

LEE BONTECOU AND DRAWING

FROM THE REAL TO THE STRANGE

By Mona Hadler

“A strange naturalist” is what one critic called Lee Bontecou, and indeed she is just that, a strange naturalist in the age of technology and mass culture.¹ The “natural world with its visual wonders and horrors” and the province of “man-made devices with their mind-boggling engineering feats and destructive abominations” are one to her.² Combining the natural and the artificial, she has produced a cabinet of wonders replete with frightening creatures and suspended cosmologies. Her visionary imagination dominates, above all, in her vast two-dimensional oeuvre, where the real commingles freely with the fantastic. The deep blacks in these works produce cosmic holes, floating eyes, gas masks, and bleak terrains populated by frankenflowers and cyborgian creatures that break boundaries between humans, animals, plants, and machines. Experimental, visionary, exquisitely rendered, and profound, her extensive graphic production ranges from the cosmic to the carnivalesque while crossing boundaries that open doors to new subjectivities.

Bontecou’s drawing practice recalls but pushes to a hallucinatory extreme the nuanced visual style of Vincent van Gogh, whom she admired.³ “You can travel miles within a drawing and not have to take all the baggage along. I always envied poets because of that fact.... I can’t stress drawing enough.... You can work from your inner world rather than always the external world.”⁴ Like poetry, she mused, drawing is produced with a pencil.⁵ Unencumbered by the intense physical labor that her particular sculptural practice involves, drawing affords more direct access to the imaginary.⁶ In taking up the pencil for graphic freedom and as a conduit to the unknown, she follows in the tradition of a wide range of sculptors, including Abstract Expressionists David Smith and Theodore Roszak. Yet Bontecou, with her deep space and haunted imagery, stayed significantly far from engaging in the debates on flatness in the early 1960s as her works matured. While drawing is central to her production and functions not only as inspiration for her early three-dimensional constructions but also as a central component of

those works, it remains to this day a key practice of hers in its own right, and one that privileges the inner eye.

“Black” started it all: “Getting the black ... opened everything up.... It was like dealing with the outer limits ... with a square of black on the soot.... I can push it.... I had to find a way of harnessing it.”⁷ In these oft-quoted words, Bontecou describes the excitement she felt when she began in the late 1950s to produce drawings with black soot by turning the oxygen down on an acetylene torch (1958; Fig. 1). She stretched paper on the studio wall and worked on a large scale, moving quickly, and, with agility and bodily

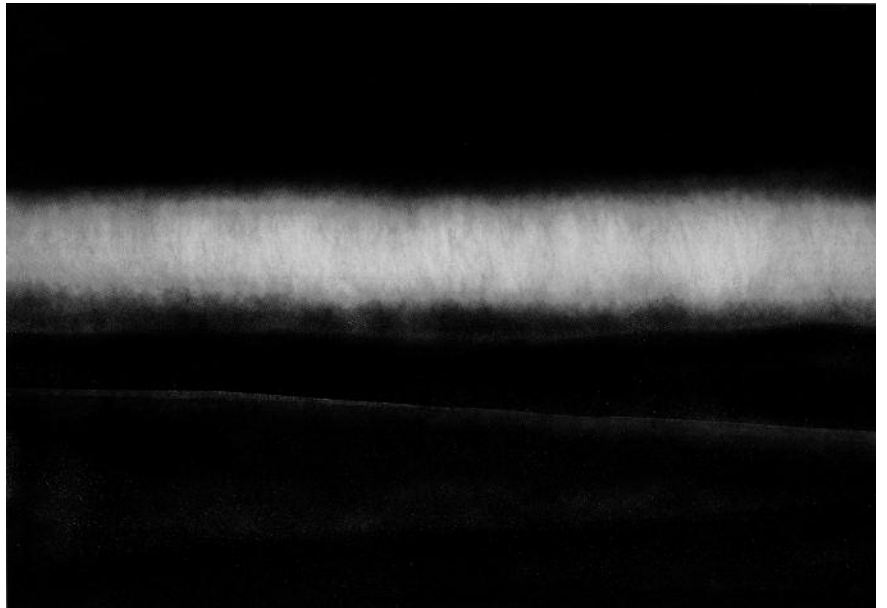


Fig. 1. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1958), soot on paper, 27" x 39", Collection Gail and Tony Ganz.

coordination, adjusting the torch’s speed and proximity to the paper to avoid burning the image, to minimize the destructive potential of the technique, and to produce drawings that mediate the rough and the beautiful. Her practice recalls the violence of French artist Antonin Artaud, who attacked images of himself with lit cigarettes, as well as the transgressive dirt that Susan Sontag relished in the Happenings of the early 1960s, which Bontecou also attended.⁸ She witnessed, for example, Red Grooms’s 1959 Happening *The Burning Building*,

