exteriors, darkened vents and tail-pipe shapes of many of Bontecou's reliefs can be understood in terms of the growing problem of air pollution. Already in 1949 President Truman had requested that his Secretary of the Interior to organize a

³⁰³ Osborn, 71.

³⁰⁴ Packard, 196.

³⁰⁵ Hadler, "Warnings," 58.

conference on air quality, he stated, “The contamination of the atmosphere and its potential adverse effects on health, industry, agriculture, and natural resources are causing wide concern.”³⁰⁶ The results of this conference, which were published in 1952, discuss the different types of pollutants and their causes as well as the effects on public health and the environment. Although aerosols were highlighted as a leading cause of pollution, preliminary research also linked low air quality to high levels of automotive traffic.³⁰⁷ By the late ‘50s the harmful effects of car exhaust was a common public concern. In 1958 the *New York Times* alone published over seventy articles that discuss the effects of air pollution; seventeen of these relate the growing problem to the increased output of car exhaust. In a 1958 article on the progress of a bill to set restrictions of safe levels of emissions lawyer Jack M. Merelman states, “The very air we breath is being used as a common sewer where fumes, gases and all manner of pollutants are dumped.”³⁰⁸ When seen in terms of the increased levels of air pollution and public concern, Bontecou’s 1961 work (figure 57), which resembles a World War II gas mask, takes on a different connotation. Rather than seeming like an artifact of war, it becomes a future tool for civilians living in a polluted world. Likewise, the numerous tailpipe-like protrusions of *Untitled* (1960, figure 10) become the exhaust system of an uber-automotive. Their soot-darkened interiors appear ready to belch black fumes at an alarming rate.

Extending the contextual analysis of Bontecou’s reliefs to consider environmental as well as popular and political concerns of the era adds another facet to the understanding of her

³⁰⁶ December 10, 1949 letter from President Harry Truman published in Louis C. McCabe, preface to *Air Pollution Proceedings of the United States Technical Conference on Air Pollution* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1952), vi.

³⁰⁷ H. F. Johnstone, “Properties and Behavior of Air Contaminants” in *Air Pollution Proceedings of the United States Technical Conference on Air Pollution*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1952) 152-4.

³⁰⁸ “Air Used as a Sewer, House Inquiry Warned,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1958 in New York Times Article Archive, <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html> (accessed August 26, 2009).

art. The arresting black voids become the insatiable mouths of industry or the exhaust belching orifices of automobiles, while still suggesting the endless depth of space and the unconscionable possibility of nuclear annihilation that Hadler has proposed. These different readings of the void present a horizon of possible interpretations that interact and thus construct the work's ambiguous meaning. Although no one can be designated as 'correct,' given the social awareness at the time and Bontecou's own sensitivity to the problems posed by pollution, these interpretations seem probable as well as possible.

However convoluted or direct their relationships to each other, the associations of Bontecou's early reliefs enrich both hers and her viewer's multivalent construction of meaning. Generating a range of responses and interpretations as broad as the "space of experience" of the times in which they were created, Bontecou's art expresses the conflict of the era in terms of an "oppositional language" where particular contrasting interpretations interact to form ambiguous constructions of meaning. Created at a time when science promised a space-age of prosperity, but also made possible unheard of acts of devastation, Bontecou's work re-presents this conflict. Her work both critiques the consumer culture of the late '50s and early '60s, and participates in responding to the pervasive aesthetic that the marketing and design concept of planned obsolescence helped to develop. At the same time that her menacing forms reveal her many-faceted responses to the mechanisms of the Cold War, they denounce the futility of the arms race, while reflecting an implicit violence back on the viewer, and still manage to present a wryly-humorous exaggeration of the aggressive posturing of the era. In her conflation of the biological and mechanical, Bontecou, though perhaps unintentionally, provides a glimpse of the tension between the biological-determinism of the construction of the female gender and the new

space-age technologies that became an integral part of women's fulfillment of that role.

Additionally, her early reliefs reveal an increasing concern for the environment, confronting the viewer with the mindless consumption of industry and its equally thoughtless polluting output.

Bontecou once described her appreciation a stealth bomber saying, "it's terrible, really, but it's also a kind of miracle."³⁰⁹ Working from a standpoint where both the beautiful and the abominable exist as aspects of each other, Bontecou created works that revel in the human condition and reflect both the wonders and horrors of the social, historical and political contexts in which they were made.

The overall layer of history explored in this chapter moves beyond Seitz's and Judd's perspectives that solely address their own artistic climate, by considering some of the diverse range of social issues that existed during the 50's and '60s. In her multi-faceted exploration of Bontecou's forms, Hadler's perspective is historical as well as speculative. As Koselleck asserts, "behind every question of 'how did it happen?' there is the question of 'how could it happen?'"³¹⁰ Her analysis and this chapter's expansion of it consider many possible interpretations for Bontecou's art that connect it to the broader culture in which it was made. In doing so, Hadler's interpretation expands the overall understanding of Bontecou's art by opening it to a realm of conjecture that defies static constructions of meaning. This open-ended conversation between Bontecou's art and certain contemporary popular culture events and political issues is the basis for a dynamic range of interpretations that constitute another possible set of historical circumstances for understanding Bontecou's early reliefs. However, the range of

³⁰⁹ Lyle Rexer, "Lee Bontecou Returns From Her Far Away Planet (includes interview with Bontecou)," in the New York Times Article Archive: 1981 to Present, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/05/arts/art-lee-bontecou-returns-from-her-faraway-planet.html?scp=1&sq=Bontecou&st=nyt> (accessed October, 2008).

