

Kathline Carr

A Visionary Machine: Forms in the Work of Lee Bontecou



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1962. Welded steel, canvas, wire, 76 x 70.5 in.¹

Strong or frail in life, but incontestably sovereign in his rumination of the world, possessed of no other "technique" than the skill his eyes and hands discover in seeing and painting, he gives himself entirely to drawing from the world—with its din of history's glories and scandals—*canvases* which will hardly add to the angers or the hopes of humanity; and no one complains. What, then, is the secret science which he has or which he seeks? That dimension which lets Van Gogh say he must go "still further"? What is this fundamental of painting, perhaps of all culture?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty²

So you take from the world, but then it goes into the dream. It's like when you read a book and the author speaks to you and you feel, here's a friend. It's the same when I look at what the cave painters did, and ancient African art, the building of Chartres Cathedral, a Brancusi sculpture or a Van Gogh painting. They are friends.

Lee Bontecou³

¹ From the Albert A. List Family Collection, David Winton Bell Gallery, Providence, RI.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery. *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p 162.

³ Elizabeth A. T. Smith, ed., *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). Lee Bontecou, from correspondence with Smith as quoted in "All Freedom in Every Sense," p180.

Symbols of Futuristic Movements

The symbolic in a work of art is a matter of interpretation for viewer and critic alike.

Often when reading about Bontecou's work, mention is made of the disparity between the derived critical meanings and the artist's actual intention. The massive and visceral forms in the welded sculptures from the early sixties seem infused with layers of interpretive meaning in private or public languages in which the pieces speak or interact with viewer. The symbolic components of the forms have asserted a kind of mythology that Bontecou has mostly denied or refuted, instead "...[taking] the position that there are no fixed meanings in her work...[offering] little by way of interpretation."⁴ For the purposes of this essay, I want to investigate the perceived connection of Bontecou's sculptural forms to the philosophical and physical idea of "cyborg," as a critical tool, substantiated by the range of work spanning her career.

Donna Haraway defines a cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."⁵ This description of cyborg suits Bontecou's work precisely. Take for example Bontecou's sculpture,

⁴ Donna De Salvo, "Inner and Outer Space: Bontecou's Sculpture through Drawing," (see note 3), p 217. De Salvo refers to a Bontecou quote in this section of her essay from *Artist's Reality, International Sculpture Exhibition* (New York: New School Art Center, 1961): "I hope the scope of my work is wide enough to awaken in the beholder some dormant reality of his won of which he has been unaware before. I wish one could, through my work, partake in the mystery my sculpture reveals to me."

⁵ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," from *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p 149.

Untitled, from 1962, pictured above. One cannot help but marvel at the contrasting delicacy and brute strength it communicates, the sense of an unsprung machine in a kind of dissected agony. Its jutting mouth bares metallic teeth, while other holes invite the viewer to enter, suggesting a hidden interior one might investigate. One such depression resembles a keyhole, as if a proffered key might lead to more subcutaneous recesses. As Haraway uses the cyborg as a scaffold for the restructuring of dismantled and outmoded feminisms, perhaps one can use the cyborgian forms in Bontecou's sculpture to interpret, through restructure, the poetics of image making in an accelerated technological society.

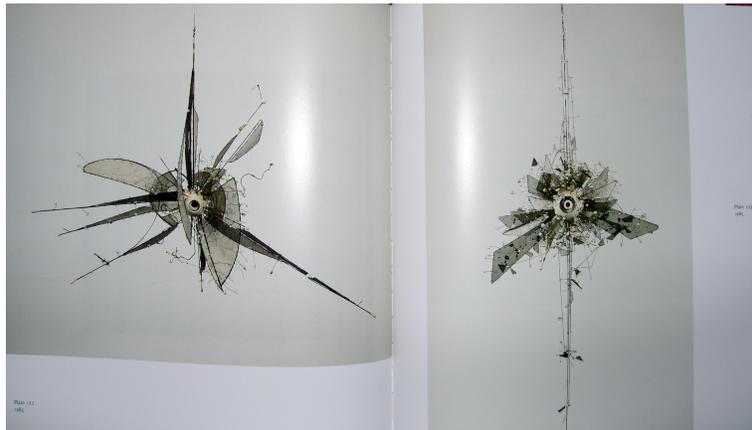
Why cyborg?