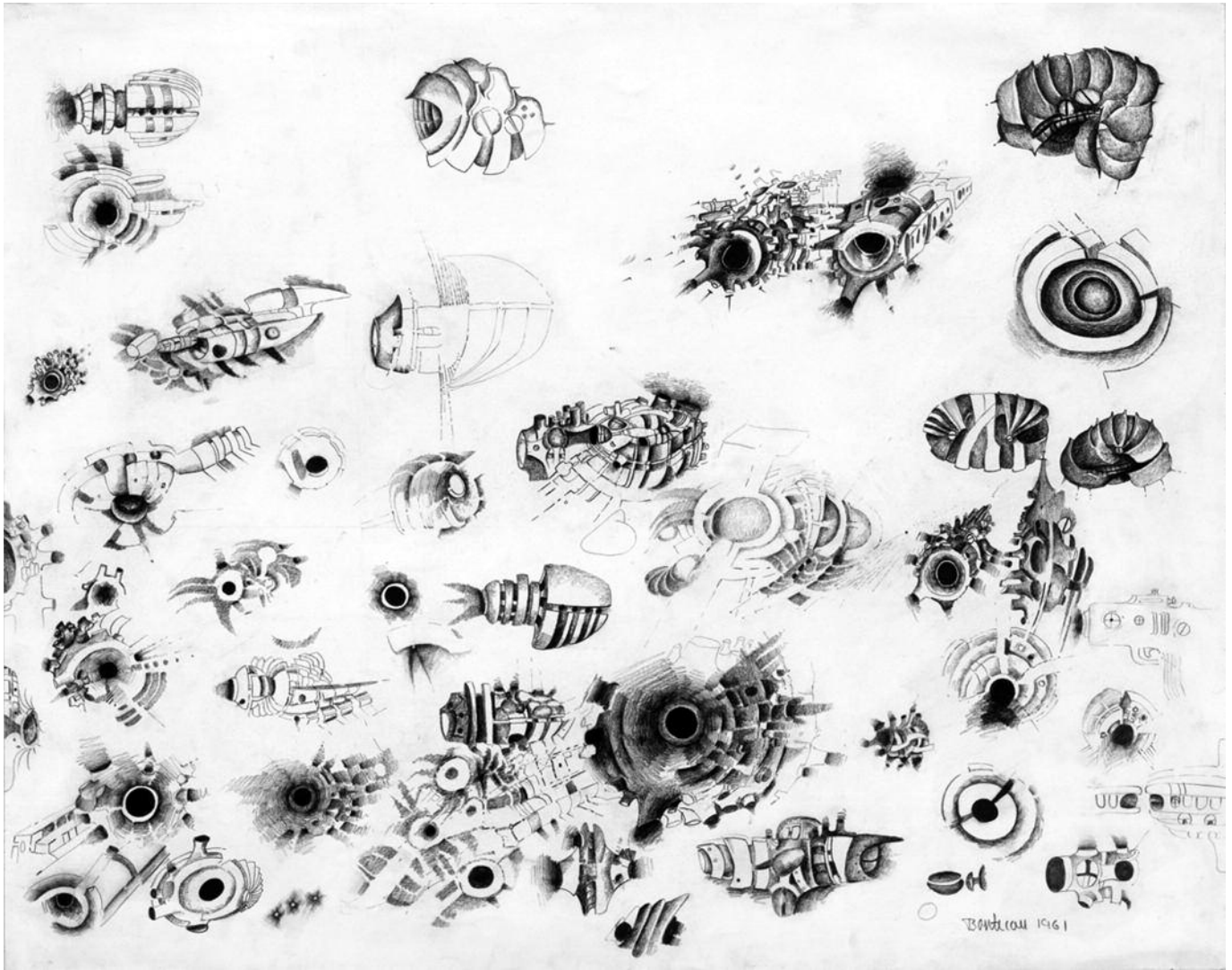


Fig. 2. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1961). charcoal and graphite on paper, 22 5/8" x 28 1/2". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of John S. Newberry (124.1962).

staged in his studio.⁹ At the same time, Bontecou's soot drawings anticipated those of the late-sixties drawings by Process artists.¹⁰ "It's nice to work large in the sense that ... there's a physical feeling that comes and you kind of can work with your whole body," she later observed in relation to sculpture, but these words also harken back to the soot drawings and to the many performative practices she admired in her younger years.¹¹

Subsequent to her soot-drawing breakthrough, Bontecou applied the same technique to canvas conveyor belts, first darkening them with the soot of the torch and then fastening them to her metal frames with wire, which added the subtlety of shading to the overall brutality of her welded constructions such as *Untitled* (1961; Pl. 8). Bontecou, whose work has always ranged between two and three dimensionality, had previously experimented with techniques evoking those of drawing and printmaking in her sculptures to incorporate gradations of light and dark. For example, she placed folded mesh inside small welded boxes in an attempt to open up the

surface of sculpture, comparable to the way Brancusi used reflection to undermine the solidity of polished metal. Sculpture in this manner, she contends, parallels the painter's ability to produce illusionistic space.¹² She has compared the shadings that the mesh produced in her sculpture to the effects of layering in her lithographs, "a superimposing of something over something else."¹³ Similarly, when engaged in printmaking, she has stated a preference for etching because it has allowed her to go back into the plate.¹⁴ Both graphic and sculptural, the process produces a flat image and an incised plate that is beautiful in its own right. Furthermore, one could characterize her late hanging sculptures as demonstrating a sophisticated form of drawing in space, which follows in the tradition of earlier welders, such as Julio González, one of her favorites.¹⁵

Bontecou's well-known large constructions such as Plate 8 from the early 1960s are amalgams of painting and sculpture, as they exploit line and shadow, edge and interior shading. While their linear welded armatures support canvas covered

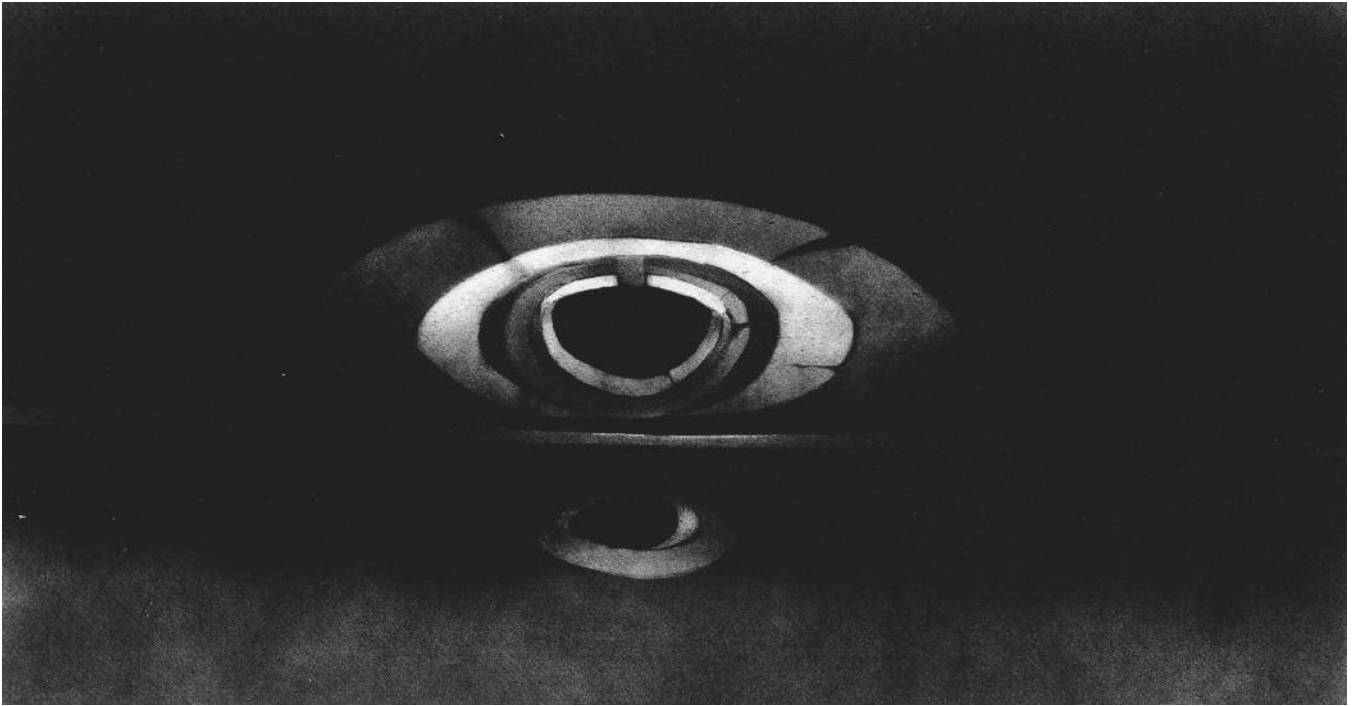


Fig. 3. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1963), soot on muslin, 11" x 19". Private collection, Los Angeles.

with nuanced shades of soot, their forms advance out of or recede into openings as dark as the black of her drawings. She often thinks in terms of values even when working with color. When using blue jeans as a medium in the mid-sixties, for example, she assiduously selected parts of faded denim based on subtle differences in shade. The jeans, she recalled, were her own, and she would look carefully at the gradations of blue, even unfastening seams to vary the values.¹⁶

In a fluid, nonhierarchical manner, the artist moves between media, alternating between drawing and sculpture: "I had a thing in mind and went to sculpture, then if there [was] a problem I drew it out, or I might be drawing and like an image."¹⁷ And, indeed, the imagery of her drawings often accords with her sculpture; for example, when she was making assemblages with military equipment, gas masks populated her picture space. The drawing process spawns the emergent imagery that critics ceaselessly discover in her constructions. Even Donald Judd, who so praised her work for its status as object, waxed eloquent on its references.¹⁸ The drawings help Bontecou solve formal problems in a sculpture and conjure imagery through an automatist practice (albeit a labor-intensive one), which enables her to work from what she called her inner world.