³¹⁰ Koselleck, "Transformations of Experience and Methodological Change," in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans., Todd Presner, eds, Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 58.

possibilities explored in this chapter is not boundless, but is necessarily tied to historical sources from which these hypotheses regarding ‘how could it [Bontecou’s art] happen’ are developed. As Koselleck states, “In principle, a source can never tell us what we ought to say,” however, “It does prevent us from making statements that we should not make. The sources have the power of veto.”³¹¹ Thus Hadler’s perspective develops “a reflective re-presentation of ... past” sources that grounds her speculation in a particular time, and through this “temporalization of perspective” her analyses are rooted in a historical period.³¹²

³¹¹ Koselleck, “Perspective and Temporality,” 155.

³¹² Ibid, 142.

Conclusion: Tensions Among the Possible Histories of Lee Bontecou's Early Reliefs

Koselleck acknowledges that, "Historical statements can reproduce past states of affairs only in a reductive or rejuvenated way, for it is impossible to restore the totality of the past, which is irrevocably gone."³¹³ He then proposes that,

...the question of "how it really was" can only be answered if one assumes that one does not formulate *res factae* but *res fictae*. If it is no longer possible to restore the past as such, then I am forced to acknowledge the fictive character of past actualities...³¹⁴

If one accepts Koselleck's Kantian observation of the fictive nature of historical constructions where one can never fully "restore the totality of the past," then it becomes necessary to explore not just a single causal structure but also several possible histories based on available source material. In Koselleck's view, every "testimonial... is bound to a particular situation," that is historically located according to the *a priori* principles of space and time. Through the flow of time, all so-called "fictive" accounts become historical, although none are necessarily "correct."³¹⁵ Hence, as Koselleck states, "we need a theory: a theory of possible history," in order to develop meaningful historical accounts.³¹⁶

Each chapter of this thesis has considered a different possible history for Bontecou's early reliefs based on a distinct perspective. In chapter one, her work is viewed in terms of Seitz's curatorial formulation of assemblage and placed within the "space of experience" of the

³¹³ Koselleck, "The Need for Theory in the Discipline of History," 15. See note 12.

³¹⁴ Ibid, 15.

³¹⁵ Koselleck, "Perspective and Temporality," 154.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

previous art historical movements of cubism, futurism, dada, and surrealism. Judd's critical concept of the specific object provides a different view as he situates Bontecou's early reliefs in a new trajectory, which subsequently became known as minimalism. Hadler's later social-historical analyses evaluate the context of Bontecou's reliefs from the late '50s and '60s by positing iconographic connections between Bontecou's art and discrete segments of the popular culture and politics of the era. Although all of these hypotheses are based on factual source material, none draw the same conclusions and none use the same range of information. Each reveals different insights into Bontecou's early reliefs, and each constructs a highly individuated possible history within its own distinct layer of time.

However, Koselleck's concept of multiple histories based on separate temporal layers does not allow for endless possible interpretations of a given subject. A historian must select particular layers of time that have an apparent value and relevancy to the subject and focus on specific questions: one does not arbitrarily develop just any perspective. In the case of this thesis Seitz's, Judd's and Hadler's perspectives are considered as distinct temporal layers because they are all key accounts in the current scholarship that situate Bontecou's works within the same geographical location and chronological time in which they were made, thus their views are most closely connected to the original context of the art discussed. Seitz's and Judd's perspectives were selected because both describe and investigate different trends within the art of the late 50's and early '60s New York artistic scene. By developing two such opposite views of the art of that time, blind spots can be avoided and new connections can be made. Hadler's more recent discussions provide a perspective from which to consider the broader play of cultural and political factors beyond the artistic scene, and are also directly involved in the original location

and chronological time in which Bontecou's reliefs were made and exhibited. Additionally, Hadler's view investigates an area that Bontecou has acknowledged as relevant to her art, and so presents an opportunity to look critically at the artist's statements as yet another embedded perspectival view. Although occasionally overlapping, Seitz's, Judd's and Hadler's different views provide a more complete range of information about Bontecou's reliefs than is possible when considering only a single historical perspective: their approaches were chosen for their relevancy to the original context of Bontecou's art as well as their relative differences from each other.

According to Koselleck's theory of possible history, it is the "temporal differences, refractions, or tensions" between these discrete layers that can express trends "toward a new structuring of reality" where "different temporal relations and factors of acceleration and delay come into play."³¹⁷ While never fully integrating these layers, the refractions and tensions among them evoke a broader historical view and take into account the subjectivity of historical perspectives.³¹⁸ Because all historical accounts are necessarily embedded in a particular perspective, to varying degrees subjectivity is unavoidable. As Koselleck explains,

...Perspectivism is tolerable only if it is not stripped of its hypothetical and, therefore, revisable character... The relationships between the circumstances, the selection, and the interpretation of the sources can only be clarified by a theory of possible history.³¹⁹

As Koselleck suggests, one can, at least partially, overcome the problem of subjectivity by acknowledging it and developing a perspectival view in a historical manner. The information involved in a particular perspectival view can be used as a filter for considering the data about a

³¹⁷ Koselleck, "On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History," 9.

³¹⁸ Koselleck, "Representation, Event, and Structure" in *Futures Past*, trans., Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 105.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

particular historical subject: each different perspective becomes a tool for historical investigation. Although it is still only a possible history, the resultant interpretation can then be compared and contrasted with others to arrive at a more complete account of a given subject. Thus, the conclusion to this study of Bontecou's reliefs will investigate the diverse interactions between the three possible histories it has presented as well as Seitz,' Judd's, and Hadler's individual perspectival circumstances including each writer's different selection and interpretation of sources. By comparing these different possible histories, this analysis will uncover new trends and underlying structures in the overall history of Bontecou's reliefs.

This consideration of the refractions and tensions between temporal layers will first explore convergences and divergences between Seitz's and Judd's viewpoints, before articulating a key point of interaction between Judd's and Hadler's perspectives. Finally, it will evaluate the complicated relationship between the historical layer of Seitz's assemblage and Hadler's social-historical construction.

