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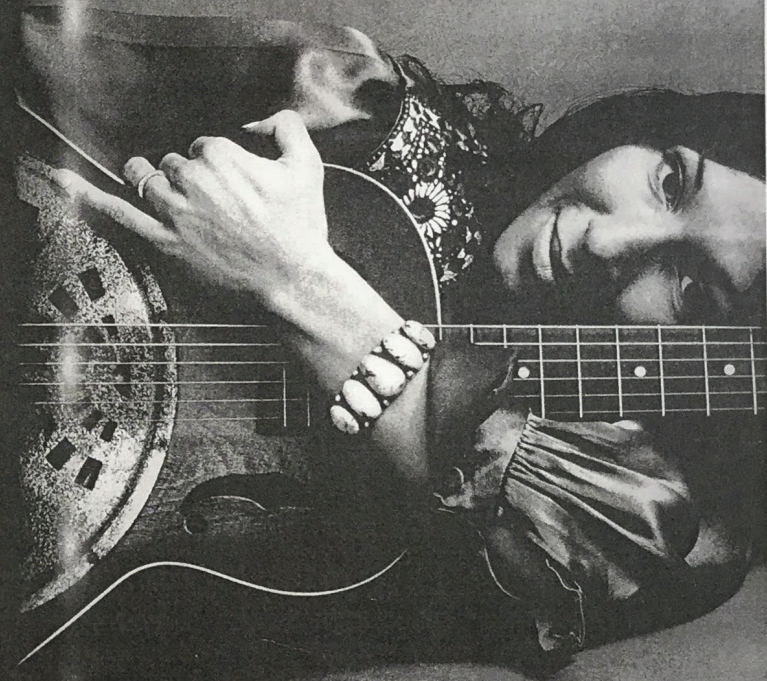
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5/69 p. 104 6 Duane Michaels



BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE, singer of protest. *"Indians—we don't all look like"*

Below: Buffy Sainte-Marie, whose sound is high with a vibrato, is a massive phenom first of the girl singers to write her own protest songs, simple, committed, moving. "Now That the Buffalo's Gone." An American born in Canada to Indian parents, Cree, educated at the University of Massachusetts, married, and she wants, in so she said: "to open myself and let people in. My songs come down to me from a ho



LEE BONTECOU, a powerful American sculptor. *"what I do, just is."*

Left: In her downtown loft-studio in New York, Lee Bontecou, a frail, small woman works on her newest experiment, an eight-foot-high plant form in frosted transparent plastic. Famous to collectors and museums, her major work lies in her dramatic constructions of raw canvas and steel. She wants no explanations of her work, gives none. When not Bontecou, she is Mrs. William Giles, has a two-year-old daughter, believes that for "artists New York is a pressure cooker," but one that she likes.

May '69 p. 194
Duane Michaels

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Studio View 5 - display shelf

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Studio view 3 - drawings

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Untitled - skeletal br

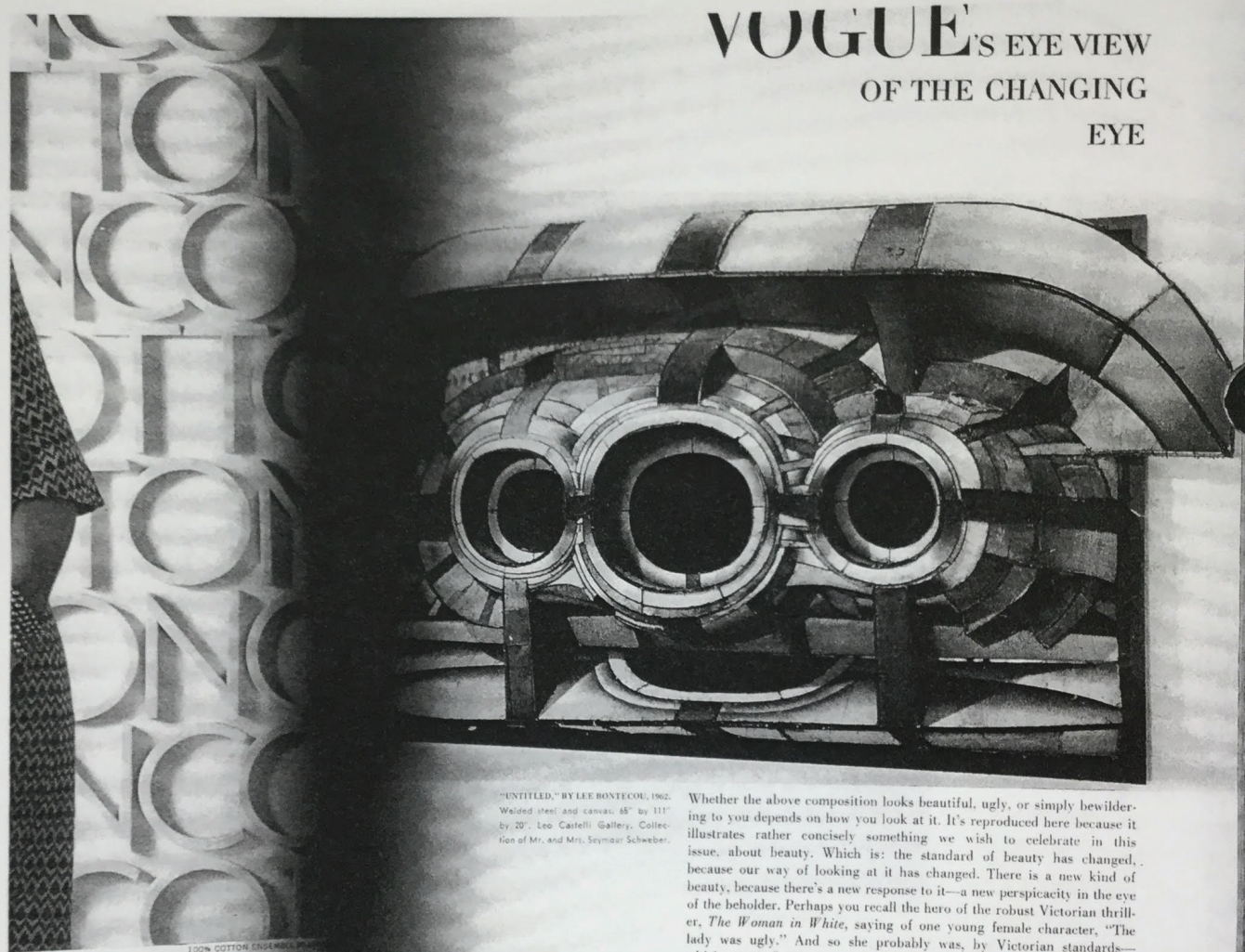
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Untitled-1997-72 darwin

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"UNTITLED," BY LEE BONTECOU, 1962.
Welded steel and canvas, 48" by 111"
by 20". Leo Castelli Gallery, Collec-
tion of Mr. and Mrs. Seymour Schwebel.

VOGUE'S EYE VIEW OF THE CHANGING EYE

100% COTTON ENGINEERED...
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teatable for looks, wear and comfort. As...
..the fiber you can tr

Whether the above composition looks beautiful, ugly, or simply bewildering to you depends on how you look at it. It's reproduced here because it illustrates rather concisely something we wish to celebrate in this issue, about beauty. Which is: the standard of beauty has changed, because our way of looking at it has changed. There is a new kind of beauty, because there's a new response to it—a new perspicacity in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps you recall the hero of the robust Victorian thriller, *The Woman in White*, saying of one young female character, "The lady was ugly." And so she probably was, by Victorian standards—which ran to Grecian noses, golden tresses, and big, blue, tear-brimmed eyes. By those standards, Sophia Loren's looks would get her no place. But by ours, Laura Fairlie—the heroine of *The Woman in White*—would look insipid. The new beauty comes on strong with a universal style and glow—a positive dash that rides right over the old specifics. She is hard to define but easy to spot. All you need is the new eye to see her with.

Untitled 1994

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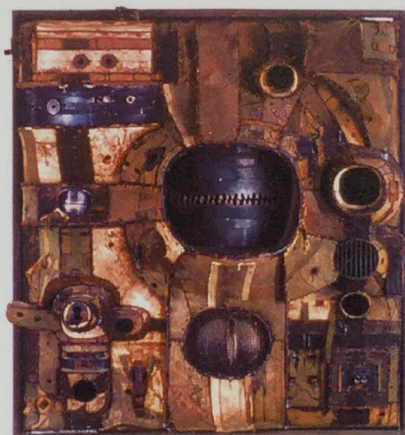
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Untitled 1994

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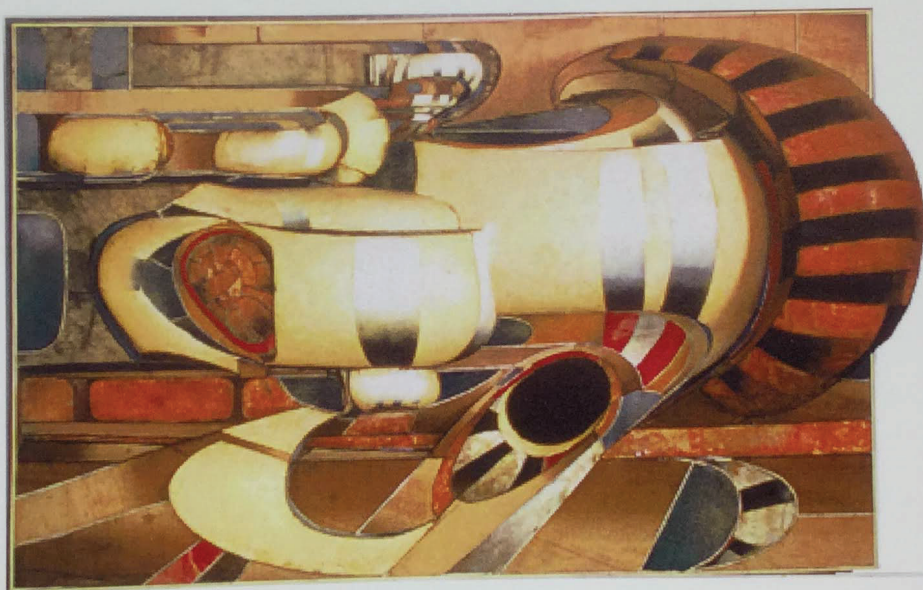


1962-72-bell

Lee Bontecou

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Untitled - 1966 - fonds Lee Bontecou