Just as Bontecou interrogates dimensionality in her constructions, she experiments with space in her graphic production. Many of her drawings fall into roughly two categories. In one (1961; Fig. 2), she engages a more traditional sketching strategy, drawing fragmentary imagery on white paper and disregarding the background as part of the composition. These sketches often give rise to fanciful metamorphic images that conjoin the organic and the inorganic. In another large group of drawings, she activates

the entire page, often resolving its composition. Here, she either divides it in a grid-like manner or produces illusionistic space. At times, she defines a horizon line (as in the early soot drawings such as Figure 1) or uses a dark, murky matrix to create deep space, still marking the picture plane with a rich materiality. In the late 1960s, Bontecou began using black paper to arrive at a comparably cavernous spatial terrain and has continued to use the medium in this manner for decades now. She populates her more recent dark pictorial spaces, which are often marked by internal framing devices, with strange aquatic or extraterrestrial creatures culled from her imagination. Drawing, in both modes, forms the seedbed for her emergent and phantasmal imagery. Although her sculptural process is more intuitive than conceptual, and therefore allows for surprise and innovation while she works, she relies on drawing for access to the mind's eye.

The soot drawings, or "worldscapes," begun after the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in the late 1950s, responded to the astounding new imagery of a hitherto unfathomable space.¹⁹ It was, as John F. Kennedy was soon to proclaim, "The New Frontier," with its "unchartered areas of science and space."²⁰ Conjuring, in fact, microscopic or telescopic Surrealist worlds, Bontecou's ensuing compositions, often bifurcated by a horizon line, commingle notions of landscape, inscape, and worldscape. Swirling holes emerge from tenebrous depths, forming apertures that impart eyes floating in deep space or resting gently on the borders between land and sky (1961; Fig. 3) and encourage comparisons to Odilon Redon and Symbolist drawings, which she admires. This imagery lends credence to Dore Ashton's 1963 revisionist essay on Bontecou, which was the first to read the forms as cosmic rather than suggestive of the sexual or threatening body.²¹

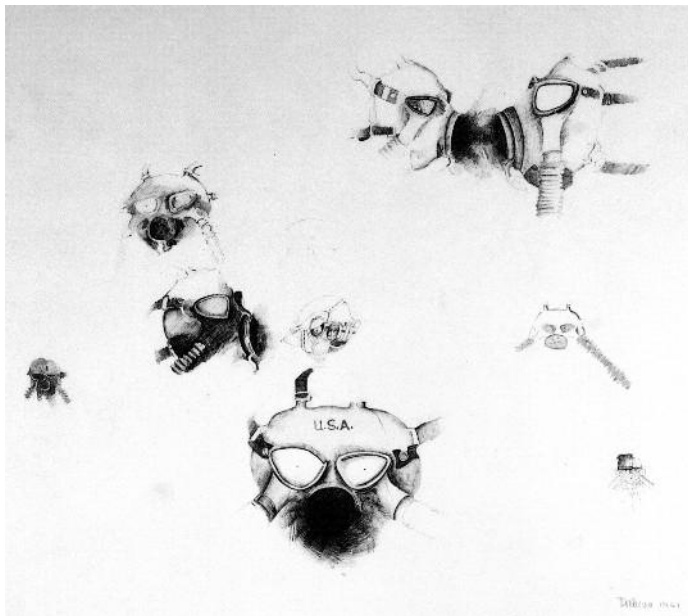


Fig. 4. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1961), graphite on paper, 22 5/8" x 28 3/4". The Menil Collection, Houston.

In the early 1960s, however, Bontecou sketched many fragmentary forms with holes that suggest the carnal as well as the cosmic (as in Figure 2). To my eye, the permutations of these compositions summon Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophical matrix that situates the body, with its permeable boundaries, between the cosmic and the physical:

All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation ... are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world.... In all these events, the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.²²

The grotesque body swells, erupts, and merges with the world and, in so doing, critiques confining systems of order.²³ Likewise, Bontecou's art rails against control and oppression. In her art, the cosmic, carnal, and historical conjoin in the manner mapped by Bakhtin, and the grotesque body, in part, mediates this synthesis. Her work, I argue here, speaks to the sense of liberation and regenerative powers in the grotesque as theorized by Bakhtin, but prevalent in other authors too such as Baudelaire in his writings on Hogarth and Goya.²⁴

The large constructions of the early sixties with embedded military equipment resemble grinning or smirking creatures with grotesque bodies. Holes in the compositions become eyes, saw blades morph into teeth, and bars become armor. Although she did not mention Bakhtin to me and was not consciously interested in the carnivalesque or the posthuman, these works frighten and amuse with a form of monstrous beauty—"inexhaustible beauty" to quote Alfred Jarry on

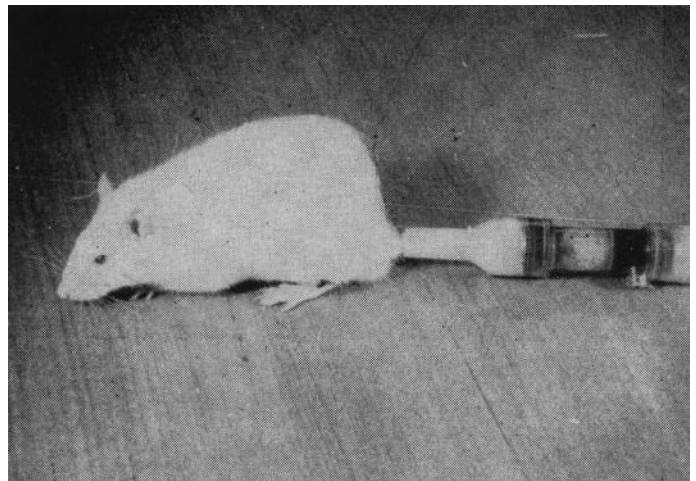


Fig. 5. Cyborg mouse, in Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Cline, "Cyborgs and Space," *Astronautics* (September 1960): 27.

monsters—and anticipate many works by more recent artists and authors who, in attacking a modernist and humanist crusade that advocated purity and strict rationality, similarly explore hybridity, the monstrous, and the abject. But Bontecou's fusions of humans, animals, plants, and machines significantly predate these artistic developments. Her welded constructions are part animal—part machine. She has likened the mottled shades of canvas, chamois cloth, and leather to markings of an insect, and at times she has even included animal remains, such as horseshoe crabs.²⁵ When asked why she left the printed word "domestic" on a piece, she responded that her sculptures were domesticated animals.²⁶