Embedded in the same time as the mid-century constructions he describes, Seitz's formulation of assemblage exists in the present conditional perspective: works are discussed 'when-they-are-being-made.' Oriented differently, Judd, who is situated in the same chronological time, projects ahead into future possibilities viewing works not just as they are but also as 'they will-have-been-made.' Likewise, these two perspectives function at different velocities and rates of change. Moving diachronically Seitz catalogs a swift flow, while Judd, who also observes variations as they occur, increases the rate of change as he envisages the new work to come. In other words, Judd sprints ahead as Seitz remains connected to his present situation and examines smaller alterations.

A key tension between these two historical perspectives exists in their different relations to abstract expressionism. Both include this previous artistic movement as a vital part of their “spaces of experience,” although they envision vastly different “horizons of expectations” from it. Seitz and Judd are particularly resistant to the Greenbergian formalist concept of the purity of mediums in which abstract expressionism is viewed as constituting a pinnacle of achievement. “It is our taste for the actual, immediate, [and] first-hand,” Greenberg argued, “which desires that painting, sculpture, music, [and] poetry, become more concrete by confining themselves strictly to that which is most palpable in them, namely their mediums.”³²⁰

As such, for Greenberg,

The literal nature of the medium of painting consists in configurations of pigment on a flat surface...Modern painting [abstract expressionism] conforms to our desire for that which is positive and literal by openly declaring itself to be what painting has always been but has tried for so long to dissemble: colors placed on a two-dimensional surface.³²¹

Subverting Greenberg’s media-specific theorization of art, Seitz and Judd, in perhaps the only coinciding of their aesthetic approaches, privilege the relief as a primary mode of construction. Fulfilling Judd’s qualification of being “neither painting nor sculpture,” the relief format was frequently used by Judd.³²² His well-known stacked and wall-mounted boxes function as reliefs as do his systematically notched shelf forms as well as earlier works like *Untitled* (1962, figure 58). In Seitz’s *Art of Assemblage* relief constructions also figure prominently and are a natural outcome of the expanded range of materials used in this work. Reliefs by Lousie Nevelson and John Chamberlain as well as, of course, Rauschenberg’s “combines” were all included (figures

³²⁰ Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 1*, 314.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 315.

³²² Judd, 181.

59, 60). As art historian Leo Steinberg later pointed out in his discussion of Rauschenberg's oeuvre,

What I have called the flatbed [his term for Rauschenberg's relief format] is more than a surface distinction if it is understood as a change within painting that changed the relationship between artist and image, image and viewer. Yet this internal change is no more than a symptom of changes which go far beyond questions of picture planes, or of painting as such. *It is part of the shake up which contaminates all purified categories* [my italics].³²³

Thus, one can extrapolate that at least some of the appeal of this mode of construction lies in its disregard for Greenberg's rigid formulation concerning the dominance of the picture plane.

Given this predilection, it is unsurprising that both chose Bontecou's reliefs as manifestations of their different artistic trends. Working almost exclusively in a relief format, Bontecou provided in her art a powerful and timely example of transgressing the boundaries between mediums. Indeed, Bontecou's primary articulation of her artistic philosophy, as Elizabeth A. T. Smith has observed, is "a desire for boundless freedom" and "to break away and find new paths."³²⁴ As such, although Bontecou makes no specific assertion of pointedly opposing any established artistic values, her work is part of this larger trend of moving away from Greenberg's formalist view of art.

However, in other ways Seitz's and Judd's connections to abstract expressionism are much more at odds and can be seen as constituting opposite possible histories: each incorporates aspects of the previous genre that are avoided or ignored by the other. As has been explored, one of the key qualifications of Judd's specific objects is the avoidance of external references in order to exclude symbolic readings of the work of art. The traditional view of art as a "container" for meaning was anathema to Judd, who, like Greenberg, privileged only those

³²³ Leo Steinberg, 36.

³²⁴ Lee Bontecou, "Artist Statement, 2003," 12; Elizabeth A. T. Smith, "All Freedom in Every Sense," 171.

interpretations of art that are based on the object's physical form.³²⁵ In fact, despite the vociferous responses of Greenberg's and Fried's against "Specific Objects," Judd has stated, "I thought we wanted the same thing."³²⁶ Thus, Judd found inspiration in aspects of abstract expressionism and Greenberg's criticism of it that involved its form, but not its symbolic content. For him, "the paramount quality and scheme of Abstract Expressionism was the singleness of the format and also its quality"; he privileged these artist's use of large scale and the overall look of many of their paintings for their ability to form powerful, single units.³²⁷

In contrast to Judd, Seitz highlights symbolic constructions of meaning that are more closely connected to the abstract expressionists' own interpretations of their work than to Greenberg's formalist view. Proposing a metaphysical reading of assemblage, Seitz characterizes the work of art as "an investment of matter with spirit."³²⁸ As noted by Polcari, abstract expressionists were also involved in a search for modes to express symbolic content in their art that at times verged on the mystical.³²⁹ Polcari describes how many abstract expressionists shared a concern with "the relation of man to sacred forces larger than himself that control his fate," thus, "they saw primitive religion—magic, myth, ceremony, ritual, and spirits—as a symbolic means to mediate between ... mental, cultural, and spiritual forces of creation and destruction."³³⁰ When asked why he used mythic subject matter, abstract expressionist Adolph Gottlieb stated,

³²⁵ Judd, 181.

³²⁶ Conversation with Judd quoted in Meyer, "Specific Objects," 140.

³²⁷ Judd, "Local History," 151.

³²⁸ Seitz, 10. He writes, "If anything has been surveyed, it is the metaphysics of assemblage rather than its history." Seitz, 6.