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Lee Bontecou

Untitled no. 38 1961

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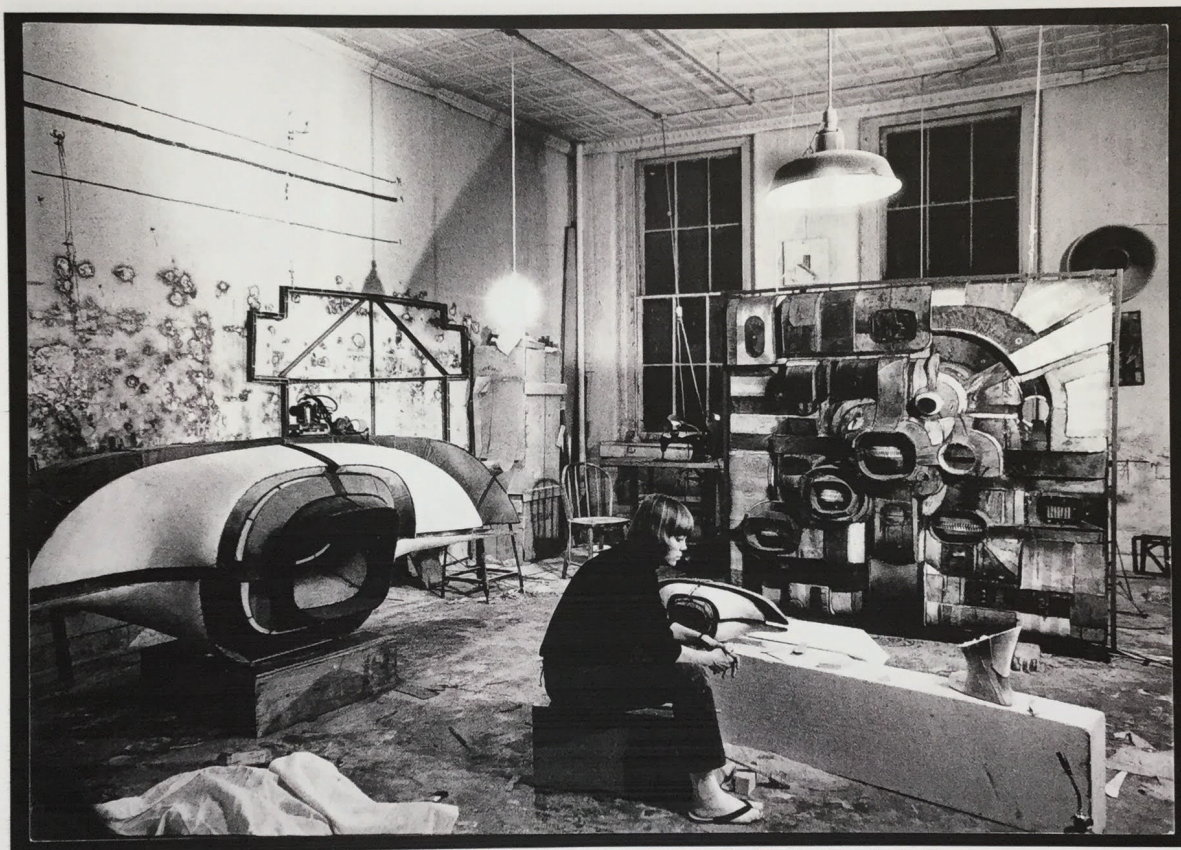


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by Hugo Mulas

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2Bontecou.tif

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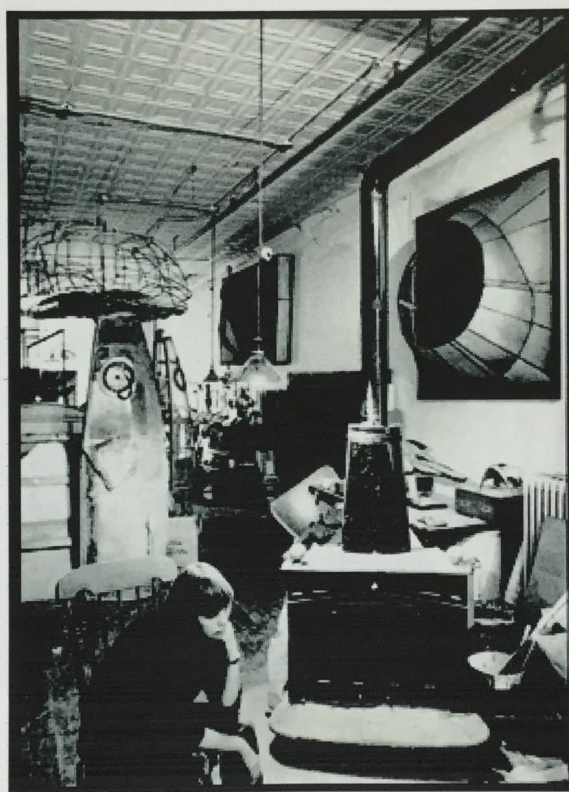


3 Bontecou.tif

8-bit CMYK flat TIFF file, 383x281 pixels (7.66x5.62 inches) @ 50.00 pixels/inch, written by Adobe Photoshop 6.0

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4 Bontecou.tif

8-bit CMYK flat TIFF file, 279x379 pixels (5.58x7.58 inches) @ 50.00 pixels/inch, written by Adobe Photoshop 6.0

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5 Bontecou.tif

8-bit CMYK flat TIFF file, 281x355 pixels (5.62x7.10 inches) @ 50.00 pixels/inch, written by Adobe Photoshop 6.0

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6 Bontecou.tif

8-bit CMYK flat TIFF file, 270x374 pixels (5.40x7.48 inches) @ 50.00 pixels/inch, written by Adobe Photoshop 6.0

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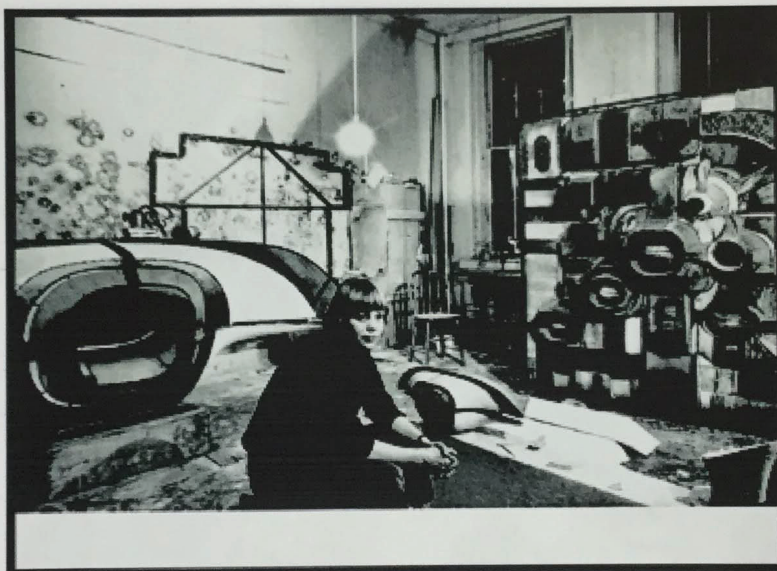


7 Bontecou.tif

8-bit CMYK flat TIFF file, 382x272 pixels (7.64x5.44 inches) @ 50.00 pixels/inch, written by Adobe Photoshop 6.0

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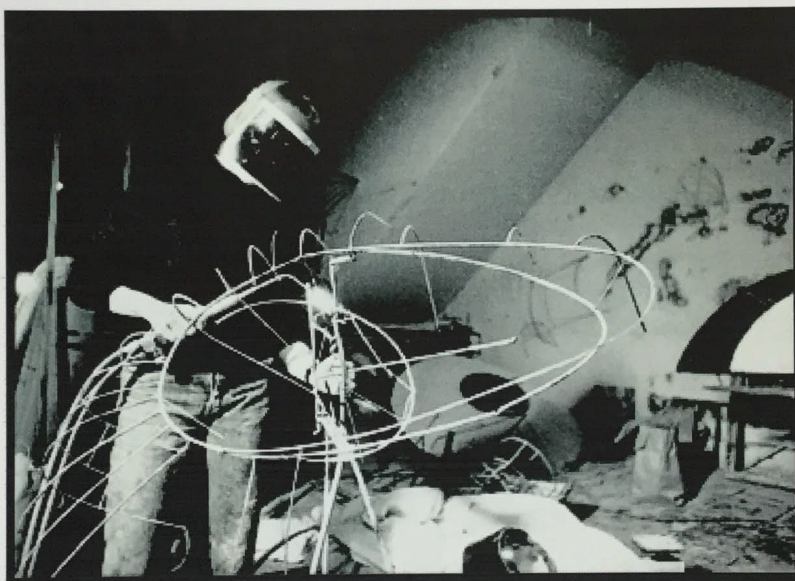


8 Bontecou.tif

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9 Bontecou.tif

8-bit CMYK flat TIFF file, 376x261 pixels (7.52x5.22 inches) @ 50.00 pixels/inch, written by Adobe Photoshop 6.0

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Unt_(CA_25246).jpg

Lee BONTÉCON
Untitled, 2001
Welded steel, wire mesh, porcelain and wire
45 x 47 x 21"