In the early 1960s, when she produced her most aggressive welded work, Bontecou filled pages of drawings with war equipment; but here also the forms mutate. Gas masks and helmets morph into aviator goggles with bug eyes (1961; Fig. 4). In other sketches, phallic screws become insects or flying machines, while circular shapes conjure the then newly discovered black holes of outer space.²⁷ These drawings must be contextualized in the post-World War II era. Born in 1931, Bontecou was obsessed in the late fifties and early sixties, as were others of her generation, with both the positive and the negative consequences of scientific progress, with the excitement of outer space, and the fear of nuclear devastation. Her drawings of this period coupled animals with machines, just as, she recalls, scientists had based the designs of nuclear submarines on dolphins, and of satellites and helicopters on dragonflies. These drawings with their menacing, machine-man-insect hybrids relate back to the Dada works of George Grosz and others.²⁸ They nod to Surrealist art in their fusion of the natural, violent, and abstract (Arshile Gorky's drawings are particularly relevant here)²⁹ and prefigure the utopian and dystopian visions of technology rampant in European art of the late 1960s, such as the startling environment-transforming helmet "Flyhead," designed by the Viennese collective Hans-Rucker-Co.³⁰

In the postwar context, Bontecou's works' closest siblings can be found in emerging images of what became known as the "cyborg," a term that was first coined in 1960 to describe a

man-machine system designed to live in outer space. A picture of the first cyborg, a white laboratory rat whose tail was implanted with a control device that could inject chemicals to allow the animal to survive in extraterrestrial environments (Fig. 5) hit the popular press in 1960, and still today is startling in its transgressive fusion of the organic and the inorganic.³¹ The media abounded with pictures of exoskeletal suits (1965; Fig. 6), which strapped airmen to machines, and early space suits that were strangely similar to Bontecou's carapace-like structures.³² Bontecou herself loved reading about the space race and astronauts and, according to Tom and Jane Doyle, who were present at her home at the time, Bontecou, like most people at the time, watched the 1969 landing on the moon with inexhaustible curiosity and excitement.³³ These images of actual airmen in their paraphernalia replaced the pictures of the cyborgian astronaut in his silver suit that illustrated the science fiction of Bontecou's youth. Her drawings are a key site for motifs that share with the altered rat and metallic spacemen a connection to an androgynous human-animal-machine construct. The importance of the cyborg here, however, is not in its link to science fiction but in its new articulation of subjectivity.

Donna Haraway, whose 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto" has become canonical, includes the enhanced rat in her clan of cyborgs born of the Cold War and the space race.³⁴ Bontecou told me she was not interested in cybernetics and unaware of Haraway, who is thirteen years her junior, but Haraway's writings, which developed in the aftermath of World War II with its geopolitical battles and monstrous machines, profoundly resonate with Bontecou's art. Haraway calls early cyborgs "the illegitimate children of militarism and patriarchal capitalism." They are the positive progeny of this era. In their fusions, they offer a way out way out of the "maze of dualisms ... building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships." A cyborg world, as she famously writes, is one where "people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."³⁵

Though Bontecou's art, like the notion of the cyborg, was born of postwar politics, I believe that, she, like Haraway, transcends the systems of control that attended the nascent science of cybernetics and the growing military-industrial complex. She, again like Haraway, found more in the "valley of the monster."³⁶ In blurring the distinctions between humans, animals, and machines, Bontecou's work moves beyond postwar quandaries and unintentionally enters the realm of genomics. It relates to the evolutionary process that biologist Lynn Margulis calls symbiogenesis, whereby all complex life forms are the products of endless replication and multidirectional acts of mutation.³⁷ And, since ingestion plays a key role in this process, Margulis's theories further resonate with the wide-open, seemingly voracious "mouths" in Bontecou's sculptures and drawings.

In the early 1970s, Bontecou startled the art world by exhibiting large plastic flowers and fish replete with sharp teeth and undigested prey visible in their bellies. Plastic offered her the ability to make lighter and more open forms



Fig. 6. Wallace Cloud wearing a superman suit created by Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory, in Wallace Cloud, "Man Amplifiers: Machines That Let You Carry a Ton," *Popular Science* (Nov. 1965): 70.

which she desired,³⁸ but it also afforded a new element of literalness. These sculptures come the closest to a form of Verism in her work. The spectator stands face to face with the oversize fish, which hang from the ceiling, and is forced to confront them on equal terms, as documented in a 1971 installation photo (Fig. 7). In this regard, they might be seen in relation to the recent field of "animal studies" that respects animals' "otherness." Bontecou is indeed an animal lover and naturalist,³⁹ but she does not anthropomorphize her fish, nor are they like pets. They are emblematic neither of a child's perspective (as is, for example, the character Sebastian in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*) nor of voices of adults. Instead, they contribute to what has been called the "unmeaning" of animals—that is, they value animal otherness and do not render animals meaningful in human terms.⁴⁰ As installed, the