³²⁹ Polcari, "Propaedeutics: The Intellectual Roots," 38-9.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

...all genuine art forms utilize images that can be readily apprehended by anyone acquainted with the global language of art. That is why we use images that are directly communicable to all who accept art as the language of the spirit....³³¹

In Gottlieb's view the use of mythological subject matter, rooted in the beliefs of ancient cultures enables a form of spiritual communication. For example, in his *The Rape of Persephone* (1943, figure 61) he used mythic subject matter to express the universal complexity and "brutal implications" of "the concept of seed and its earth."³³² Although Seitz's references to this aspect of assemblage are less specific than Gottlieb's mythological subjects, he still explains important characteristics of assemblage in metaphysical terms. According to Seitz, "physical materials and their *auras* [in assemblages] are *transmuted* into a new amalgam that both *transcends* and includes their parts [my italics]."³³³ Seitz also exhibited such objects as, a carving of a two-headed dog from Cabina Africa (figure 62), noting that

In a primitive cult object, a shell becomes an eye because of its context... meanings of highly charged units impinge on a poetic as well as on a physical or visual level... The assembler, therefore, can be both a metaphysician and (because his units are loosely related rather than expository) a poet who mingles attraction and repulsion, natural and human identification, ironic or naïve responses.³³⁴

Thus, it is clear that part of Seitz's formulation of assemblage, like certain abstract expressionist works, was activated by an almost spiritual transformation of symbolic meaning.

Bontecou's reliefs can be thought of as existing between Judd's and Seitz's viewpoints where symbolic meaning is neither excluded nor explicitly implicated. In chapters one and two this thesis observed how Bontecou's forms avoid making direct connections to the everyday origins of her materials, but also subtly evoke other content through her imagery and the general

³³¹ Gottlieb quoted in "'The Portrait and the Modern Artist,' by Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, October 13, 1943," in *Mark Rothko: Writings on Art*, ed., Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 39.

³³² "Rothko and Gottlieb's letter to the editor, 1943," in *Mark Rothko: Writings on Art*, ed., Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 35.

³³³ Seitz, 82.

³³⁴ *Ibid*, 83.

patina of age that overlays her forms. Her work cannot be fully explained by Judd's formalism, but neither is it expressly involved in creating the type of poetic or metaphysical symbolism that Seitz describes. Hadler comes closest to explaining Bontecou's different relationship to form and content when she makes the comparison that "Science fiction ... attempted, like Bontecou's art, to come to terms aesthetically and socially with the space-age."³³⁵ She explains how Bontecou's constructions involve a complex interweaving of the cosmic and prehistoric that "articulate her fantastic worldscape notions."³³⁶ Expanding on Hadler's comparison, this thesis has projected that Bontecou's works, like science fiction, take fragments of everyday life and transform them into new and fantastic other worlds. Just as science fiction uses elements of history and science to construct imaginative plots, Bontecou employs pieces of worn canvas, bits of pipe and other items from the everyday to create new forms with their own internal logic. Curator Donna De Salvo analogizes the process of "looking at Bontecou's drawings...[as being] a bit like turning pages of a fantastic atlas that maps *someplace* but not necessarily *a place*."³³⁷ Continuing this association *Untitled* (1960, figure 63) can be likened to a celestial map of some unknown location. The stained canvas suggests prior use and travel, but nothing concrete. Remnants of printed matter become inscriptions and annotations marking forgotten points of reference. The concentric circles radiating from the center suggest latitudinal lines that are divided by incomplete meridians. Although this is purely a personal imagining of a fictive purpose for Bontecou's construction, the fact that the internal logic of her forms suggests such lines of reason, which are neither fully of the everyday world,

³³⁵ Hadler, "Worldscapes," 204.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

³³⁷ Donna De Salvo, "Inner and Outer Space: Bontecou's Sculpture through Drawing," in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, ed., E. A. T. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 217.

nor part of the compositional mode of art-making, points to her unique confabulation of form and content. Her reliefs do not explicitly reference everyday life or formulate symbolic meaning; instead, they create new worlds each with their own system that is specific to the form itself even though it catalyzes viewers' reactions and general knowledge.

Refractions between Seitz's and Judd's historical perspectives point to aspects of Bontecou's art that exist outside the range of either formulation, revealing a different view of her work. Likewise, the points of tension between Hadler's and Judd's viewpoints open up other new avenues. Although their two possible histories appear to be opposed since Judd projects into the future and Hadler delves into the past, there are points of interaction. Hadler's retrospective discovery of connections between Bontecou's forms and the popular culture and political issues of the age is rooted in the same quickly changing time on which Judd bases his predictions for the future. Thus, the two share a relatively fast-paced starting tempo as they explore two different possible histories.

Curiously, an intersection between Judd's formalism and Hadler's social and political interpretation of Bontecou's forms already exists in a readymade fashion. Hadler's assertion that Bontecou's reliefs employ the body as a site for presenting their anti-war message is based in part on Judd's earlier, uncharacteristic observation of the simultaneous war-like and sexual connotations of her forms; in his description of Bontecou's reliefs, he narrates, "The warhead will be mated at the firing position."³³⁸ Thus, when Hadler equates Bontecou's intense feelings about Cold War conflicts with an "angry sexuality," their distinct perspectives are on common ground.³³⁹ However, Judd's rigid construction of the specific object and its separation from

³³⁸ Hadler, "Warnings," 56; Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 179.