KNOEDLER GALLERY

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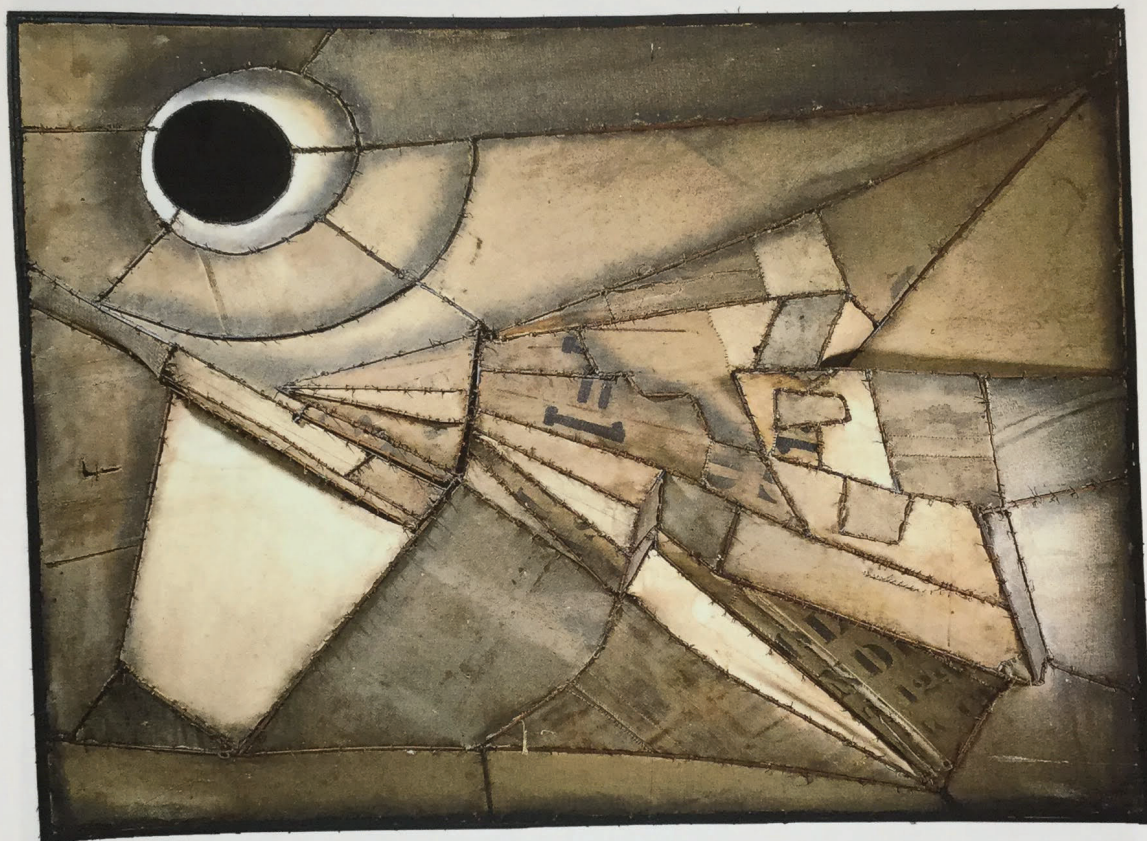
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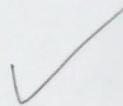
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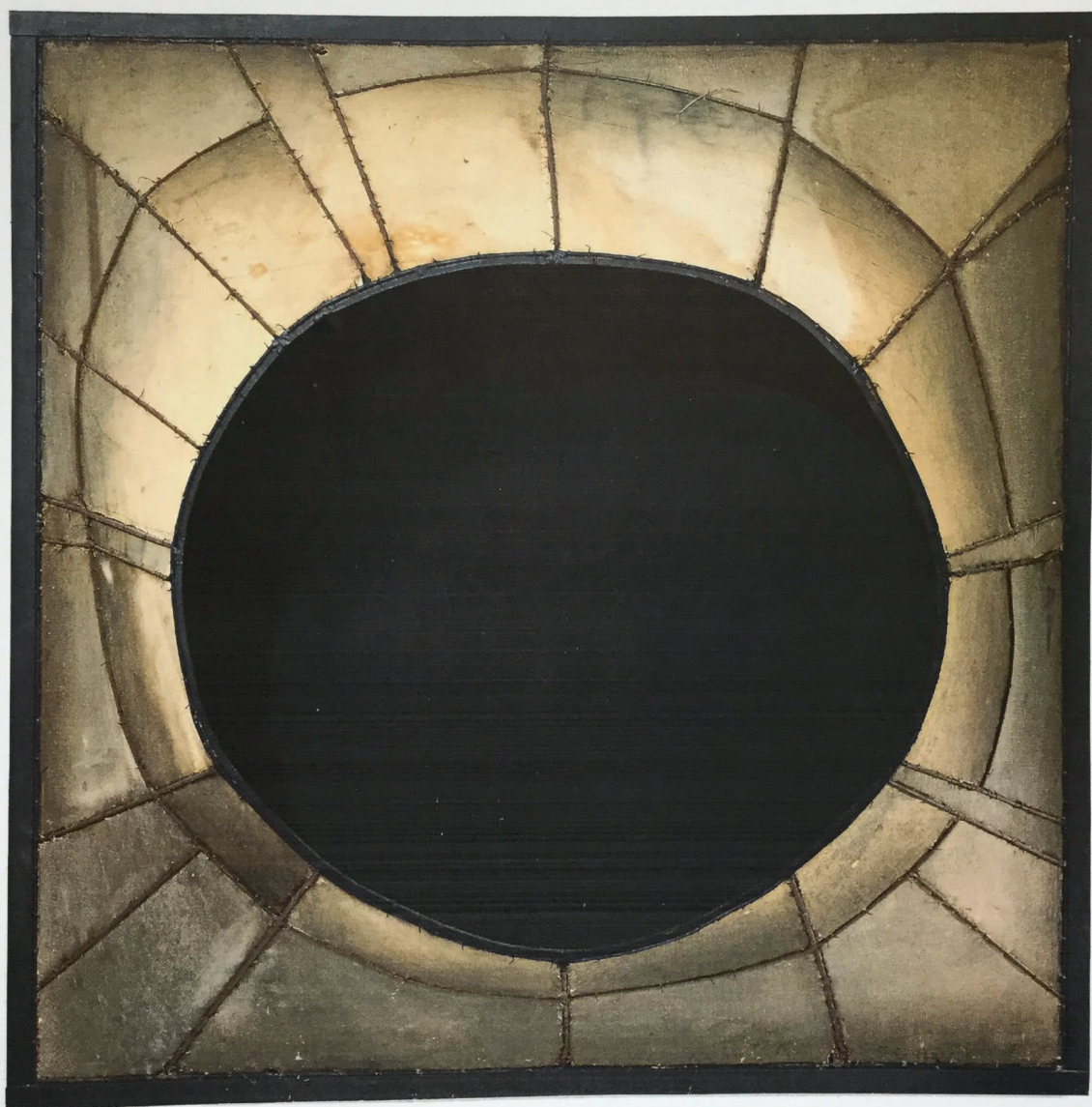


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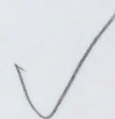


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HAMMER

Lee Bontecou: *A Retrospective*

October 5, 2003–January 11, 2004

UCLA HAMMER MUSEUM

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HAMMER

Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective

October 5, 2003–January 11, 2004

Elizabeth A. T. Smith



Co-organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the UCLA Hammer Museum

Above: Lee Bontecou in her Pennsylvania studio, 2003. Photo: Josh Titus

Right: *Untitled*, 1966. Welded steel, canvas, epoxy, leather, wire, and light. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; gift of Rober B. Mayer Family Collection (1991.85)

Back Cover: *Untitled*, 1997. Graphite on paper. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles

Cover: *Untitled* (detail), c. 1980–98. Welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, canvas, and wire. Collection of the artist, courtesy of Knoedler & Co., New York

One of the few women artists to achieve broad recognition in the 1960s, Lee Bontecou created a strikingly original body of work from the late 1950s to the present. Co-organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the UCLA Hammer Museum, this exhibition surveys almost fifty years of her work, including numerous recent sculptures and drawings that have never before been exhibited. It provides an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider an artist who has become a legendary figure due to the powerful impact of her work of the 1960s and 1970s and the relevance and interest it still holds for many younger artists.

Whether heroically scaled or intimate, Bontecou's predominantly abstract work has consistently incorporated figurative, organic, and mechanistic references to states of transformation between the natural and the man-made. From her early sculptures—wall-mounted, three-dimensional objects in which geometric fragments of canvas and other materials are stretched over and fastened onto welded metal framework—to the explosive intricacy of her most recent pieces, many of which are suspended in space, Bontecou's greatest preoccupation as an artist has been to encompass "as much of life as possible—no barriers—no boundaries—all freedom in every sense."

Born in 1931 in Providence, Rhode Island, and raised in Westchester County, New York, Bontecou attended the Art Students League in New York from 1952 to 1955, followed by a period of residence in Rome. She worked in a vein of abstracted figuration, sculpting animal and bird forms that in their crudeness and vigor anticipated the direction of her subsequent work. Upon her return to New York, Bontecou arrived at the idea of creating lightweight welded frameworks resembling boxes and infilling them with wire mesh, canvas, and muslin to impart a painterly sense of depth and illusion. The resulting objects, while primarily geometric in form, resembled rough-hewn machines with a curiously handmade presence.

Beginning in 1959, a large circular opening began to recur in Bontecou's sculpture, projecting from the surface of the work itself and framing a dark, receding inset. She intended these

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blackened voids to evoke mystery and a range of emotive responses to the unknown, the wondrous, and the sublime, prompted in part by her fascination with scientific and technological advances surrounding the exploration of outer space. At the same time, this aspect of her work refers to the underbelly of human nature, encompassing fear, violence, brutality, and war. In a statement accompanying the Museum of Modern Art's 1963 exhibition *Americans*, Bontecou said that her goal was to "build things that express our relation to this country—to other countries—to this world—to other worlds—in terms of myself. To glimpse some of the fear, hope, ugliness, beauty, and mystery that exists in all of us and which hangs over all the young people today."

References to airplanes, the wings of birds, and other anthropomorphic and mechanomorphic elements increasingly reverberated within Bontecou's sculpture, including a monumental work commissioned by Lincoln Center for the New York State Theater, and in numerous drawings of the early and mid-1960s. By the later 1960s Bontecou began to further shift the direction of her sculpture, developing works made of balsa wood and silk, resembling chrysalis forms. She also began to experiment with synthetic materials such as fiberglass and epoxy, departing from the rugged textures and receding spaces of her earlier pieces in favor of ballooning forms that appeared more rounded, finished, and protective.

Around 1969–70 Bontecou made a group of vacuum-formed plastic works in the forms of flowers, plants, and fish, the sections of which were affixed to suggest overlapping gills, petals, plates of armor, or shells. Embodying curiously disturbing interpretations of their subjects, the fish are sharply scaled, with ferocious teeth, shown in the act of swallowing and ingesting smaller species, while the flowers and plants appear sinister and mutated. This body of her sculptures directly reflects the negative implications of human degradation of the natural world, transmitting a pronounced ecological message.

During the 1970s and 1980s Bontecou devoted herself primarily to teaching in the Art Department at Brooklyn College, continuing to work in both sculpture and drawing over the next two decades. Her recent works include small porcelain sculptures that evoke miniscule and mysterious landscapes or galaxies and a group of suspended objects resembling airborne hybrids of organic and mechanistic forms. Concurrently, she has made a series of more representational sculptures derived from the figures and heads of birds—coming full circle to the subject matter of some of her earliest works, but with a markedly different expression that is graceful and surreal, comical and frightening, and compellingly intricate.

