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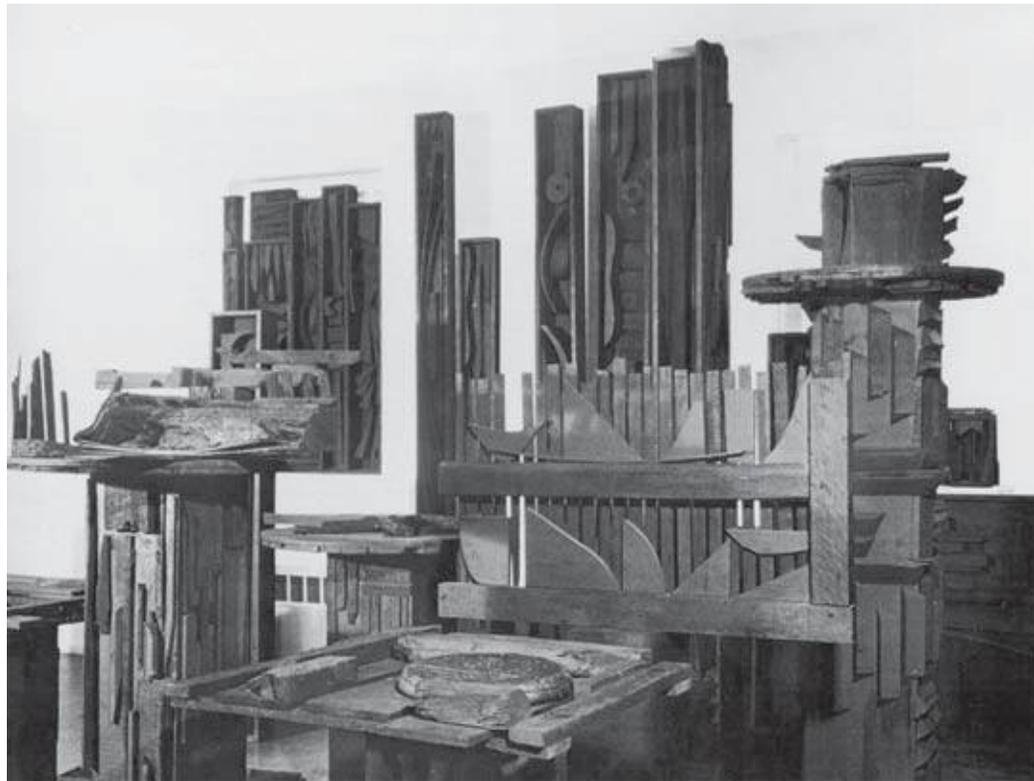
New Perspective

Experiencing Louise Nevelson's *Moon Garden*

Elyse Deeb Speaks

Though nearly forgotten today, Louise Nevelson's exhibition *Moon Garden Plus One* won widespread critical acclaim when it opened in 1958 at the Grand Central Moderns Gallery in New York City. The show was composed of numerous large, abstract assemblages that together created a unified space. Made mostly of found wooden scraps—banisters, beams, toilet seats, moldings and other architectural embellishments, milk crates, rolling pins, and various domestic wooden objects—the components were all painted a uniform black. Sculptures were stacked and crammed throughout the room, lining the walls and unfolding into the center of the gallery. Piled onto windowsills and hung from the ceiling, the tightly compressed wooden units overlapped one another to surround the viewer and suggest one complete environment (figs. 1, 2). The show confirmed Nevelson's signature style: from this point on, she would consistently work in monochrome, with various parts usually combined to form "walls."

Articles and reviews about *Moon Garden* appeared in newspapers and popular magazines like *Time* and *Life* as well as in the major art journals. The critics agreed about the vivid effect of Nevelson's environments—a relatively new genre of sculpture that Louise Bourgeois had begun experimenting with earlier in the decade and that Allan Kaprow began working with that year.¹ A dynamic, engaged, and experientially based relation between the spectators and Nevelson's installation was seen to emerge, one that placed a premium on standing and moving within the space over time. This conception of Nevelson's work as centered in the bodily experience of being there should be understood today as one thread of a new phenomenological discourse around sculpture that would develop in the 1960s, when qualities of "theatricality" would be explicitly associated with minimalism. Phenomenology is the study of conscious experience from the point of view of the perceiver. At the time of Nevelson's 1958 show, art reviewers relied more on loose ideological conceptions of primitivism and enigmatic medieval worldviews than on the ideas of twentieth-century philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to whom critics would turn in the mid-1960s, about examining our experience of the world. But the responses to Nevelson's works can nonetheless be seen to share much with the approach to sculpture that would be taken throughout the next decade.² A look at the reception of her early environments like *Moon Garden* as well as subsequent work provides important insight into the attraction phenomenological conceptions of art would hold for both artists and critics.