³³⁹ Hadler, "Heart of a Conquering Darkness," 43; Judd, "Lee Bontecou," 179.

external associations continues to exist in direct conflict with his own observation (as well as Hadler's). A tension emerges between Judd's inert, unitary construction of the specific object and the multivalent biological associations attributed to Bontecou's forms. If one considers this tension as existing not just between Hadler's and Judd's views of Bontecou's art, but also between the art that would become known as minimalism and other so-called "sensuous" forms that were made concurrently, it becomes possible to see how the refractions of these two layers were played out in the art of the '60s and early '70s.³⁴⁰

In an article written in conjunction with her 1966 exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*, Lucy Lippard asserted:

...the primary structurists [an early term synonymous with minimalism] have introduced a new kind of funeral monument—funereal not in the derogatory sense, but because their self-sufficient unitary forms are intentionally inactive. Eccentric abstraction offers an improbable combination of this death premise with a wholly sensuous life-giving element.³⁴¹

In Lippard's view, the work she discusses combines elements of early minimalism with forms that have bodily associations, which she equates with aspects of surrealism.³⁴² She explains:

The makers of what I am calling, for semantic convenience, eccentric abstraction, refuse to eschew imagination and the extension of sensuous experience while they also refuse to sacrifice the solid formal basis demanded by the best in current non-objective art.³⁴³

As her comments demonstrate, even at the time, the austere productions of the most rigorous "primary structurists" were at odds with more organic impulses in the art of the time. According to Lippard, Bontecou's works provide a "precedent for the sensuous objects" included in her show. She describes how Bontecou's "gaping reliefs were a departure in the way they firmly

³⁴⁰ Lucy R. Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," *Art International* 10/9 (November 1966): 28.

³⁴¹ Lippard, 28.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Lippard, 28.

subjugated the evocative elements to unexpected formal ends.”³⁴⁴ Thus, in terms of Lippard’s analysis Bontecou’s constructions bridge the divide between the type of work Judd advocates in his “Specific Objects” and Hadler’s observations of organic and bodily associations.

This tension continued in the late ‘60s early ‘70s in postminimalist art. Art historian and critic Robert Pincus-Witten, who coined the term postminimalism, also viewed Bontecou’s early reliefs as an important precursor to this new work that fused aspects of minimalism with a new emphasis on the body as well as activities and processes that referred back to it. In a comparison with artist Lucas Samaras’ oeuvre (who, coincidentally was also included in Judd’s “Specific Objects”), Pincus-Witten wrote:

Throughout his work, Samaras deals largely with polymorphic sexual influences of a generally sadomasochistic ambiguousness. In the early ‘60s this kind of obsessional material is not only widely found throughout ... [his] work ... but is also visible in the work of Lee Bontecou... [her] work occasioned frequent reference to a castration archetype, the vagina dentate (the vagina with teeth), though the artist denies so limited a reading.³⁴⁵

He continued comparing the “craft-based” activities of Bontecou’s “painstakingly wired canvas elements” and Samaras’ “obsessional” use of yarn, noting, “It is important to emphasize the relationship of this highly varied body of work to the tactile effects of Postminimalism.”³⁴⁶

Pincus-Witten viewed these two components—the quasi-sexual associations of abstract forms and the labor-intensive modes of construction—as important models for artists like Eva Hesse whom he described as a “representative figure of Postminimalism.”³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 28, 34.

³⁴⁵ Robert Pincus-Witten, “Rosenquist and Samaras: The Obsessive Image and Postminimalism,” in *Postminimalism*, (New York: London Press, 1977), 81-82.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 82.

³⁴⁷ Pincus-Witten, 82. More recently Jo Applin compared Bontecou and Hesse stating, “Although both Hesse’s and Bontecou’s sculptures have been discussed as though they contain a sexual or bodily ‘subject matter’, it is the abstract yet bodily aspect of Bontecou’s work that connects her output to that of Hesse.” Applin, 480.

Like Bontecou's, Hesse's work is frequently discussed in terms of its bodily associations, but it is also connected with aspects of minimalism, in particular in terms of her use of repetition and pared-down forms, which comment on aspects of minimalism even as they perpetuate some of its forms. Lippard praised the manner in which Hesse's "modular and serial frameworks never interfered with or veiled, or stultified the intensely eccentric core of the work" that for many had "visceral and erotic associations."³⁴⁸ Although Judd identifies Bontecou's reliefs with the specific object, for Hadler, her constructions are analogous to the body and can be understood as being "composed of skin, bones, various other materials, or orifices."³⁴⁹ Similarly, Lippard notes how Hesse's work *Ishtar* (1965, figure 64) and other works like *Addendum* (1967, figure 65) use repeating "'breast' forms."³⁵⁰ Other works made by Hesse in the mid '60s such as *Ringaround Arosie* (1965, figure 66) and *Ear in a Pond* (1965, figure 67) present abstract yet bodily references and use a relief format similar to Bontecou's constructions. Hesse's *Accession II* (1968, figure 68), a box with an intricately furred interior made by threading innumerable plastic tubes through the surface, parallels Bontecou's void constructions since both are similar to the human body in having clearly defined interiors and exteriors. Also, both Bontecou's and Hesse's works were frequently made through labor-intensive processes: Hesse's elaborately textured interior calls to mind Bontecou's bristled reliefs, which are covered in many minute wire stitches.

Observing the similarities between aspects of Bontecou's and Hesse's work, the break denoted between Bontecou's proto-minimalist categorization and Hesse's identification with

³⁴⁸ Lippard, "Eva Hesse: The Circle," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 156, 157-8.

³⁴⁹ Hadler, "Warnings," 57.

³⁵⁰ Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 55.

postminimalism begins to seem arbitrary. In the mid '60s both artists created biomorphic forms that were also related to early minimalist works. Although Hesse's production in this area was just starting and so was much less well-known than Bontecou's, the two artists participate in the same undercurrent of bodily or "eccentric" abstraction that ran counter to the prevailing trends of minimalism when exhibitions like Judd's 1968 one-man show at the Whitney and MoMA's *The Art of the Real: USA 1948-1968* embodied the dominant themes in contemporary art.³⁵¹ Looking at Hadler's and Judd's unlikely consensus on the biological associations of Bontecou's forms in terms of the dialogue between the hard-edged and industrial aesthetic of minimalism and other more sensuous abstraction during the '60s and '70s provides a glimpse of an underlying trend in the art of the time. Their different interpretations reveal a dynamic aspect of Bontecou's early reliefs that is shared by such future postminimal works as Jackie Winsor's *Bound Square* (1972, figure 69) and *Burnt Piece* (1977-8, figure 70) or even Hannah Wilke's *Pink Champagne* (1975, figure 71).