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Bontecou's innate sense of connection among nature, culture, and self and her emphatic commitment to a wide range of sources—from the art of ancient and non-Western cultures to abstract expressionism—have generated a profoundly original corpus of work that continues to evolve while eluding easy classification. Her continuous experimentation with materials and modes of making—while consistent in her use of certain key images and motifs—endows her work with an uncommon vibrancy and vitality. The lyricism and cornucopic sense of visual abundance emanating from her sculpture and drawing, in which recognizable forms from nature fuse with the abstract, are simultaneously unsettling, otherworldly, surreal, and fundamentally mysterious.


Elizabeth A. T. Smith is James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

The exhibition is curated by Elizabeth A. T. Smith in association with Ann Philbin, director of the UCLA Hammer Museum.

UCLA **HAMMER** MUSEUM
10899 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90024
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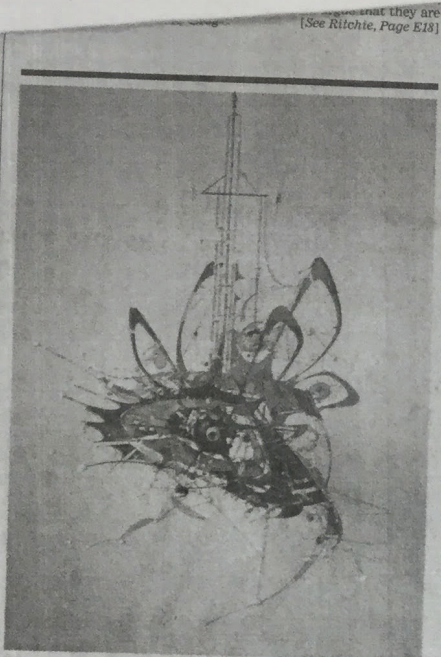
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National Sponsor  Altria

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MESMERIZING: Bontecou merged porcelain, fragile wire mesh and delicate welded rods in this new mobile sculpture.

ART REVIEW

Taking art to a higher level

Sculptor Lee Bontecou's profound exhibit at the UCLA Hammer is born from her 'classics.'

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
Times Staff Writer

Some art museum exhibitions come loaded with enormous expectations. None in recent memory has been larger than those accompanying "Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective," which opened Sunday at the UCLA Hammer Museum.

Bontecou is an extraordinarily gifted sculptor who, in the early 1970s, walked away from a flourishing career — one that is difficult enough for any artist to achieve, but one that was even harder for a woman in her day. Following a small 1977 retrospective at a college gallery in Upstate New York, which focused on her classic relief sculptures, she chose not to exhibit a substantive body of new work again. The Hammer retrospec-

tive is thus eagerly anticipated on two counts.

First, it offers the fullest accounting to date of the pivotal reliefs in welded steel, rough canvas and twisted wire that Bontecou made in New York beginning in 1959. And, it unveils for the first time and in considerable depth the work she has been making in her rural Pennsylvania studio for the last 26 years.

On both counts the show not only meets expectations — it actually exceeds them.

There was no doubt that the survey of Bontecou's early phase would be a joy. In 1993, L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art organized a small but absorbing presentation of 10 reliefs and about a dozen drawings from the 1960s. Its success was the catalyst for widely renewed interest in the long-gone artist's work.

MOCA curator Elizabeth A.T. Smith, now at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, went on to initiate the current retrospective, and she worked with Hammer director Ann Philbin to

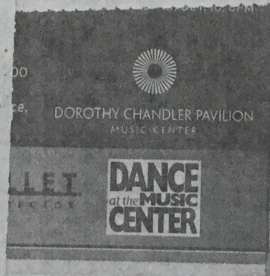
[See Art, Page E8]

ACK VALENTI is no stranger to the exercise of raw political power. After all, the Motion Picture Assn. of America either began in Washington as an aide to President Lyndon Johnson. And power, as in big-time studio clout, is what's really behind last week's hotly debated decision to ban the widespread dissemination of Oscar screeners as a way to stem the tide of digital piracy. The MPA has served as a whipping boy for the unpopular edict, which independent filmmakers say will undermine the Oscar chances of edgier art films. As Valentini told one reporter last week, "If there's a villain in the piece, it's me." But for like Jack Valentini goes out his way to take the blame for something, the one thing you can be sure of is that he's covering for someone else. When you

Screeners Behind the ban

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E8 TUESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2003

LOS ANGELES TIMES

CALENDAR

Bontecou returns in a masterful display

[Art, from Page E1] organize a national tour. (The show, after moving on to Chicago in February, will conclude next summer at New York's Museum of Modern Art.) The largest complement of sculptures and drawings on view dates from the fecund early period between 1959 and 1967, when Bontecou made her first indelible contribution to art.

But what of the more recent work, which is having its public debut now? Bontecou's last solo show three decades ago at Leo Castelli Gallery focused on vacuum-formed plastic sculptures of fish suspended from the ceiling and mutant-looking flowers standing upright on pedestals; it was not well-received. A selection of both is included here. While their significance in the transition toward what was to come is plain, as independent sculptures they haven't improved with age.

However, Bontecou's new work turns out to be fully of a piece with her "classics" of the 1960s—in ambition and achievement as well as in their astonishing level of formal invention. With its shimmering evanescence, the recent sculpture does not look like the old, but it is born of it in ways profound and mov-



GLENN KOBRIE Los Angeles Times

IN SPOTLIGHT AGAIN: Sculptor Lee Bontecou walked away from a flourishing career in the early '70s.

ing. The earliest sculptures on view hardly predict such future glory. Bronze and terra cotta figures of wild animals—totemic, foreboding and pedestal-bound—they are post-World War II versions of a 19th century European tradition of *animalier* sculpture. Critic Robert Storr, writing in the show's generally

excellent catalog, aptly describes the widespread genre in the 1950s as "the Aesop's Fables school of nuclear age apocalypses." Common among such minor artists of the preceding generation (Bontecou was born in 1931) as Italy's Marino Marini, Poland's Theodore Roszak and France's Germaine Richier, as well as Bontecou's English contemporary, Elizabeth Frink, it was modern sculpture's clumsy answer to the liberating aesthetic of Abstract Expressionist painting.

In 1959, though, freshly back from two years spent studying in Rome, Bontecou transformed her work. If you crossed the lush organic blossom of a floribunda rose with the ferocious carapace of a brute engine on an F-14 fighter jet, you might end up with something in the ballpark Bontecou began to play in.

Scraps of coarse tarpaulin, old military fatigues and even lengths of fire hose are stitched with bits of sharp copper wire onto welded armatures of steel. They are built up in organic mounds and curves, like an aerial view of topography. Hung on the wall, the large, grim reliefs seem almost like paintings that have been subjected to fierce internal pressures, until they swelled, erupted and split wide open.



UCLA Hammer Museum

'UNTITLED, 1962': The exhibit offers the fullest accounting to date of the reliefs that Bontecou made in N.Y. beginning in 1959.



UCLA Hammer Museum

'UNTITLED, 1997': Bontecou's works contain repeated suggestions of eye sockets and eye shapes.



'Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective'

Where: UCLA Hammer Museum, 10699 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood

When: Tuesdays, Saturdays-Sundays, noon-7 p.m.; Wednesdays-Fridays, noon-9 p.m.; Closed Mondays.

Ends: Jan. 11

Price: Adults, \$5; seniors, \$3

Contact: (310) 443-7000

neously, they occupy the two zones of space where earth-bound viewers cannot live—under water and in the sky.

But the sculptures are formally flawed. Descriptive natural figures rendered in plastic seem inevitably like toys—disposable and disposable.

Bontecou resolved the formal problem in the same way she did with her "Aesop's Fables animals" in 1959. Her magnificent new works from the 1980s and after might at first seem to be conventional mobiles—curved, sail-like forms of fragile wire mesh, delicate welded rods and porcelain beads that recall eye sockets from the parched skulls of ancient birds, all turning in space as if suspended from the ceiling. But they're not.

Instead, like her classics from the 1960s, the new works are reliefs. A relief is a mode of sculpture in which forms and figures are distinguished from a surrounding plane surface. Usually that plane surface is affixed to a wall. Bontecou began to suspend the plane in space, out in the middle of a room.

She doesn't allow her forms and figures free rein. Instead, she spot-welds. Her intricate webs of straight and curved rods and sails are carefully constructed, so that a dominant visual plane is established in space. Subsidiary planes seem to revolve around it. Particles explode out from those.

The new work creates a new form: mobile reliefs.

Tellingly, at both big moments of transition, drawing has been essential to Bontecou's enterprise. In the late 1950s and the early 1980s, drawing is where her ideas were worked out. The exhibition is rich in examples. (Notably, the 1970 flower drawings are far superior to the flower sculptures, which were made before them.) For a sculptor—one who mucks about in three dimensions—the two-dimensional plane of a piece of paper can be crucial.

The mobile reliefs contain re-

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work turns out to be ratty of a piece with her "classics" of the 1960s — in ambition and achievement as well as in their astonishing level of formal invention. With its shimmering evanescence, the recent sculpture does not look like the old, but it is born of it in ways profound and mov-

view hardly predict their future glory. Bronze and terra cotta figures of wild animals — totemic, foreboding and pedestal-bound — they are post-World War II versions of a 19th century European tradition of *animalier* sculpture. Critic Robert Storr, writing in the show's generally

school of nuclear age apocalypses." Common among such minor artists of the preceding generation (Bontecou was born in 1931) as Italy's Marino Marini, Poland's Theodore Roszak and France's Germaine Richier, as well as Bontecou's English contemporary, Elizabeth Frink, it was modern sculpture's clumsy answer to the liberating aesthetic of Abstract Expressionist painting.

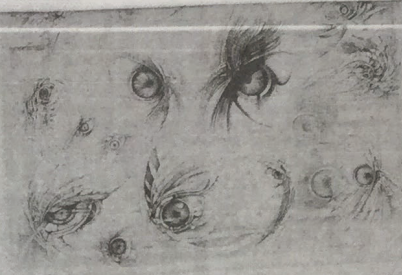
In 1959, though, freshly back from two years spent studying in Rome, Bontecou transformed her work. If you crossed the lush organic blossom of a floribunda rose with the ferocious carapace of a brute engine on an F-14 fighter jet, you might end up with something in the ballpark Bontecou began to play in.

Scraps of coarse tarpaulin, old military fatigues and even lengths of fire hose are stitched with bits of sharp copper wire onto welded armatures of steel. They are built up in organic mounds and curves, like an aerial view of topography. Hung on the wall, the large, grim reliefs seem almost like paintings that have been subjected to fierce internal pressures, until they swelled, erupted and split wide open.