As Mona Hadler points out, "There is a...parallel in the conjoining of the organic and technological and in their historical place in a lineage that stretches from eighteenth-century automata to modern notions of the cyborg."⁶ The constructed nature of the hybrid organic machine harkens back to the first decades of the nineteenth century, as the Italian Futurists and the Russian constructivists contemplated new technologies and art, seeking to incorporate the physical properties of science and machines into representations of form and color.⁷ The complexity and hybridity of Bontecou's sculptural forms require an

⁶ Mona Hadler, "Lee Bontecou's Worldscapes," (see note 3 for full reference), p 206. Hadler mentions Haraway's seminal text on the cyborg on this page also.

⁷ Andrei Nakov, *Avant-Garde Russe* (New York: Universe press, 1986), see p 36 for discussion on "states of existence" as basis for artistic inquiry: "This quasi-alchemic insistence on the possibilities of the dynamics of transformation of the state of things constituted the starting point for Malevich's reflection on the possibilities of suprematism's evolution." Also, p 22 Nakov discusses Tatlin's obsessive interest in a combined "flying machine" (*Letatlin*, 1928-32) whose driving force is derived from the movements of man."

open system of critical thinking. If we are to glean our own realms through visual observation of her work, as she wishes (see note 4), we need to make certain leaps in interpretation. I would like to suggest the “social reality” of Bontecou’s work deals with protest and inhabiting a protesting body. Her fashioned panels like armor, metallic gears and teeth create a barricade, not a completely impenetrable one, but one that offers unpleasant consequences. In another untitled piece from 1962, a central eye protrudes;⁸ another from 1964 has a proliferation of orifices, which resemble eyes and mouths with clenched teeth.⁹ While making the body a site of protest, she is also empowering the flesh with a tearing and devouring power, reclaiming materials from military and/or industrial occupations.¹⁰ With the blurring of boundaries between male and female, body and machine, she is reckoning a cyborgian creation born of post-war anxiety and science fictive wonder.



Left: *Untitled*, 1985. Right, *Untitled*, 1985. Photo: K. Carr

⁸ Smith (see note 3), *Untitled*, 1962. Plate 49, p 55.

⁹ *ibid.*, *Untitled*, 1964, Plate 66, p 70.

¹⁰ Smith (see note 3), p. 173. “The location of her studio yielded a variety of items that she scavenged or purchased cheaply—laundry bags and canvas conveyor belts ...metal bolts, gears, war helmets, shrapnel, knapsacks and an abundance of army surplus items, rope, and various other detritus found on Canal Street.”

In later works, two untitled pieces from 1985 (pictured above), Bontecou's "creatures of fiction," like Haraway's cyborg, are all eyes, expectant, ominous and probing.¹¹ They are delicate, almost disembodied offspring of the earlier pieces, yet they maintain a futuristic humanity, at once sentient and mechanized. One can see through her drawings a literal blueprint for the monstrous celebration of technology that her sculpted work presents, and a formal progression of assembled planes of shape and line. Her newer work presents also a figurative blueprint for rebellion, offering the possibility that observation and streamlined awareness is possibly more effective than monumental barricades and terror.

As Haraway states,

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the ...household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other.¹²

Bontecou's shift in scale indicates a pulling back from the role of mouthpiece, which coincides with her retreat from public expectation and engagement with the New York art scene she abandoned for a more real art world.¹³ As her more delicate work addresses more directly environmental concerns with the inclusion of physiological elements of fish

¹¹ These two sculptures hang from the ceiling, are constructed of wire and ceramic orbs, small beads and fabric attached to armatures with fine wire or thread. They are pictured on pages 120 and 121 of the aforementioned monograph, *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*.

¹² Haraway (note 5), p151.

¹³ "I've never left the art world. I'm in the real art world." (To Ann Philbin, quoted in Calvin Tomkins' New Yorker article "Missing in Action," 4 Aug 2003, New Yorker article, p 43.

and birds, they retain a mechanized and ominous edge. This edge serves to remind of the duality of the natural world, its fragility and its power.