Several artists whose work shares the synthesis of minimalist forms with biological or organic references and processes characteristic of this underlying trend in the art of the '60s and '70s are considered in curator and art historian Susan L. Stoops *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s*. Although Stoops situates her consideration in the '70s, many of the issues discussed were already present in Bontecou's early reliefs. "While maintaining a minimalist emphasis on relatively elemental forms, schematic compositions, and formal repetition and restraint," Stoops observes that some artists also, "turned towards human experiences (sometimes their own) and natural occurrences, and gravitated towards

³⁵¹ Meyer, 247, 253.

unpretentious, oftentimes raw materials and visibly direct hands on methods.”³⁵² She

continues, noting that their works

...are neither explicit in conventional narrative imagery, nor autonomous, self contained forms, but rather consciously allusive objects that expose the creative participation of their makers as well as provoke an active conceptual, psychological and physical engagement with their viewers.³⁵³

Stoops places these “allusive objects” within the context of the new engagement with gender issues in art of the time, and argues that this cultural situation “shaped the experiences from which ...[the artists] lived and from which they worked.”³⁵⁴ This intersection of feminism and abstraction is not an entirely new proposition. Already in 1977 Pincus-Witten asserted that,

The new style’s relationship to the women’s movement cannot be overly stressed; many of its formal attitudes and properties, not to mention its exemplars, derive from methods and substances that hitherto had been sexistically tagged as female or feminine, whether or not the work had been made by women.³⁵⁵

As Hadler has noted, Bontecou’s early reliefs were made at the same time that feminist activism reemerged in the early ‘60s.³⁵⁶ Thus, Stoops’ and Pincus-Witten’s hypotheses of the relationship between feminism and the biomorphic abstraction of such artists as Hesse presents an open-ended and multivalent opportunity for the construction of a new possible history for Bontecou’s work. Unfortunately, a complete exploration of this new and exiting temporal layer is beyond the scope of this thesis; such a diverse and multileveled topic requires its own full-length study.

Although not specific to feminist issues, the political implications of Bontecou’s reliefs are a vital part of this analysis. Like the indeterminate relationship between postminimalism and

³⁵² Susan L. Stoops, introduction to *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the ‘70s*, ed, S. L. Stoops (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University, 1996), 6.

³⁵³ *Ibid*, 6.

³⁵⁴ Stoops, 7.

³⁵⁵ Pincus-Witten, 11.

³⁵⁶ Hadler states that the structure of many of Bontecou’s reliefs “relates to the political and social concerns of the sixties—the decade of sexual revolution.” Hadler, “Warnings,” 57.

feminism, the political nature of Seitz's formulation of assemblage is also a subject of debate.

In the early '60s when the term neo-dada was used more often than assemblage to describe the then current mode of constructed work, there was a pronounced variance between the distinct and often-vocalized political views of the dadaists and the relative silence of the mid-twentieth century assemblagists. This disparity becomes even more apparent when viewed in terms of the layer of time in which Hadler situates Bontecou's work when feminists, civil rights activists, environmentalists and anti-war protesters all began actively to seek social change.

Although Hadler's retrospective view functions in the past continuous tense and moves at a slower and more deliberated pace in her consideration of works as they-were-being-made, the historical time she describes moves quickly and takes in a number of changes in the political and popular at the time. Likewise, even though Seitz retrospectively describes art historical movements and concepts that he views as part of the development of mid-twentieth-century assemblages, he primarily observes the rapidly changing art of his time. Thus, comparatively speaking, the velocities and rates of change of these two separate temporal layers are much the same. However, this similarity only makes the discrepancy between the highly politicized layer of time that Hadler describes and on which Seitz remains noticeable silent more glaring.

Despite using Shattuck's theorization of the internal frame that brings the everyday world in contact with the realm of art, Seitz avoids addressing the political implications of assemblages, which mix these two realms. Even though the political connections of dadaism were discussed at the symposium accompanying the exhibition, no mention was made of this art's political relevance for the mid-century assemblages, despite that fact that Richard Huelsenbeck, a founding dadaist, observed, "while we are thinking, and anxiety is rising, Mr. Khrushchev

threatens with a fifty-megaton bomb; [and] [Governor] Rockefeller recommends [fallout] shelters.”³⁵⁷ Reviews of *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition comment more on the use of found objects or “trash” in art works than any political statement or message.³⁵⁸ Those that do mention the social relevance of the subjects chosen by the artists speak in general terms and are content to point out that many of the works seem to protest “the suicidal materialism of our time” and “bourgeois aesthetic standards.”³⁵⁹ Emily Genauer questions whether the political ramifications of assemblages are purposeful, stating,

Regardless of the artists’ intentions their products are a grim sociological manifestation, an unconscious statement about or a deliberate protest against our times confused ethical and esthetic values. Cesar’s and Chamberlain’s exhibits, for example, both of them old wrecked automobiles crushed into newer wrecks, can be read, although there is no indication the artists meant them to be, as sardonic commentaries on our time’s deification of shiny new cars.³⁶⁰

Even outside the critical and curatorial discussion of *The Art of Assemblage* artists like Bontecou withdrew from discussions of political content. In a 1960 letter to MoMA curator Dorothy Miller, Bontecou hinted vaguely that her work was meant to “express our relation to this country—to other countries,” but it was not until 1977 that she explicitly acknowledged the political content in her work when she described how she was intensely concerned with the situations in China and Africa and “anger became part of the process.”³⁶¹ Although over time

³⁵⁷ Richard Huelsenbeck quoted in the transcript of the symposium for *the Art of Assemblage*, 132.

³⁵⁸ See note 57 for a discussion of reviews of *The Art of Assemblage* and the general focus on the new use of materials and found objects in the exhibited works.