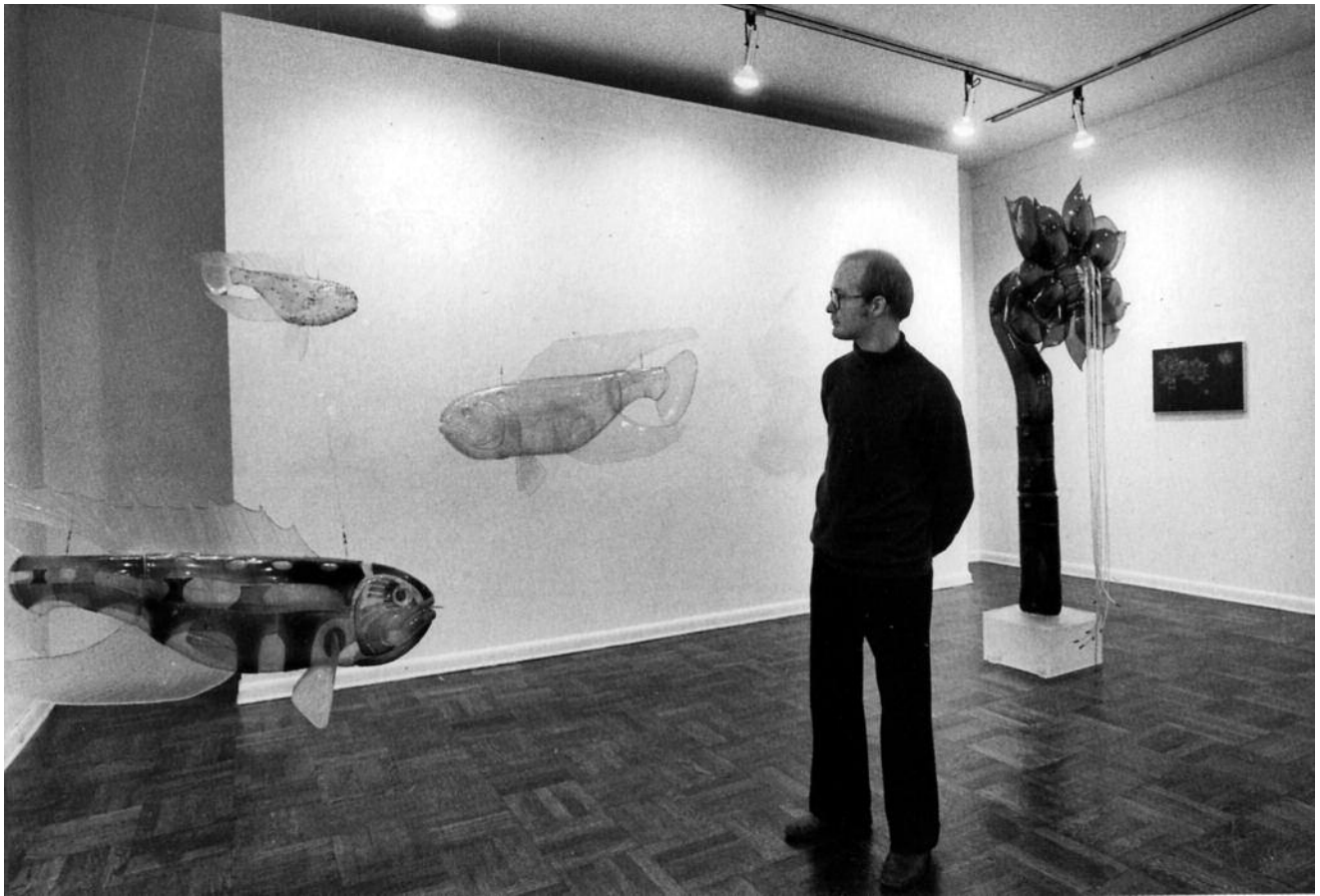


Fig. 7. Lee Bontecou, Installation view at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York (1971).

works point to a contemporary and radical desire for a new subjectivity that takes its power from its association with an identity of otherness—to be other than human.

Yet the fish and flowers, with their synthetic membranes and their positive and negative connotations, remain connected to the world of the cyborg. Yellow, orange, and clear pieces of plastic—like flayed skin, half natural and half artificial, beautiful and sinister—are fastened on with screws. With tentacular test tubes reminiscent of the rat's prosthesis, they are plastically altered, techno-mutant flora and fauna. Ambivalent creatures, they resemble atomic mutants and spacemen with external hoses. They are frankenfish and frankenflowers—at times human-scaled and encased in what could be called a recombinant plastic membrane—that point to liberating new subjectivities and life forms, while also functioning as critique and as testament to Bontecou's growing ecological concerns. As to Bontecou's own intentions at the time, she has underscored that she saw the fish and flowers as a commentary on nuclear fears and on the environment. They were "anti-pollution oriented,"⁴¹ and in that regard her concerns dovetail with the whole earth environmentalist agenda of 1960s leftists. Her attitude aligns with the humanism that attended the critique of the bomb in the postwar era. I argue here, however, that Bontecou's work anticipates later concerns voiced by Haraway and others.

Bontecou's plastic material produces strange associations with the body: her sculptures with synthetic "skins" and plastic

tubing hanging from central "eye" forms can be compared to works by Eva Hesse and other artists whom critic Lucy Lippard linked together under the label "eccentric abstraction."⁴² Both her choice of materials and her hands-on engagement encouraged German artist and critic Rolf-Gunter Dienst to place Bontecou's work in a similar context: he claims Lucas Samaras and H. E. Kalinowski, with his employment of dead skin, to be her strange bedfellows. Dienst's essay is indicative of the enthusiastic reception Bontecou received in Germany (more so than in Latin America⁴³). Indeed, Dienst correctly calls Bontecou's work a protest against Minimal and Systemic art; similarly, it is also distant from industrially finished products and does not address concerns over mass communication and consumerism, common themes among her contemporaries.⁴⁴ The plastic work, which Bontecou fabricated herself, continues along this trajectory, just as her painstakingly rendered drawings counter Conceptual practices.

While Bontecou produced relatively few plastic sculptures, she explored their subject matter in countless drawings. Often rendered on black paper in silver pencils or white charcoal, the imagery alternates between nightmarish flowers looming like sentinels in postapocalyptic landscapes and mutated fish with luminescent exoskeletons glowing in what might be radiated waters (1970; Fig. 8). The black paper of certain drawings emulates the darkness of outer space and the recesses of the ocean floor. Silvery lines form the contours of the fish, while

revealing their intestines. Bontecou voraciously read fiction and nonfictional tales of the sea including adventure stories or ones that provided detailed descriptions of boats and sea life such as *Kon-Tiki* or Peter Freuchen's 1957 *Book of the Seven Seas*, which describes countless underwater creatures that live in blackness and develop enormous telescopic eyes, emit light with built-in torches, or squirt luminous fluids.⁴⁵ As Bontecou is known to have spent innumerable hours observing wildlife in her rural home and in museums of natural history and, similarly, aquatic life in the aquarium or in museum dioramas, she saw fish comparable to Freuchen's descriptions, such as angler fish that glow in the dark and resemble many of her fish forms. Echoing these aquatic creatures that shimmer like ghosts in dark waters, the motifs in her drawings blend the real and the implausible.⁴⁶

The black drawings simulate the dark ocean floor and dimly lit displays in natural history museums and aquariums. These institutional displays engender complex forms of spectatorship similar to those of her art. The hanging fish looks the observer in the eye as in an aquarium or diorama. The welded sculptures function somewhat differently. While their aggressive advancing forms seem to physically threaten the viewer, their apertures beckon, luring her in with a tempting voyeurism.⁴⁷ "I like space that never stops. Black is like that. Holes and boxes mean secrets and shelter," she tantalizingly offered in 1960.⁴⁸ We peer into her drawings as if to catch a glimpse into the dark, secret recesses of her sculpture, and we discover luminescent fish radiating in the paper's darkness. The inclusion of an internal frame in some drawings of the late 1990s (1999; Pl. 9) redoubles this effect.⁴⁹ We gaze with wonder into the ocean depths where these fish reside.

Indeed, for Bontecou, the oceanic rivals the cosmic as the site of "visual wonders and horrors." Wavelike forms are ubiquitous in her drawings—she could observe the waves all day since they change, she reminisced⁵⁰—and her tonal variations recall the fog which she loved as well. Spending summers in Nova Scotia at her grandmother's house, Bontecou's passion for the sea began at an early age. Her mother's family is from the sea, as she put it.⁵¹ Her cousin remembers her as an ardent naturalist when they summered together in Nova Scotia as children, collecting butterflies, snake skins, and rocks and crouching over tide pools to observe aquatic life.⁵² The beauty of the terrain, the lure of the sea and the rugged individualism of the island's inhabitants were etched indelibly into her imagination. Her encounter with the ocean's powerful forces and rich underwater life compounded with the tales she read of sightings of strange creatures to fill her with a sense of marvel. Bontecou's drawn fish are as close to sea monsters as her flowers are to space-suited moonwalkers. They conjoin the familiar and the strange, as do the fictional and nonfictional accounts of the sea that she has voraciously continued to read over the years. As late as 2007, she was obsessed with articles about sea monsters. A man had sighted one during World War II, she remembered. "You can harpoon it but not shoot it," she explained. "Who knows?" she asked.⁵³ The famed Loch Ness Monster was, in fact, a popular subject in the news during the late sixties and