Speaking of War (Philosophies of Protest)

As text might correspond to visual images, the textual work of assembly describes and encapsulates the tough canvas of military surplus and found twentieth-century detritus in Bontecou's early sculptural pieces. The sculpture *Untitled* 1962 suggests a template for a dialog on fear and war, while simultaneously presenting organic aspects. The center, for instance, looks like the axis point for revolving planets or the receptacle of a disc flower. Both planets and flowers have things to say to the concept of war, philosophically. As Mona Hadler points out, "many of Bontecou's commanding works of the 60's express her darker moods and anger at war."¹⁴ It is clear from Bontecou's later works that her strong interest in nature and its survival remains, even as her works derive their strength from the weird otherworldly physical structure of satellites, flying machines or sentient watching eyes.

A cyborg, aesthetically, incorporates organic likenesses with machine-like properties. We have a right to be confused about the intentions of cyborg. We live in a society that fights wars with robotic weaponry. Haraway suggests, "...modern war is a cyborg orgy, coded

¹⁴ Hadler (note 6), p 208. Hadler has used a quote from Bontecou on her feelings toward war from the Eleanor Munro book, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976, p 384): "I was angry. I used to work with the United Nations program on the short-wave radio in my studio. I used it like background music, and in a way, the anger became part of the process."

by C³I, command-control-communication-intelligence, an \$84 billion item in 1984's defense budget."¹⁵ But we are a people that rely on technological devices such as hand-held telephones as an aid to human interaction, and as a supplement to our thinking.¹⁶ The duality of beauty and savagery of the objects of war employed in Bontecou's sculptures recalls Futurist Filippo Marinetti's posit that "War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body..."¹⁷ Again, the cyborg refuses to take sides. The cyborg incorporates the sides, represents contradiction and duality in its very nature. How can we make sense of the multiplicity of agendas the cyborg seems to be engaged in? Can we better understand the contradictions that Bontecou presents, through notions of the cyborg?

Poetics of image making

Maria Fernandez states "Human/Machine hybrids and the virtualization of the body have long-standing roots in the theorization of electronic technologies: prefigurations of cyborgs appear in the writings of both [Marshall] McLuhan and Jack Burnham in the 1960's."¹⁸ In that sense, Bontecou is in step with her contemporaries.¹⁹ Listening to her

¹⁵ Haraway (see note 5), p 150.

¹⁶ Martin Lindstrom, "You Love Your iPhone. Literally." New York Times Op-Ed, New York Times Media Group, 30 September 2011. Internet. 5 Nov 2011. Lindstrom's research indicates unhealthy dependencies on cell phone devices.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, from *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), p 241.

¹⁸ Maria Fernandez, "Postcolonial Media Theory," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p 520.

¹⁹ In retrospect, one can see the visionary quality that Bontecou's work projects in light of the (then) impending conflict in Vietnam, and further, as our society invests in ever-increasingly complex technological war machines.

radio and absorbing the news of the day, with blowtorch in hand, and the limits of human curiosity and scientific discovery being stretched daily, she was compelled, in her early pieces, to create sculptural images at once archetypal and apocryphal. Her art combines technological hybridity with a kind of mad scientist hope that the body and its frailties will survive and adapt, as her work has, into its present state. Art critic James Mellow contends, “She has, it seems, been a strange naturalist all along.”²⁰

In Bontecou’s earliest sculptural pieces, her “armored” animals recall the impenetrable exoskeleton of the cyborg, with its implication of protection and strength. In the linear progression of her work, Bontecou repeatedly creates an external armor, with interior sanctuaries into which her viewer may retreat: into the dark cave of imagination, hers or our own. Can we vicariously experience a reprieve from the fear of our own machines consuming us? Bontecou, with her reticence about “meaning” in her work, seems to operate from a place of innocence, as the channel and mouthpiece for a complex set of observations and protests. The formal and symbolic elements of her work create enough mystery and mastery to elicit conversations far into the future of art history, feminist thought and cyborg philosophy. As Lee Bontecou is an artist who has always disliked categorization and has eschewed explanations for her creations, she needn’t articulate further. The forms speak for themselves. The burden of translation falls to art history, the many-headed hydra of interpretation, so the hybrid creation of artist and critic may speak to the future.

²⁰ Smith (note 5), p 180.

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