³⁵⁹ Quoted from Henry J. Seldis, “‘Art of Assemblage’—the Power of Negative Thinking,” journal name and date of publication unavailable in Curatorial Exhibition Files, Exh. #695. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

³⁶⁰ Genauer, “An ‘Assemblage’: Art or Plumbing?” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 3, 1961, Arts section.

³⁶¹ Munro, 384.

the political implications of assemblage have become increasingly evident, during the early '60s they were generally indistinct.³⁶²

Notwithstanding the general lack of political discussion concerning assemblage, the tension between Hadler's politicized view and Seitz's more socially remote interpretation reveals, strangely enough, a vital political undercurrent in his writing. Throughout his theorization and historization of assemblage, Seitz suggests the political relevance of the work without explicitly explaining it. For example, in his construction of the historical underpinnings of assemblage, he locates its formal and conceptual roots in futurism and dada, both of which promoted radical (albeit opposite) political agendas. Although Seitz focuses on the futurist's contribution of expanding the range of materials relevant to a fine art context, he also notes that,³⁶³

Futurism was a movement in which social and aesthetic theory preceded the practice of painters and sculptors. Its works were the carriers of a passionately felt and explicit subject matter—nationalism, war, the speed of automobiles and airplanes, ... etc...³⁶⁴

Seitz mentions the political ideology of the dadaists as well, although their affiliations were much less prescriptive than those of the futurists.³⁶⁵ He characterizes dada as “a nameless anti-

³⁶² During the late '80s a series of exhibitions based on the stylistic category of assemblage reopened the discussion of its political nature. While *The Poetic Object*, a 1988 exhibition at the San Antonio Museum of Art, does not address the political implications of assemblage and, instead, focuses on literary or poetic correlations, the 1989 exhibition *Forty Years of California Assemblage* emphasizes its political power. In his essay “Beat and Beyond: The Rise of Assemblage Sculpture in California,” artist and curator Peter Boswell writes that assemblage’s “principle role, therefore, has been to serve as a meditation upon the modern world and its values.” [Peter Boswell, “Beat and Beyond: The Rise of Assemblage Sculpture in California,” in *Forty Years of California Assemblage* (California: Wright Art Gallery, University of California, 1989), 65]. He continues by noting the cross-pollination of influence between Beat writers and poets that he views as coinciding with “a determination to resocialize art,” (70). Another essay, “California Assemblage: The Mixed Message,” by curator and art historian Phillip Brookman, focuses on the importance of assemblage for various forms of cultural and social protest as evidenced by artists like Betye Saar. In fact, assembled works like Saar’s, played a vital role in feminist’s art of the 1970s. From Miriam Shapiro’s “femmagés” to Marisol’s wood constructions, collage and assemblage proved to be vital tools for creating ambiguous situations that made pointed political statements.

³⁶³ Seitz quotes Umberto Boccioni’s assertion that, “glass, wood, cardboard, iron, cement, horsehair, leather, cloth, mirrors, electric lights, etc.,” are all viable materials for futurist compositions,” (25).

³⁶⁴ Seitz, 26.

war and literary manifestation with an aesthetic commitment to abstract art” and adds, “sociologically, international dada was the response of bitter and spiritually injured intellectuals to a war jing[o] atmosphere.”³⁶⁶ Arguing against the appellation “neo-dada,”³⁶⁷ Seitz asks, “why (especially considering the overtone of tired academicism which ... [this term] can imply) is the prefix ‘neo’ more applicable in 1961 than it was in 1921?” “Social and emotional life,” he continues, “is scarcely more secure at present than it was during the youth of Jarry, Vache, Schwitters, or Duchamp.”³⁶⁸ Seitz’s statements reference the historical relevance of politics to art as well as the complex social and political situation of the early ‘60s, but avoids creating definitive links to current art production.

Continuing his strategy of keeping the political nature of assemblage indirect and non-specific, Seitz describes how “many [assemblage artists] cultivate attitudes that could be labeled

³⁶⁵ Some of the dadaists did have more explicit political connections. The Berlin dadaists, in particular, were affiliated with aspects of Marxism—mainly in terms of their desire to upset the bourgeois capitalist system. However, as the following excerpt from Tristan Tzara’s 1918 dada manifesto (one of several dada manifestos) makes clear, most dadaists rebelled against any kind of political label or agenda:

To put out a manifesto you must want: ABC

to fulminate against 1, 2, 3,

to fly into a rage and sharpen your wings to conquer and disseminate little abcs and big abcs...

I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things, and in principle I am against manifestoes, as I am against principles ...

³⁶⁶ Seitz, 33.

³⁶⁷ The term “neo-dada” was often used in a pejorative sense, to suggest, that like these artists’ materials, the concept was old or stale [Susan Hapgood, “Neo-Dada” in *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958-1962*, ed., Brian Wallis (New York: Universe Publishing, The American Federation of the Arts, 1994), 11]. This being the case, most artists avoided identification with the term. In a 1992 interview Allan Kaprow, artist and author of *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*, notes that the term “neo-dada” “was generally thrown around in criticism. No one said, ‘Oh isn’t it wonderful that you’re a Neo-Dadaist.’ It was a criticism, not a joyous utterance,” [Allan Kaprow, quoted in interview published in Susan Hapgood, *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958-1962*, 115]. He continued, explaining, “I took exception to that [being referred to as a neo-dadaist] because I really had none of the sociopolitical attitudes of the Dadaists,” (115). As curator Susan Hapgood observes,

Since Dada was, in part, a nihilist a reaction to the horrors of World War I, intent upon eradicating the entrenched conventions of art and shocking the complacent Bourgeoisie, the term “Neo-Dada” led critics to see in that movement a similar social and cultural critique. ... Gradually at first, and then increasingly in late 1962 and early 1963, critics contended that the so-called Neo-Dadaists were not against anything; at the most they were indifferent. Hapgood, 42.