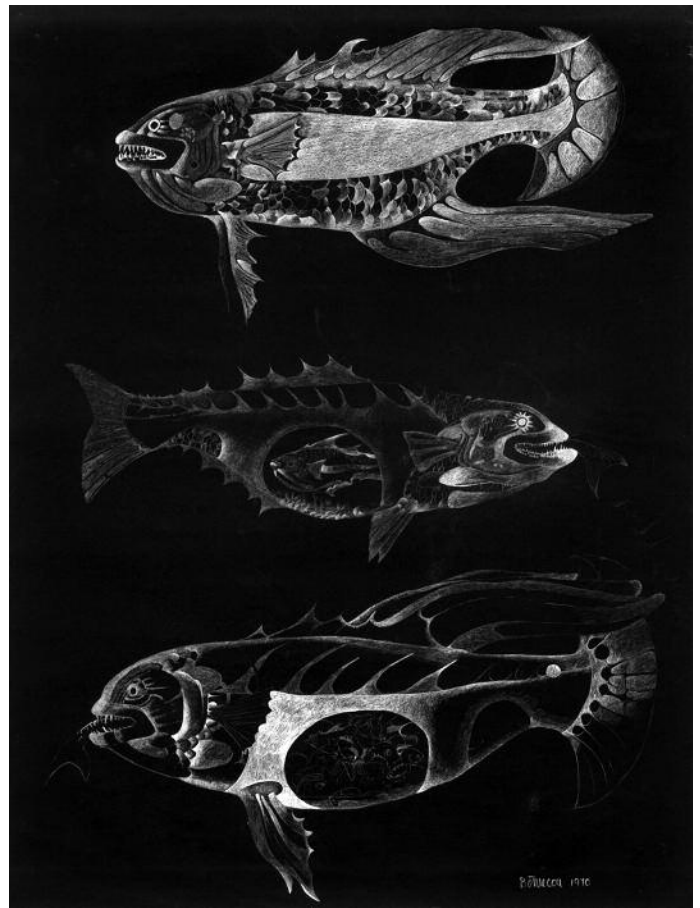


Fig. 8. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1970), colored pencil on black paper, 26 1/8" x 20". The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

early seventies, when scientific teams tried to establish the truth of its existence and the authenticity of disputed photos showing the long-necked creature.

Attracted to the monstrous as well as the natural and the marvelous, Bontecou relished the bizarre, quirky, and androgynous and often found it humorous. Not surprisingly, when questioned, she recalled the graphic style of and amusing characters in the comic illustrations of her youth. For example, she jokingly likened the irregular shapes of her favorite cactus plants to "The Powerful Katrinka"—a woman with a small head, a large body, and a crop of children of varying sizes and shapes under her wing—who appeared in Fontaine Fox's comic-strip "Toonerville Folks," which ran in newspapers from 1908 to 1955.⁵⁴ Katrinka was especially celebrated in the 1920s, when Wilna Hervey, a six-foot-three-inch, three-hundred-pound actress played her in a film.⁵⁵ More recently, during a visit to the 2004 Carnegie International, Bontecou seemed amused by the idiosyncratic and androgynous body types in Polish artist Kataryna Kozyra's 1999 video installation, *The Rites of Spring*. Across nine screens, elderly nude dancers parody their youthful counterparts, while wearing prosthetic genitalia and wigs on their pubic areas as a subversive form of "cross-dressing." Without essentializing any reading of Bontecou's work, an appreciation of the bawdy is evident. Her own dual-gendered language of

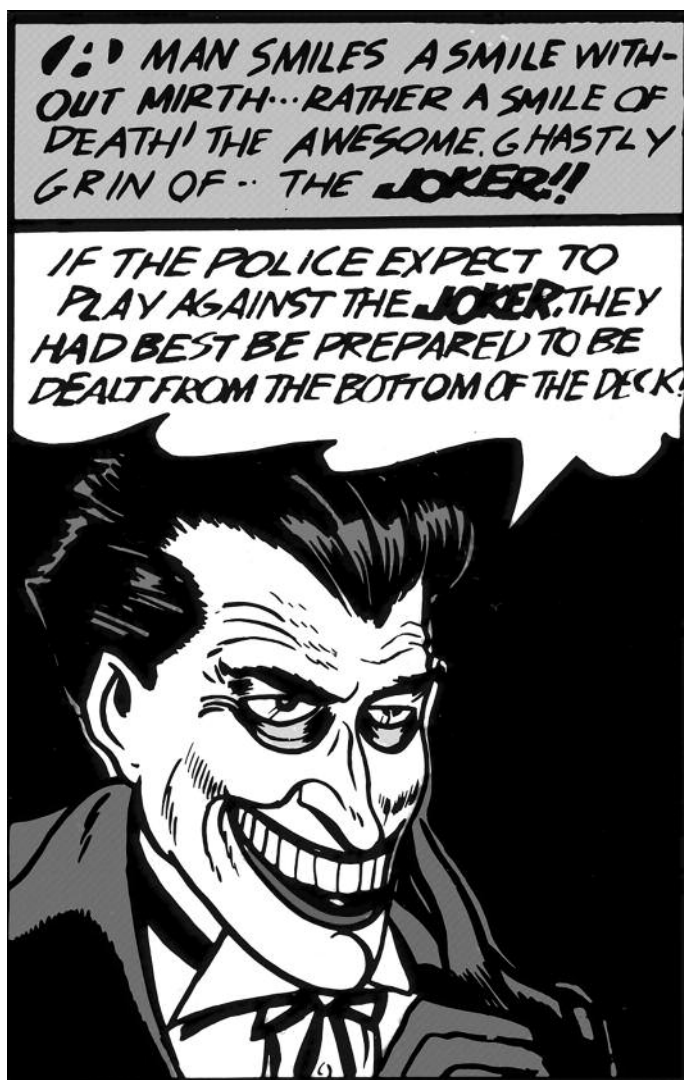


Fig. 9. Robert Kane, *The Joker*, in *Batman 1*, no. 1 (April 1940).

the body, which takes the form of a quirky, carnivalesque, grotesque realism with aggressively projecting and receding forms, was noted early on in the criticism of her work: Annette Michelson, writing in the mid-1960s about Bontecou's work, admired its provocative celebration of opposites, of attraction and repulsion.⁵⁶ Just as Bakhtin eludes simple binaries in his references to orifices and protuberances, Bontecou's work too embraces a slippage of categories and a destruction of binaries.⁵⁷ Her humor is omnivorous and androgynous: the polymorphous perverse greets the carnivalesque.

In the same exhibition, Bontecou saw and seemed drawn to the same qualities in the work of Robert Crumb. She expressed admiration for his crude humor. His women, whose caricatured protruding buttocks and overly muscular torsos angered some feminists in the seventies, amused Bontecou. She looked at Crumb's expressive line and use of black and white, but it is his combination of carnivalesque humor, grotesque realism, political commentary, and psychosexual content that I believe comes closest to her spirit.⁵⁸

Bontecou has shared that the humor and superb graphic style of comic-book artists, such as the early black-and-white

Popeye drawings by E. Z. Seghers⁵⁹ or those of Robert Kane, the creator of *Batman*, appealed to her. Kane did not traffic in talking anthropomorphic mice, like those of Walt Disney, but instead used a fierce form of comic abstraction that frightened and amused. Bontecou remembered collecting *Batman* comics as a young girl and gravitating to the Joker, the brainchild of Kane, whose leering grin both scared and fascinated her (Fig. 9). She related the Joker to Grimm fairy tales in the way they trigger the childhood imagination: "As a child you look, and you see more."⁶⁰ With ghastly white skin and lurid green hair, the Joker is perhaps most identified by his red lips and hideous large, grinning teeth—recalling the ubiquitous grin that would appear in and haunt a range of Bontecou's works, from those that incorporate saw blades reminiscent of teeth to her plastic fish and drawn creatures with gaping mouths. Bontecou is not an avid fan of the comics, did not read or collect them as an adult, and is by and large more of a naturalist. But as a consummate graphic artist who saw herself as an outsider to the art world and to canonical modernism (like Philip Guston whom she admired), she was a kindred spirit to these draftsmen, and certain qualities of their work are significant: the dark humor of Kane and the grotesque realism and comic body language of Crumb.