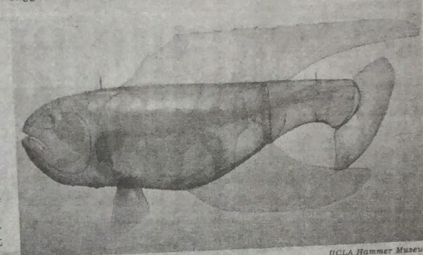
Across the surface, volcano-like cones backed in black velvet or industrial soot open physically shallow tunnels of visually deep space. These confounding configurations — thrusting voids — are stunningly sexual abstractions. And the occasional additions of band saw "teeth" make them no less aggressively riveting.

As images, Bontecou's powerful reliefs seem to contain all the personal and public conflicts of their tumultuous Cold War era. In a famous review reprinted in the catalog, sculptor Donald Judd described them as encompassing "something as social as war" and "something as private as sex, making one an aspect of the other."

They build, in short, on a Surrealist tactic of simultaneity of



'UNTITLED, 1969': Bontecou's works contain repeated suggestions of eye sockets and eye shapes.



'UNTITLED, 1969': A vacuum-formed plastic fish was not well-received three decades ago but it signified what was to come.

vision, in which identity is in perpetual flux. By the time Bontecou began working, Surrealism had been largely banished as an avenue of avant-garde discourse — an old European language, supplanted by Abstract Expressionism.

Instead, aesthetic purification was being claimed as essential to American art. But Bontecou's reliefs are hardly pure. A rambunctious rectangular wall as sex, making one an aspect of the other."

hybrid form matched the simultaneity of vision in her imagery.

Given this startling development — and the degree to which it was widely recognized as significant — what came next is hard to fathom. Bontecou's subsequent turn to modest fish and flower sculptures cannot help but seem retrograde.

The mutant quality of her crystalline flowers, with stamens that morph into intravenous feeding tubes, is certainly understandable. So is the "in between" quality of fish suspended overhead as mobiles: Simulta-

ne 1960s, the show was a relief. A relief is a mode of sculpture in which forms and figures are distinguished from a surrounding plane surface. Usually that plane surface is affixed to a wall. Bontecou began to suspend the plane in space, out in the middle of a room.

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The mobile reliefs contain repeated suggestions of eye shapes, both as internal fragments and as the reliefs' overall form. These eyes-in-the-sky locate the spatial plane conceptually.

Imagine the plane of human perception (or consciousness) with which you apprehend experience. The world "out there" is joined to the one "in here." The ashen sphere of history is united with the resplendent promise of the future. The death-machinery of war unites with the natural refinement of a dragonfly's wing. The expanding cosmos collapses into the nucleus of an atom.

The stuff that holds them all together is the human fabrication called a work of art. Bontecou's art is a masterful tour de force, mesmerizing and poignant.

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Angered artist has her say

Los Angeles Times

Saturday, October 4, 2003

Lee Bontecou's 11th-hour response to a critic is inserted in her retrospective catalog.

By ALLAN M. JALON
Special to The Times

A bitter controversy has erupted behind the scenes of a much-anticipated retrospective of artist Lee Bontecou at the UCLA Hammer Museum, pitting the artist and her husband against a prominent New York art critic and curator who wrote one of the catalog's five essays — a dispute over nothing less than the basic meaning and sources of the art that Bontecou has been making in rural seclusion for the last 30 years.

The exhibition, "Lee Bontecou: a Retrospective" is scheduled to open Sunday at the Westwood museum.

In his essay "Seek and Hide," Robert Storr, an artist and former curator of contemporary art at New York's Museum of Modern Art, begins by describing how Bontecou "dropped out of the art world at the height of her fame in the mid-1970s," calling her "a remote and enigmatic figure."

He then goes on to describe the difficulty of writing about someone who was "inaccessible, uncooperative, or has spoken little on his or her own behalf." He chronicles the history of her critical position in the art world. Storr draws wide-ranging connections between Bontecou and many other artists, from Bruce Conner to Robert Rauschenberg, a web of associations that ranges from European painting in the 1940s to American assemblage on the West Coast.

Bontecou, it seems, reacted with a determination to be seen on her own terms. At the 11th hour, the normally reserved artist reportedly objected to the inclusion of the essay in the catalog, but was told it was too late to make changes.

Museum officials said she then asked that exhibition organizers in Chicago and Los Angeles include a special "Artist's Statement" aimed at what she called "inaccuracies and irrelevant contextualizations."

Bontecou's essay — consisting of a single-page insert in the front of the catalog — does not directly assail Storr. But her husband,

William Giles, issued a statement to the press in which he savagely criticized the critic.

"It is unfortunate that Storr failed to talk with her or view her recent work before drafting his article," Giles says in the statement. "His failure to interview her has resulted in misleading speculations, trumped-up connections to artists she has no connection with, and self-serving hyperbole."

In an interview, Giles broadened his attacks to include the curators at the Hammer and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, which organized the show and the catalog, for "betrayal" of the artist by excluding her collaboration with Storr on the essay. Storr did not respond to several requests for comment. But according to Hal Kugeler, director of publications for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Storr is "devastated" by the controversy. Kugeler said the museum envisioned this as a scholarly essay and was not interested in having Storr contact the artist.

Museum officials in Chicago and Los Angeles said they were delighted with the essay.

The dispute over the catalog entry sheds light on the issue of the sometimes difficult distance between the private world of making art and the public arena in which it is presented.

Bontecou, in Los Angeles for the opening of the retrospective, did not return calls. In her "Artist's Statement," she does not address the specifics of Storr's essay. However, she does write that "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."

She does not address which "inaccuracies" and unsatisfactory contextual arguments in Storr's essay upset her. But her statement suggests that Storr's approach and the critical judgments of the art world in general have overlooked her personal sense of the forces that motivated her. Kugeler said he believed the statement had been developed too late to get in the catalog's hardcover version on sale in bookstores and online. It can be found in the soft-cover catalog in the museum's bookstore.

According to Giles, Bontecou originally had wanted the statement placed opposite Storr's essay, but curators argued for inserting it in the front of the book. With an almost poetic austerity that barely hides the pain of not being seen as she wishes, the artist says: "In the past, when I tried to express my thoughts, eyelids drooped and other agendas were doled out. As a result I stopped trying and spoke only through my work."

"So I am writing this now during my retrospective to put all that to rest, and to express my own voice" about her influences. And what are they?

Greek vases and drawings in the Metropolitan Museum (of Art in New York), fossils at the Museum of Natural History. At the Museum of Modern Art, "just to see a single Brancusi sculpture was enough." The one art world movement she names came in the "most wonderful period of Abstract Expressionism." She mentions artists who range from the well known — the sculptor John Chamberlain — to her husband, a painter, and gives the most space to a relatively unknown artist named Doc Group, who lived in Venice and died several years ago.

She describes Group, whom she met in New York in the 1950s, as "a rough and tough New Yorker who, though his main interests were electronics and aviation, painted the most delicately beautiful and sensitive Oriental landscapes on rice paper and mounted them on scrolls." Group's scrolls, Bontecou writes, "still haunt my imagination."

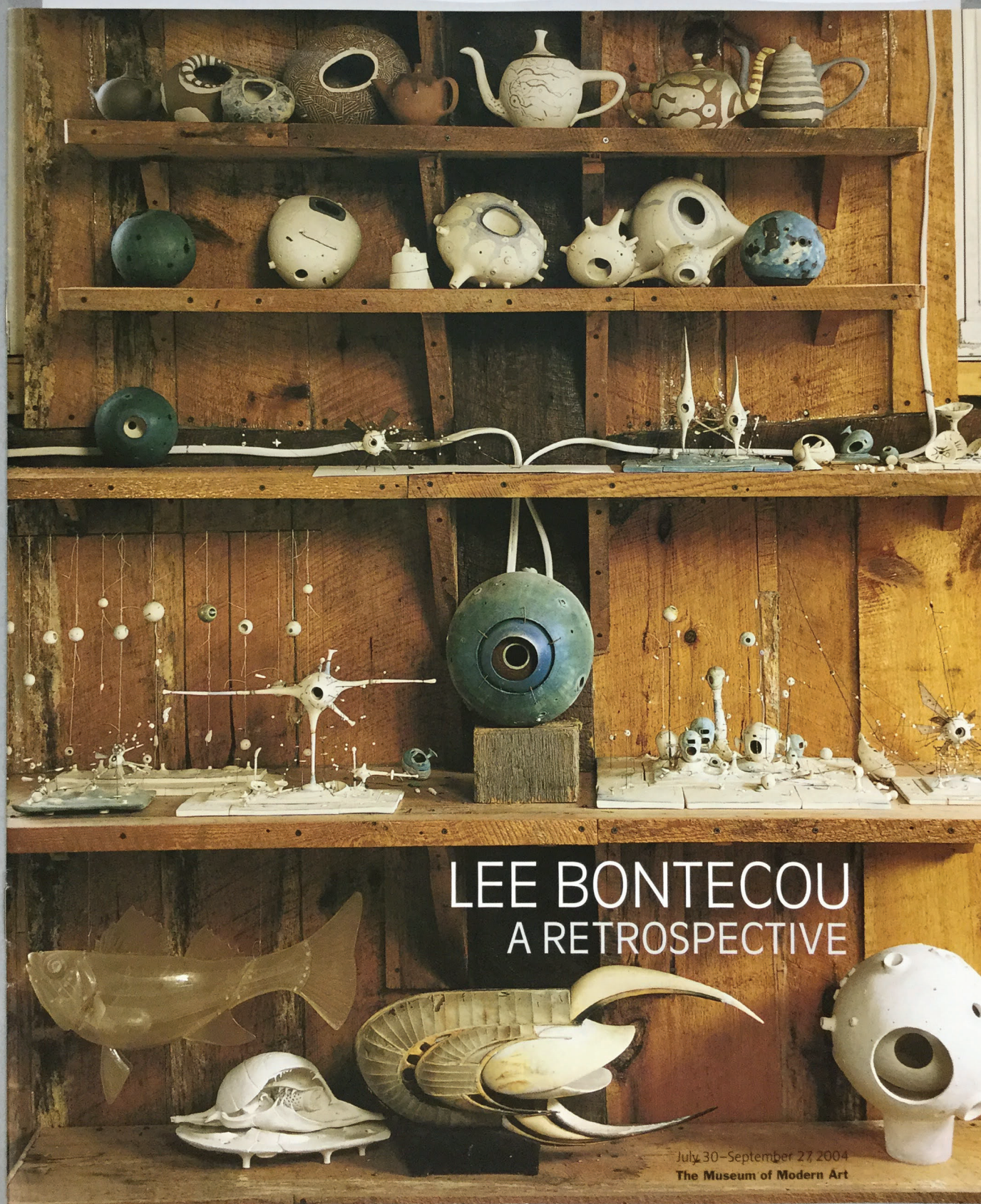


JASON SIPES For The Times

HER OWN VOICE: Normally reserved Lee Bontecou sets the record straight about the influences on her art.