³⁶⁸ Seitz, 87.

as ‘angry,’ ‘beat,’ or ‘sick’; they inherit a malaise shared by authors such as Kafka, Satre, Beckett, and Ionesco.”³⁶⁹ He also acknowledges, “the method of juxtaposition is an appropriate vehicle for feelings of disenchantment with the slick international idiom that loosely articulated abstraction has tended to become, and the social values this situation reflects.”³⁷⁰ Thus, in a mitigated form, Seitz suggests the relevance of the assemblage mode of construction for political commentary and, hints at the unspoken tension between the intensely political atmosphere of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s and the lack of explicit political commentary by assemblage artists.

Viewed in terms of Seitz’s covert construction of the political nature of assemblage, the ambiguous connections between Bontecou’s early reliefs and the politics of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s discussed by Hadler is in keeping with the contemporary artistic climate. The tenuous relationship to politics exhibited in Seitz’s formulation of assemblage is partly a reflection of the views of the previous established artistic genre, abstract expressionism. Focusing on universal questions concerning human origins and the fundamental character of life, the abstract expressionists avoided political references in their art, which in the ‘40s was viewed in relation to social realism and the Stalinist angle that demonstrated in the late ‘30s that communism in the USSR was a mask for totalitarianism and despotic rule.³⁷¹ Thus, assemblage artists inherited an accepted gap between politics and art that was only gradually bridged. Bontecou’s art is poised on this divide. As discussed in chapter three, her early reliefs reference many of the political issues of the time from the new wastefulness of the consumer culture and Cold War anxieties to environmental and feminist concerns. However, her works are not reducible to any single

³⁶⁹ Seitz, 87.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Polcari, “The Psychology of Crisis,” in *Abstract expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9.

political statement and project an ambiguous mixture of both the “wonders and horrors” of the period. This ambiguity testifies to the political and social complexity of the era as well as the tenuous separation between politics and art that was characteristic of the time.

The tensions and refractions between the Seitz’s, Judd’s and Hadler’s historical perspectives do not dissolve the boundaries between temporal layers. Instead they enact compelling interactions among the distinct possible histories of Bontecou’s early reliefs. In their different relations to abstract expressionism Seitz’s and Judd’s interpretations of Bontecou’s art reveal how her forms avoids being fully defined by either. In her transformation of materials and images, Bontecou’s constructions become their own worlds. Judd’s and Hadler’s different observations of organic and bodily references in Bontecou’s early reliefs expose the tension between organic or sensuous forms and the cool industrial shapes of many minimal works; similar to the later postminimalists her work embodies elements of each. Hadler’s overtly political consideration of Bontecou’s art moves away from Seitz’s avoidance of direct political commentary and shows how compelling tensions existed between the artistic scene and the world outside of it during the late ‘50s and early ‘60s. In a number of superficial ways the interrelations of each of the histories described in this thesis plays off one another and reveal underlying trends that effect Bontecou’s art. The many and diverse reactions against Greenberg’s modernist formalism were multifaceted and far-reaching, involving multiple stylistic categories, including Seitz’s assemblage and Judd’s specific objects. Similar to Greenberg’s formalism, the rigidity of Judd’s artistic views, as reflected in later minimalist art, sparked such subversive trends as the “eccentric” or “sensuous abstraction” Lippard describes, which developed opposing aesthetic and conceptual values. At the same time, political tensions

in the wider social context abutted sharply against this hermetic artistic climate. In Koselleck's view "That which makes a history into the historical cannot be derived from the sources alone: a theory of possible history is required so that the sources might be brought to speak at all."³⁷² In his theory of possible histories, perspectives become historical as particular persons, places and times are overtaken by the continuous passage of time. These perspectives become constructions of possible histories based on the distinct position of the temporal layer they inhabit. Thus, Seitz's curatorial theorization, Judd's critical discussion and Hadler's social-historical constructions are "brought to speak" through the possibilities they each propose according to their different historical perspectives; in addition, as this conclusion has demonstrated, they can be seen as conversing with one another through the conflicts and conjunctions of their separate views.

Existing within each of these changing contexts posited by Seitz, Judd, and Hadler, Bontecou's art occupies a space of continuous transition, but not in the sense of a progression from one movement to another. The most overarching generalization that can be made about Bontecou's early reliefs is that they have a determined indeterminacy: her reliefs appear designed to create contradictions and extend the play of perception and the consideration of meaning. Although she uses recognizable found materials from the everyday, she transforms them within the compositions of her works: these materials reference their original context, but also suggest other fantastic worlds. While in many works Bontecou creates a convincing illusion of infinite space, the image is delimited and, to a degree, subverted by her adherence to a rectangular frame that reminds one of the traditional format of painting and locates the viewer in the fine art context in which the works are viewed; one can briefly enter outer space, before one

³⁷² Koselleck, "Perspective and Temporality," 155.

is quickly returned to the gallery setting. Even the politicized account of Bontecou's art is caught up in the indeterminacy of her construction of meaning: both "wonders and horrors" are explored and celebrated, even though, at times, they constitute one and the same political or cultural event. Bontecou's forms inspire a dynamic oscillation among possible histories and interpretations. The resultant free play of thought recalls Kant's definition of beauty as, "an object's form of *purposiveness* insofar as it is perceived in the object *without the presentation of a purpose*."³⁷³ For him,

The very consciousness of a merely formal purposiveness in the play of the subject's cognitive powers, accompanying a presentation by which an object is given, is ... pleasure. ... This pleasure is not practical in any way ... Yet it does have a causality in it, namely to *keep* the state of the presentation itself, and [to keep] the cognitive powers engaged without any further aim. We linger on the contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself.³⁷⁴

Thus, in Kantian terms, the dynamic interplay among the possible histories of Bontecou's early reliefs and their multivalent potential interpretations becomes a means for understanding beauty as an ongoing dynamic rather than a determining and static standard.

³⁷³ Kant, 84.

³⁷⁴ Ibid, 68.