Bontecou's drawings have grown increasingly dark and hallucinatory over the years, a development encouraged in part by her isolated living conditions and her reading of visionary poets such as William Blake.⁶¹ At the same time, she has produced a startling oeuvre of hanging work, in which visions of oceanic space or solar galaxies are evoked and where delicacy has replaced the heavy mass that characterizes earlier work. Freed from the wall and other enclosing elements, they realize her cosmic vision: the worldscapes, which were conjured in the interior spaces of her earlier sculpture and dark soot of her drawings, now fill galleries with boundless beauty. These late sculptures are expansive and, for some viewers, calming. Their tranquility, however, must be considered in tandem with the disturbing graphic imagery that she simultaneously produced (1996; Pl. 10, and Pl. 9). Swarms of teeming creatures that bring together the organic and the bizarre are pulled to the surface of the drawings often by a frame within a frame; they tease us to peer into their dark—seemingly dank—worlds. Intricate, fine lines and subtle shadings both define and disperse their forms. Beaks, claws, teeth, and eyes commingle in the blackness of an underwater/outer space matrix, which reminds us that "Life is a verb and... the actors are not all human."⁶² We look into this world of creatures that break boundaries in a monstrous and libidinous manner and recall Bontecou's youthful musings on how black "opened everything up." It impelled her to make her sculpture and fostered a riveting graphic production that ranges from the cosmic to the carnivalesque, and ultimately points the way to new, more emancipated subjectivities. •

Mona Hadler is a professor of art history at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. She has published extensively on Lee Bontecou and on the painting, sculpture, and visual culture of the postwar era.

Notes

I would like to thank the Wolfe Institute at Brooklyn College for awarding me a Faculty Fellowship in the Humanities for my continued work on Lee Bontecou. A version of this paper was delivered at the College Art Association in 2012 and at the Menil Collection in April 2014.

1. James R. Mellow, "Bontecou's Well-Fed Fish and Malevolent Flowers," *New York Times*, June 6, 1971, D19. My text here follows extensive writing on Bontecou in four essays published from 1992 until 2007 (cited below). In July 1986 Lee Bontecou and I spent a weekend at the Giles-Bontecou farm in Pennsylvania photographing her work. Much of the primary information in this essay comes from taped interviews from this time, as well as from many subsequent informal interviews between 1986 through 2007 (often in telephone calls initiated by Bontecou herself), which I have dated when possible. After decades of scholarly study, I have developed ideas and readings of her work in this essay that draw upon and extend this earlier material.
2. Lee Bontecou, "Artist's Statement" (2003), in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, ed. Elizabeth A.T. Smith (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, and Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2003), n.p.
3. Bontecou recalled visiting a Vincent van Gogh show with her mother and marveling at his fields rendered in varied strokes, Bontecou, interview by the author, July 1986. Bontecou also talks about Van Gogh's drawings in her interview with Dore Ashton, Oral History Interview with Lee Bontecou, Jan. 10, 2009, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
4. Bontecou, lecture presented at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, New York, 1988, Skowhegan Lecture Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 11.
5. Bontecou, in Tony Towle, "Two Conversations with Lee Bontecou," *Print Collector's Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (May-June 1971): 25. Bontecou began to make prints in 1962, with Tatyana Grosman at Universal Limited Art Editions.
6. Although her drawings are also the products of arduous labor, she considers drawing a much freer process than sculpture. See her discussion of this in *ibid.*
7. Bontecou, interview by the author, July 1986.
8. Susan Sontag writes about Antonin Artaud's significance at this time in "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition" (1962), in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 272-74. Bontecou liked and attended several Happenings and performances in New York and mentioned to me that she loved their humor and spontaneity.
9. Wilhemina Van Ness, e-mail to the author, April 7, 2009. Bontecou also went to Claes Oldenburg's Ray Gun Theater performances. See Elizabeth A. T. Smith, "All Freedom in Every Sense," in Smith, ed., *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, 172. Bontecou also saw Jean Tinguely when she visited Paris during an exhibition of her work at the Sonnabend Gallery. Bontecou, interview by the author, Oct. 16, 2003.
10. In fact, one of Bontecou's soot drawings was included in the exhibition "Live/Work: Performance into Drawing," organized by Cornelia H. Butler, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007.
11. Bontecou, Skowhegan lecture, 5.
12. Bontecou, interview by the author, July 1986. See also my essay, "Lee Bontecou's Worldscales," in Smith, ed., *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, 203.
13. Bontecou, interview by the author, July 1986.
14. Bontecou, in Towle, "Two Conversations with Lee Bontecou," 27. Linda Owen, in an article on the soot drawings, describes Bontecou's comparable process of working back into the black residue with razors, in "Fire and Paper: An Examination of the Materials and Techniques of Lee Bontecou's Soot Drawings," *The Book and Paper Group Annual*, no. 27 (2008): 50. As early as 1975, Richard S. Field compared her etched lines to her welded skeletal frames and her aquatints to the canvas inserts, in his *Prints and Drawings by Lee Bontecou* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ., Davison Art Center, 1975), 8.
15. Bontecou, interview by the author, July 1986
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. Donald Judd, "Lee Bontecou," *Arts Magazine* 39, no. 7 (April 1965): 20. Alex Potts argues that Judd, in his essay "Specific Objects," tried to "have it both ways" by stressing both formal and metaphoric elements. Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination, Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 274-78. For a discussion of Judd's writings on Bontecou, see Jo Applin, "This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object: Lee Bontecou and the Sculptural Void," *Art History* 29, no. 3 (June 2006): 488-89.
19. Bontecou first used the term "worldscapes" in Towle, "Two Conversations with Lee Bontecou," and I have focused on the concept in "Lee Bontecou's Worldscales," 200-11; and in the earlier essays "Lee Bontecou's Warnings," *Art Journal* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 56-61; and "Lee Bontecou: Heart of a Conquering Darkness," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 38-44.
20. John F. Kennedy, acceptance speech for the Democratic Party nomination for the Presidency of the United States, Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960, "The American Presidency Project," <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25966>. David Anfam relates the reading of Abstract Expressionism as the "abstract sublime" to this speech. Anfam, "Transatlantic Anxieties, Especially Bill's Folly," in *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, ed. Joan Marter (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 61. Bontecou acknowledges her admiration for Abstract Expressionist artists in similar terms: that she is inspired by their "boundless freedom." Bontecou, "Artist's Statement" (2003).
21. Dore Ashton, "Illusion and Fantasy: Lee [Magica Fantasia di Lee]," *Metro*, no. 8 (April 1963): 29. Bontecou mentioned repeatedly her gratitude to Ashton for moving the discourse on her work into new directions.
22. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), 317. Robert Storr was the first to connect Bontecou with the grotesque. See his essay "Seek and Hide," in Smith, ed., *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, 191.
23. For a discussion of Bakhtin and Soviet Socialist Realism, see Michael Holquist, prologue to Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, xiii-xviii.
24. See Geoffrey Galt Harpham's discussion of Bakhtin and Baudelaire in, *On the Grotesque, Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 70-74.
25. Bontecou, Skowhegan lecture, 5.
26. Bontecou, interview by the author, July 1986.
27. Bontecou connects the black of the worldscales to world politics and events. See my "Lee Bontecou's Worldscales." Jo Applin suggestively compares Bontecou's use of black to Theodor Adorno's characterization of black as antiutopian. Jo Applin, "Surviving Reality: Lee Bontecou's Worldscales," *Tate Papers*, no. 14 (Oct. 2010): 12; online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/10autumn/applin.shtm>.
28. Bontecou admired George Grosz during her early years at the Art Students League. See my essay, "Lee Bontecou: Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades," *Woman's Art Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2007): 17.
29. See Michael R. Taylor, "Gorky and Surrealism," in *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009), 94-138.