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LEE BONTECOU

A RETROSPECTIVE

July 30–September 27, 2004
The Museum of Modern Art

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Untitled, 1957. Terra-cotta over reinforced cement, 20 x 63 x 19" (50.8 x 160 x 48.3 cm). Private collection.
Photo: © Malcolm Varon

One of the most singular artists of the second half of the twentieth-century, Lee Bontecou has created a strikingly personal body of work marked by an eccentric use of materials and processes. The first comprehensive overview of the artist's oeuvre, *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective* spans over forty years of remarkable output, presenting not only the artist's celebrated early welded-steel reliefs, but also her lesser-known, recent suspended pieces. Documenting the complexity and scope of Bontecou's oeuvre, this exhibition includes over 100 sculptures and drawings from the late 1950s through 2002. Drawn from private and public collections as well as the artist's own holdings, a number of the works featured here have rarely or never before been on view.

This exhibition offers the unique opportunity to experience Bontecou's work within the context of its own multifaceted autonomy, allowing for insight into the ways the artist's recurring motifs intertwine and mutate, appear and reappear with vigorous assertiveness and breathtaking skill. Harnessing the potency of her imagination, Bontecou evokes themes that are, on one level, quite self-referential, yet on another level allude to the wider context of human experience. The worlds that she has created invoke the continuous interplay, at once formal and philosophical, between conditions of the organic and the artificial. And although her oeuvre is firmly grounded in a keen observation of the natural world, it is her oneiric, even delirious vision that profoundly transforms what is seen into what might be.

Ingenious inventions and intricate manual work were familiar activities from Bontecou's childhood. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1931, the artist was raised in Westchester County, New York, spending summers in Nova Scotia, Canada, in close contact with nature. Her mother worked at a factory wiring submarine transmitters during World War II, and her father and uncle made the first all-aluminum canoe. Bontecou attended the Art Students League in New York from 1952–55, where she studied academic painting techniques and sculpture in plaster, clay, and cement with William Zorach. "I had taken the drawing class, then I took the painting. And then I thought, 'Well, I'll just go down and try sculpture.' And

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that was that. I never came up afterward."¹ She spent the summer of 1954 at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine, where she learned welding, a process that opened up a whole range of possibilities for sculptural experimentation. In 1956, a Fulbright scholarship took her to Rome, where she stayed until 1958. "I was in Italy for a while, and at this time, still experimenting. I was trying to search for my own language, my own statement, and still trying to find materials, so I experimented with terra-cotta over reinforced cement. I did a series of birds, and they were all kind of grounded."² Bontecou's sculpture from this period anticipates the archetypal structure of the various bodies of sculptural work that she would later develop: a composite three-dimensional structure comprised of multiple sections or facets that are constructed to forge an object which paradoxically alternates between synthetic wholeness and disjunctive entropy. "I lived in a terra-cotta factory and used clay. I'd lay clay over the welded metal frames, let it dry, take it off, fire it, and cement it back. It was almost like a mosaic, made in pieces. I still work in pieces. That way I can extend the surface way beyond what it will naturally do. I get involved with space."³

While in Rome, Bontecou also experimented extensively with drawings, testing innovative techniques. "One day I found that by cutting off the oxygen from my blowtorch tanks and just drawing with the acetylene, I got a beautiful black line. I started making huge soot drawings. I finally got that dark that I wanted, the black I wanted. And a kind of landscape, or a worldscape.... It just opened up a new thought."⁴

These early drawings prefigure distinctive features of future work, introducing the deep velvety black that would become evident both in her later drawings (through the use of soot) and sculpture (through the use of dull, light-absorbing fabrics). The early drawings also introduce the motif of the circular void, which, when transformed into frontal openings, would become a pervasive iconographic and structural element in her work of the following years.

Untitled. c. 1958. Soot on paper, 30 1/2 x 40" (77.5 x 101.6 cm). The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

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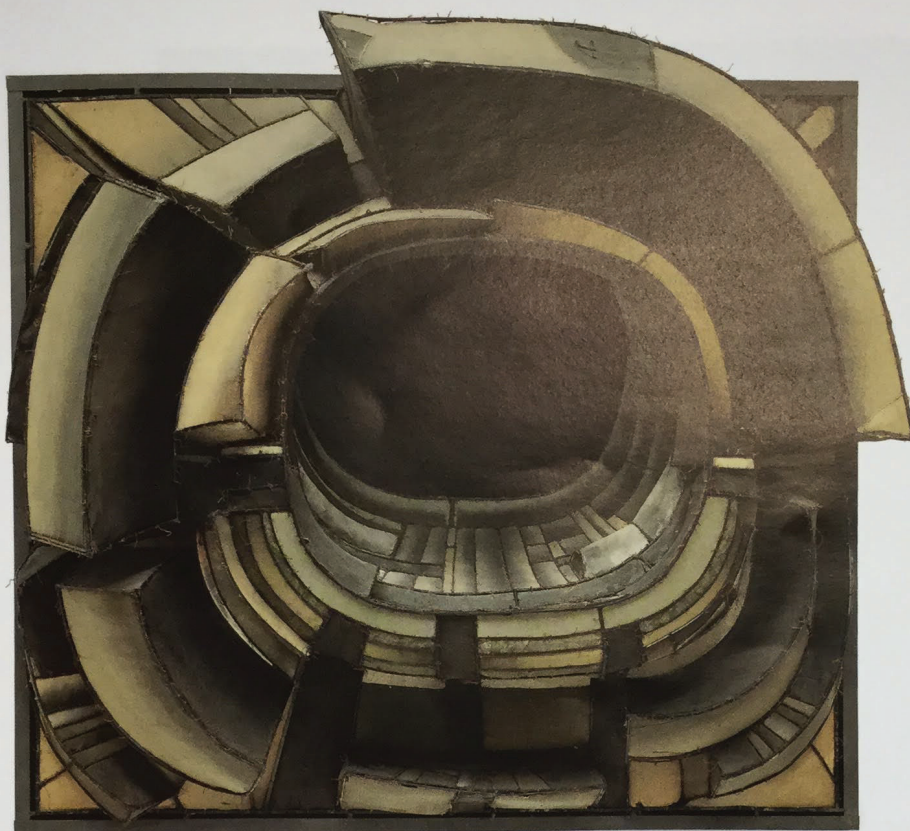


Untitled. 1959. Welded steel, canvas, and wire, 31 x 27 x 27" (78.7 x 68.6 x 68.6 cm). © Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

Upon her return to New York, in 1958, Bontecou moved into a studio on Avenue C and Sixth Street, where her sculpture underwent a radical departure. The welded metal armatures that had been latent in her earlier terra-cotta and cement sculptures would soon emerge into the foreground, and this now visible framework became the distinctive, primary element of her work. She started welding together lightweight metal frames, to which she would secure sized pieces of canvas with wire, reinforcing the canvas with rabbit-skin glue, thereby stretching and tightening the fabric. Twisting conventions of frame and image, this new way of working offered Bontecou the possibility of incorporating a pictorial, painterly quality into spatial play. In these works, the viewer's perceptual orientation goes back and forth between the "image" and the concreteness imposed by the materiality of the sculpture.

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 was so heavy; there is no illusionary depth. But this canvas was the answer. I could push a part of this 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.⁵

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Over the following years, Bontecou's welded metal-and-canvas boxes gained in complexity, scale, and suggestiveness. Their manner of construction implies a series of concentric elements that appear simultaneously to advance and retreat in a succession of outward and inward movements, suggesting an endless exchange of absorption and expulsion. The work also increasingly incorporated a range of found materials scavenged from the street or the laundry below the artist's studio (such as heavy-duty canvas from mailbags and conveyor belts) or purchased on Canal Street (grommets, bolts, washers, spools, tarpaulins, saw blades, helmets, army-surplus items). Bontecou seemed to be attracted to these readymade utilitarian objects' rough materiality and the layers of meaning they carried. "I started finding all kinds of nice materials. Old mailbags—I found them under the mail-boxes.... I started cutting up the canvas. And I would get wonderful values with it. I could get depth that was not possible in the regular pieces of canvas. If I did it all in steel or metal, I wouldn't get the kind of illusion that you have in painting."⁶

Untitled. 1961. Welded steel, canvas, velveteen, wire, and soot, 6' 8¼" x 7' 5" x 34 ¼" (203.8 x 226 x 88 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Kay Sage Tanguy Fund

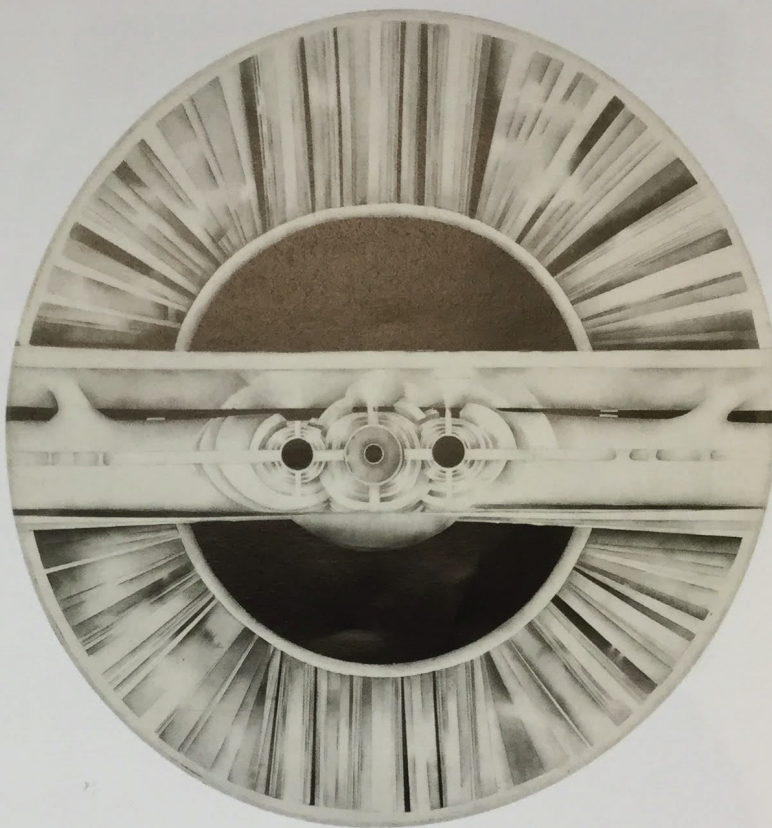
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Untitled. 1961. Welded steel, canvas, velvet, saw blades, rope, pipe fittings, soot, spools, washers, grommets, and wire, 72 3/4 x 66 x 25 7/16" (184.5 x 167.6 x 64.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase (61.41). Photo: Geoffrey Clements, © 1996 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

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Reminiscing about this period, Bontecou notes two parallel practices in which she would alternately engage: on the one hand, she generated works that pointed to the exploration of space, reflecting a utopian perspective in relation to technological development; on the other, she created works that were predominantly black, employing visual clues that obliquely addressed recent histories of destruction and anger.