30. See Jane Pavitt and David Crowley, "The Hi-Tech Cold War," in *Cold War Modern, Design 1945–1970* (London: V & A Publishing, 2008), 180.
31. Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, "Cyborgs and Space," *Astronautics* (Sept. 1960), reprinted in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995), 30. Bontecou never mentioned to me seeing this image. For more on European artists' responses to the cyborg, including Archigram's Suitaloon project, see Pavitt and Crowley, "The Hi-Tech Cold War," 174.
32. Wallace Cloud, "Man Amplifiers: Machines That Let You Carry a Ton," *Popular Science*, Nov. 1965, 70–72. The suits, if motored, would have allowed a person to lift a thousand pounds with one hand, like Superman, the author quips.
33. Tom and Jane Doyle, interview by the author, New York, March 25, 2009.
34. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985), in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
35. *Ibid.*, 151, 154, and 181. Quoted in part also in Hadler, "Worldscapes."
36. Donna Haraway, "Birth of the Kennel," lecture at the European Graduate School, August 2000; <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/donna-haraway/articles/birth-of-the-kennel>.
37. Haraway discusses Lynn Margulis's writings in *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008), 31. In this book, Haraway elaborates her more recent thoughts on companion species and the intersections of biology and technology in the current economic and industrial context.
38. Bontecou frequently mentioned lightness and translucency to me and others in relation to her use of plastic. See, for example, Ashton, Interview with Bontecou, Jan. 10, 2009.
39. According to her neighbors in Pennsylvania, in addition to pet dogs, Bontecou and her husband William Giles cared for a three-legged deer; they once also rescued a young hawk, which lived in a beautiful cage until it was old enough to set free. Tom and Jane Doyle, interview by the author, New York, March 25, 2009.
40. See Stephen Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 94. Baker relies heavily on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who insisted in their concept of "becoming animal" that there should be no symbolism, allegory, or metaphor in relation to the animal world (120).
41. Ashton, interview with Bontecou, Jan. 10, 2009.
42. Lucy Lippard included Bontecou in her article "Eccentric Abstraction," *Art International* 10, no. 9 (Nov. 1966): 28, 34–40.
43. Bontecou exhibited internationally in the sixties in Germany and in Latin America as early as 1961 in the Sixth São Paulo Biennale. The connection to Brazil is intriguing with its politics and aesthetics of the garbage heap albeit in relationship to colonialism. At this point, however, I have found no critical response to her work in Brazil from that exhibit. I would like to thank Agnaldo Farias and Paulo Miyada at the archives in São Paulo for their help with this information.
44. Rolf-Gunter Dienst, "Lee Bontecou, Oder Anmerkungen zur Amerikanischen Kunstsituation" (Lee Bontecou, or observations regarding the American art scene), in *Lee Bontecou* (Berlin: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 1968). Bontecou, H. E. Kalinowski, and Lucas Samaras showed their work together in New York. See Charlotte Willard, "In the Galleries: New Forms, New Values," *New York Post*, Oct. 22, 1966, 46.
45. Peter Freuchen, *Peter Freuchen's Book of the Seven Seas* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 1957), 62. Bontecou conversation with the author, Oct. 10, 2005. She also read the works of Patrick O'Brien, and Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*.
46. In a humorous parallel to my argument here, the inventors of the enhanced rat likened themselves to fish, schooled in cybernetics and intelligent enough to invent the needed apparatus to thrive out of water; see Clynes and Kline, "Cyborgs and Space," 29.
47. Applin subtly problematizes the sculptural encounter with its multiple dynamics of desire and aggression in her article "This Threatening and Possibly Functioning Object."
48. Bontecou, quoted in Charlotte Willard, "Women of American Art," *Look*, no. 24 (Sept. 27, 1960): 75. One also thinks of the dynamics of vision in the work of Joseph Cornell, whom Bontecou called the "master of mystery." Bontecou, interview by the author, July 1986. Cornell kept correspondence and note files on Bontecou (some under her original name, Nathalie Bontecou), Joseph Cornell Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
49. See Donna De Salvo, "Bontecou's Sculpture through Drawing," in Smith, ed., *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, 219.
50. Bontecou, interview by the author, Sept. 22, 2006.
51. Bontecou, interview by the author, Oct. 10, 2005.
52. Dora Flash Bourne, interview by the author, New York, March 17, 2007.
53. Bontecou, interview by the author, Feb. 11, 2007.
54. Bontecou, interview by the author, Oct. 10, 2005. See Herb Galewitz, introduction to Herb Galewitz and Don Winslow, *Fontaine Fox's Toonerville Trolley* (New York: Scribner, 1972).
55. See Joseph P. Eckhardt, "The Biggest Girl: Wilna Hervey, Actress and Artist," Betzwood Archives, <http://faculty.mc3.edu/jeckhard/biggestgirlarticle/thebiggestgirl.html>. Katrinka might also have appealed to Bontecou as a no-nonsense, unglamorous folk heroine, who, like Bontecou's Canadian relatives, took matters into her own hands and broke binary, male-female stereotypes.
56. Annette Michelson, "Lee Bontecou," in *Lee Bontecou* (Paris: Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, 1965).
57. Robert Stam discusses this aspect of Bakhtin, in his *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 162–63.
58. Bontecou and I saw the art of Robert Crumb and Kataryna Kozyro in 2004 at the Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, where a section of the exhibition was also devoted to Bontecou's work. Crumb's crude humor and ambiguous satirical stance, simultaneously endorsing and mocking hippie culture, in many ways mirrors her position as someone who admires aspects of technology yet enjoys her rural and isolated home in Pennsylvania.
59. A documentary on Seghers reminded her of an earlier excitement over these drawings. Bontecou, interview by the author, April 10, 2004.
60. Bontecou, interview by the author, July 22, 2004. Appearing in 1940, when Bontecou was nine, the Joker has by now terrorized generations of children with his cruel humor.
61. Bontecou, interview by the author, Feb. 11, 2007.
62. Haraway, "Birth of a Kennel."