I was angry. I used to work with the United Nations program on the short-wave radio in my studio. I used it as background music, and in a way the anger became part of the process. During World War II we'd been too young. But at this time, all the feelings I had back then came to me again.

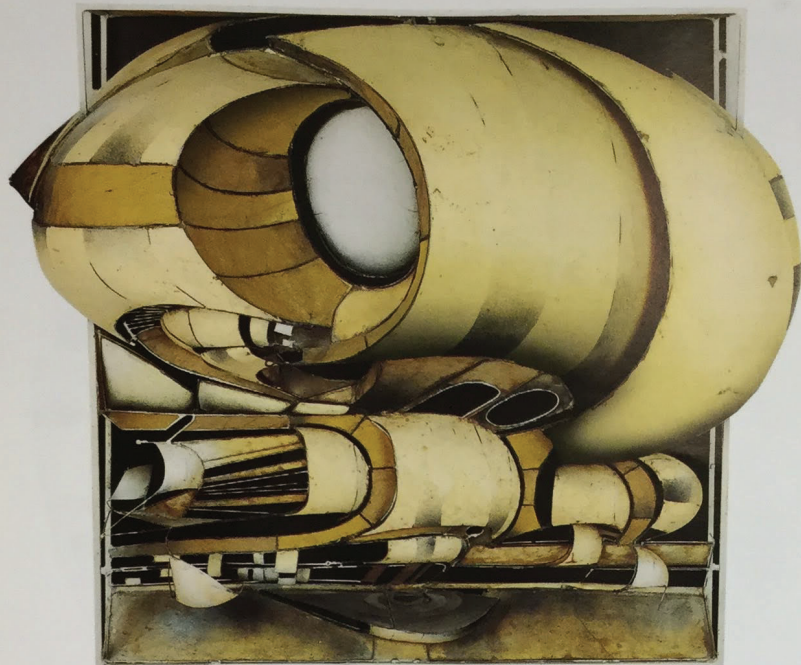
I'd have to stop and turn to more open work, work that I felt was more optimistic—where, for example, there might be just one single opening, and the space beyond it was like opening up into the heavens, going up into space. The other kind of work was like war equipment. With teeth.... It was sort of a memorial to my feelings. I never titled any of these. Once I started to, and it seemed to limit people to a certain response, so I didn't continue. I hate the feeling of being put in a pigeonhole.⁷

I had a sort of love-hate affair with prop-jets. I love the look of them, particularly the dark nose cone, which has a kind of power. The jet form harks back to insect types such as the dragonfly, and in this way it is related to nature.⁸

Untitled. 1963. Graphite and soot on muslin, 6' 9⁷/₈" (208 cm) diam. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Laura P. Hall Memorial Fund. Photo: Bruce M. White

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Untitled. 1966. Welded steel, canvas, chamois, epoxy, plexiglass, and wire, 33 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (84.4 x 85.1 x 36.8 cm). Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis

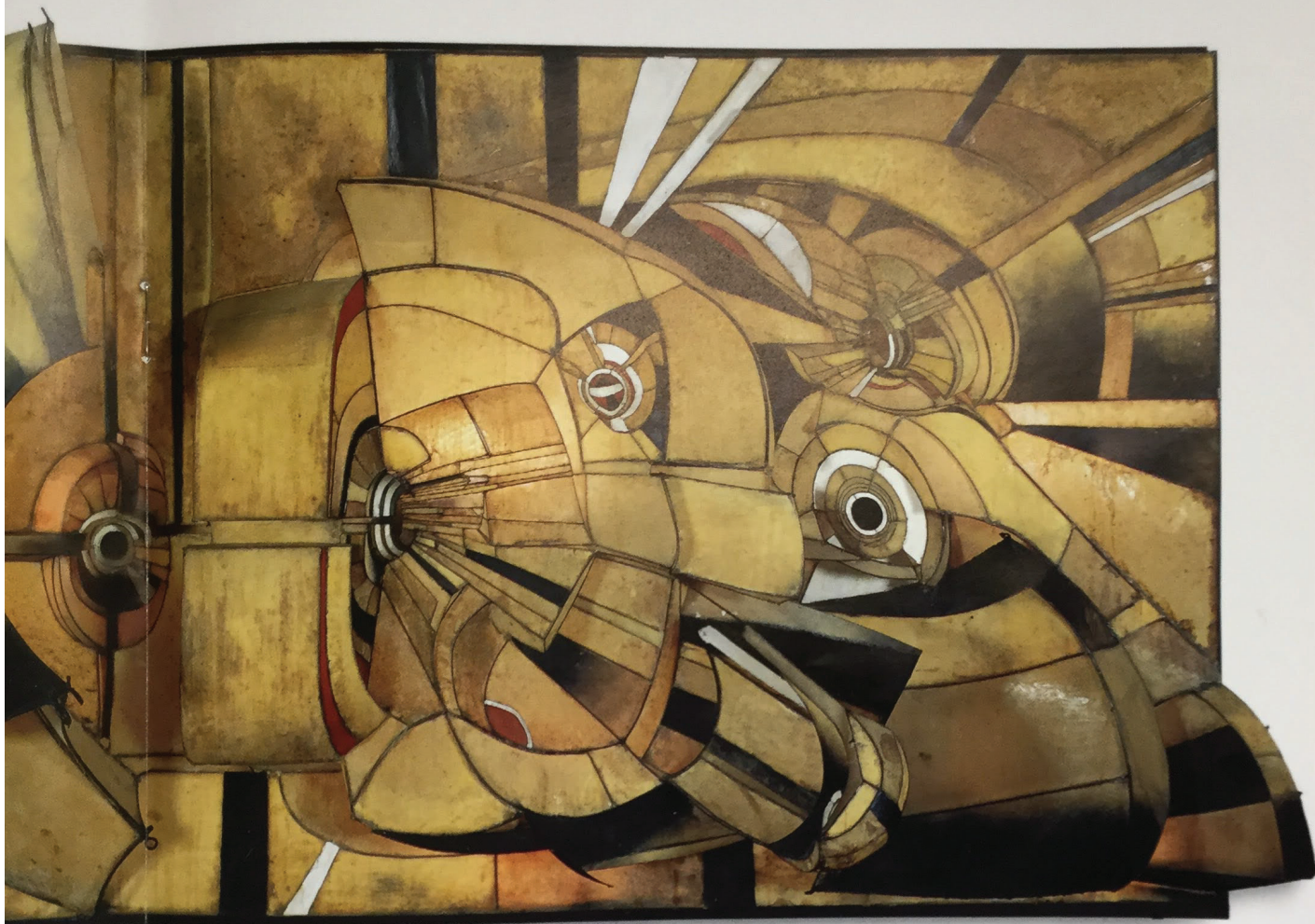


Untitled. 1964. Welded steel, canvas, epoxy, velveteen, and wire, 9 x 27 x 14" (22.9 x 68.6 x 35.6 cm). Collection of Joel Wachs. Photo: Robert Lorenzson



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In 1963, Bontecou moved to a new studio on Wooster Street, and although still working with metal frames, she started to employ fiberglass with airplane glue, covered with several coats of sanded epoxy, as well as leather and chamois (in addition to—or in lieu of—canvas). These materials allowed her forms to gain a kind of aerodynamic character—or, as she suggested, “working with the feeling of wind and sails.”⁹ The character of Bontecou’s stitching technique—the exposed spiky wiring that had characterized her sculpture since 1959—gradually gave way to smoother, more finished, sinuous configurations, amplifying the streamlined quality of the increasingly aerodynamic structures.

Color also seemed to play an unprecedented role during this period. Ocher, amber, red, blue, and gold were added to Bontecou’s usual neutral palette of Cubist overtones. “Some had color in them. Not much. The color of the canvas. Sometimes I would even use chamois or leather. Something closer to markings rather than true color. Like an insect.”¹⁰

Untitled, 1966. Welded steel, canvas, fiberglass, epoxy, leather, wire, and light, 6' 6½" x 9' 11" x 31" (199.4 x 302.3 x 78.7 cm). Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, gift of Robert B. Mayer Family Collection (1991.85). Photo: © Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

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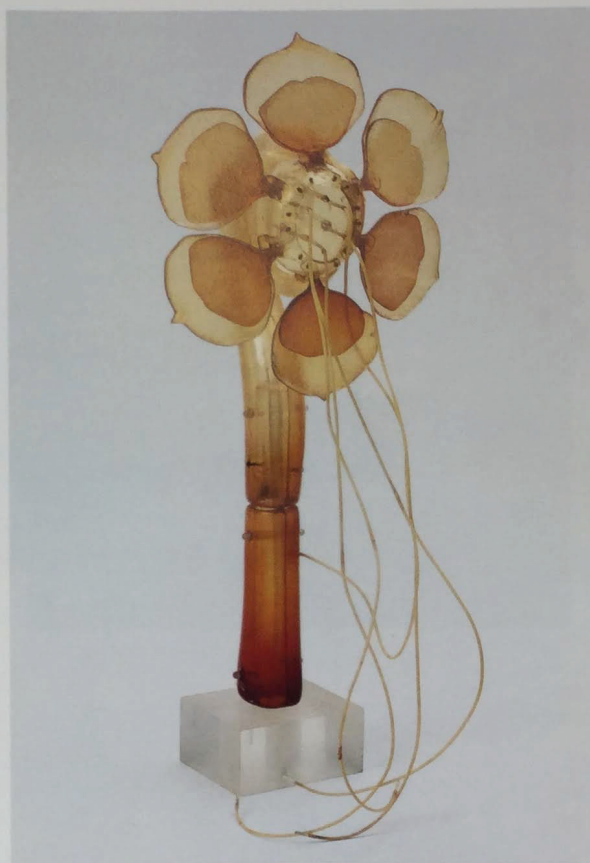
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Untitled. 1967. Welded steel, wood, and silk, $55\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{3}{8} \times 22\frac{3}{8}$ " (141 x 56.8 x 56.8 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972. Photo: Lee Stalsworth

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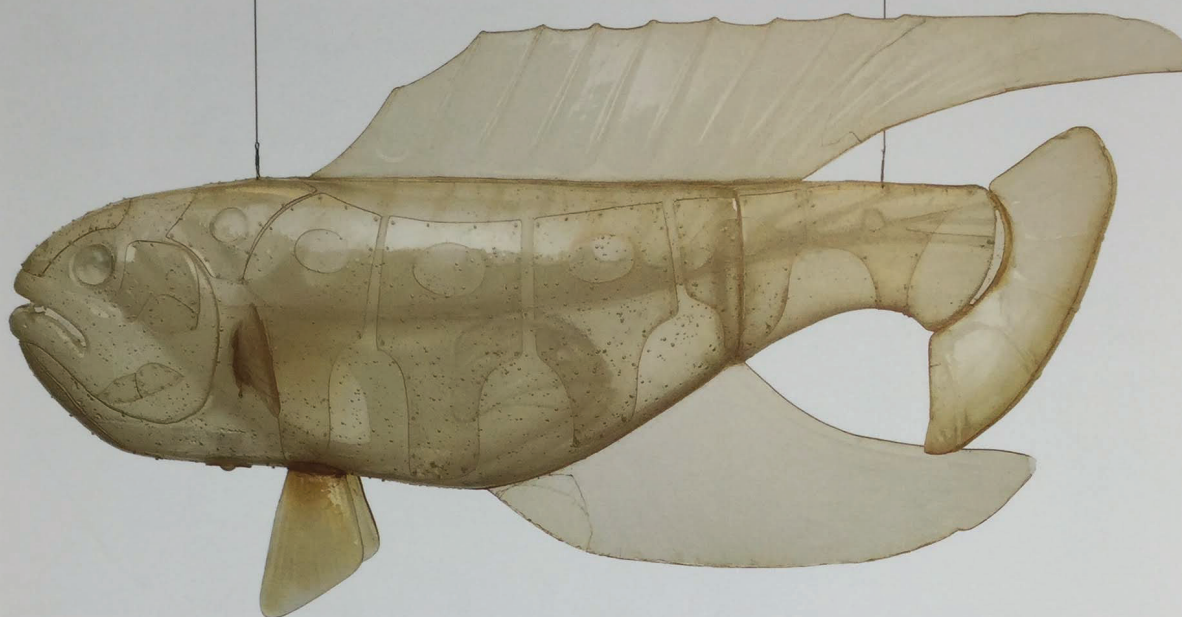
In the late 1960s, the reciprocal balance, or synergy, between nature and fiction that had characterized Bontecou's work began to transmute into a more denotative biomorphic language that more directly evoked forms observed in biological life. Around 1967, Bontecou created a group of sculptures made of balsa wood and silk that resembled chrysalis forms. "At one point, before the summer heat, I thought that I'd get a lot of welding done. But it was so hot. So I started to make little balsa wood frames and cover them with silk and paper. It was lightweight—delicate—and a nice change."¹¹

Experimenting with a homemade vacuum-forming machine, Bontecou began to work with various plastics to create fish and flowers built by translucent layers. In contrast to the naturalism with which they were rendered, these forms verge on the grotesque as a result of disturbingly fantastic, mechano-morphic features: a fish that appears to have been consumed (or inhabited by) another fish, flowers comprised of tendrils of tubing. Although these works suggest retreat into the natural world, they simultaneously allude to the artist's concern for the degradation of the environment.

Untitled, 1968. Vacuum-formed plastic, 21 x 10 x 9" (53.3 x 25.4 x 22.9 cm).
© Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

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Untitled. 1969. Vacuum-formed plastic, 30 x 57 x 21" (76.2 x 144.8 x 53.3 cm). © Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

Bontecou painstakingly carved smaller pieces from large Styrofoam logs acquired from an airplane factory. "They had logs that were about eight feet high. And you could get them in different gauges, different densities. That stuff was so hard, it was like marble."¹² These carvings would then be placed in the bed of the vacuum-forming machine, and the resulting plastic shells would be assembled into larger configurations. "I made the fish. I cut it in half and laid one-half on the bed of the vacuum former. And the heated plastic would come down and suck around it. It was like instant sculpture."¹³

The material condition of translucency achieved in these works not only made visible the internal elements and the layered structures but also exposed the bolts and gaps of the assembly process. Beyond literal form and materiality, the object appears to unveil itself, becoming a self-referential symbol for Bontecou's intricate assemblage method.

Bontecou's exhibition of vacuum-formed plastic works took place in 1971, her fourth one-person show at Leo Castelli Gallery. This was to be her last solo exhibition in New York for almost thirty years. In this same period, she joined the faculty of Brooklyn College's Department of Art, where she taught until her retirement in 1991. During this time, Bontecou commuted regularly from several locations within New York State—The Hamptons, Rockland County—as well as from her farm in central Pennsylvania.

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In 1972, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago organized a midcareer retrospective of Bontecou's sculpture and drawings. Three years later, Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Connecticut, presented an extensive survey of the artist's drawings and prints. From her early experiments with soot to various other techniques and supports, Bontecou never ceased to draw. She conceives of most of her works on paper as working drawings wherein one can observe the meticulous development of motifs through repetitive, seemingly free-associative variations and also practical solutions to the design of future sculptures. "Drawing helped for just pleasure, but also for engineering. You can solve an awful lot of problems with drawing.... I can't stress drawing enough. It can get your imagination moving, and you can work from your inner world rather than always the external world."¹⁴

Toward the end of the 1970s, Bontecou went back to working with clay. She subsequently produced a series of intricate and fragile sculptures consisting of irregular spherical parts interconnected by wire, with adjoining diaphanous sail-like planes made of wire mesh, evocative of eyes and celestial bodies. When suspended, these basic structures allowed the artist to work on a greater range of scales, and to produce enhanced spatial complexity. With each addition of wire and beads extending the sculptures further into

Untitled. 1987. Printer's ink on primed plastic paper, 11½ x 10¾" (29.2 x 26.4 cm). Private collection, New York

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Untitled. 1997. Graphite on paper, 22½ x 30" (57.2 x 76.2 cm). Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles

Untitled. 1977. Clay, 17 x 16 x 10" (42.3 x 40.6 x 25.4 cm). © Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

Opposite: Untitled. c. 1980–98. Welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, canvas, and wire, 7 x 8 x 6' (213.4 x 243.8 x 182.9 cm). © Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York



space, Bontecou achieves a remarkable effect: the scattering of structural elements within a cosmological system of gravity-defying levitation, as if one of her earlier welded-metal-and-canvas pieces had exploded.

I always wanted to move away from the wall, so I began hanging the works. I started small, combining porcelain, different clays, and screen wire. The process was getting closer to drawing, which is so free. And it can go on endlessly. A lot of ships. A sense of wind. I've been trying to use small beadlike elements for connectors, and again I have a nice feeling about wanting to go on finding endless ways of manipulating this material. I made holes in the little beads so I could put wire in, so as to extend things this way or that. I have a kind of freedom while I'm working. I try to find a way of making a silence, a kind of quiet. I feel that I'm getting a little bit closer when I look at them at night. There's a stillness.¹⁵

But I've just kept working, really, the way I did before. Partly through dreams, even day-dreams, partly through imagination. I used to go to museums a lot, the Museum of Natural History, and the Met. And galleries, some. But I'd still rather take from what's around me. On the street, or on the seashore. Like when you walk down the beach and the shadow hits the sand. The ripple of sand is hit by the light, and there you have your darks and lights.¹⁶

Lilian Tone

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- ¹ Lee Bontecou, quoted in Eleanor C. Munro, *Origins: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 381–382.
- ² Bontecou, lecture at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, summer 1988. The Skowhegan Lecture Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
- ³ Bontecou, quoted in Munro, *Origins: American Women Artists*, 383.
- ⁴ Bontecou, lecture at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.
- ⁵ Bontecou, quoted in Munro, *Origins: American Women Artists*, 384.
- ⁶ Bontecou, lecture at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.
- ⁷ Bontecou, quoted in Munro, *Origins: American Women Artists*, 384.
- ⁸ Bontecou, lecture at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Bontecou, interview with the author, April 22, 2004.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Bontecou, quoted in Munro, *Origins: American Women Artists*, 386.



Untitled, 1989. Colored pencil on paper, 20 x 28" (50.8 x 71.1 cm). Collection of Eileen Harris-Norton, Santa Monica.
Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

Cover: View of Bontecou's Pennsylvania studio, 2003. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

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THE FOLLOWING PROGRAMS WILL BE HELD IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE EXHIBITION *LEE BONTECOU: A RETROSPECTIVE*

GALLERY TALKS

Patricia Cronin: Monday, September 20, 5:30 P.M.

Dore Ashton: Thursday, September 23, 5:30 P.M.

MoMA QNS

33 Street at Queens Boulevard, Long Island City

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN LEE BONTECOU AND MONA HADLER

Tuesday, September 21, 6:30 P.M.

The Graduate Center at the City University of New York

365 Fifth Avenue at 34 Street, 9th floor

A Conversation between Lee Bontecou and Mona Hadler is a collaboration between The Museum of Modern Art and Continuing Education & Public Programs at The Graduate Center at the City University of New York.

Tickets are \$10, \$8 for members, \$5 for students with current ID, and can be purchased in person at the MoMA QNS Lobby Ticketing Desk, 33 Street at Queens Boulevard, and at the Visitor Center (open daily 10:00 A.M.–2:00 P.M. and 3:00–5:30 P.M.) at the MoMA Design Store, 44 West 53 Street, in Manhattan. There is no phone registration for Gallery Talks, and space is limited. To purchase or reserve tickets for *A Conversation between Lee Bontecou and Mona Hadler* through the box office at The Graduate Center, please call (212) 817-8215 or e-mail continuing@gc.cuny.edu. Remaining tickets will be available at the door on the evening of the program.