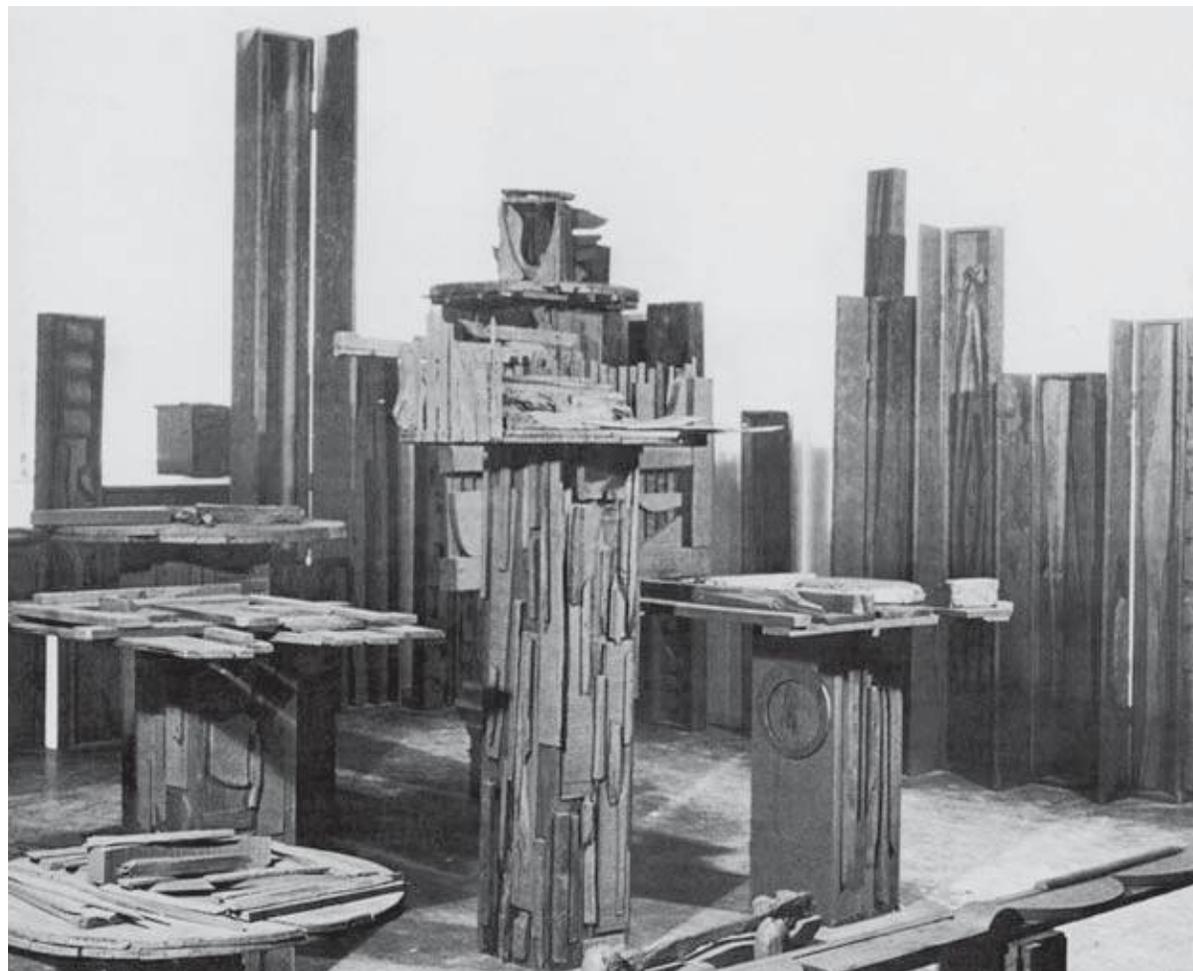
The Wooden Sorceress

By 1958, the time of *Moon Garden Plus One*, the Ukrainian-born Nevelson (1899–1988) already had earned a solid reputation based on smaller sculptures in various media that she exhibited throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Nevelson's family moved to Rockland, Maine, when she was six; her father had arrived earlier and established himself in the lumber business. Critics delighted in the felicitous coincidence that Nevelson came from a family with strong ties to wood; this biographical detail accords well with her oft-repeated assertion that she announced her plans to become a sculptor at a very young age.

She moved to New York with her new husband at age twenty, but did not immediately fix on wood as her primary working material. During her early days in New York, she studied dramatics as

1 Louise Nevelson, *Moon Garden Plus One*, exhibition at the Grand Central Moderns Gallery, New York, January 1958 © Estate of Louise Nevelson / SODRAC 2007

2 Louise Nevelson, *Moon Garden Plus One*, exhibition at the Grand Central Moderns Gallery, New York, January 1958 © Estate of Louise Nevelson / SODRAC 2007



well as painting and sculpture, worked as an assistant to Diego Rivera, and studied with Chaim Gross at the Art Students League. After eleven years of marriage and the birth of one child, Nevelson left her husband to pursue art full time. Their divorce was finalized in 1941, the year her first solo exhibition of wood sculptures took place.³

Brief forays into terra-cotta, marble, and stone during the 1940s interrupted her dedication to found wood as a sculptural material, and it was not until the early 1950s that Nevelson began to amass a large collection of wood fragments of all kinds. At that point her fundamental working process became a routine. First she painted each piece black (or later also white or gold), then stacked and stored the fragments wherever she could find room. Eventually she assembled the parts into big, abstract constructions with a hammer and nails. In 1956 or 1957 Nevelson started to use milk crates and other wood boxes as containers in which to compose small, recessed reliefs, which could then be stacked or otherwise combined. This method allowed her to make ever larger assemblages out of what were initially tabletop pieces. Meanwhile, she developed a strong rapport with Colette Roberts, the director of Grand Central Moderns Gallery, an important venue in the 1950s for showing and supporting new sculptors.⁴

Timing played a role in the fact that Nevelson's reputation skyrocketed about 1958 with her *Moon Garden Plus One* exhibit. *Art in America* had dedicated a special issue to contemporary sculpture in the winter of 1956; its tone and focus signaled the degree to which critics and art magazines looked to sculpture as the future of U.S. art. This hope was partly founded on the increase in scale that sculpture underwent when welding replaced carving as the primary working method in the United States. But *Moon Garden Plus One*, constructed entirely of wood, stood out against the work of the welders, most notably David Smith, the rising star of American sculpture (fig. 3). While relating to Louise Bourgeois wood exhibitions from 1949–50 (fig. 4), Nevelson's show shared the larger scale of the new welded sculpture. Yet it had neither the aggressive look of metal nor its linear purity. Indeed, by leaving the wood in its rough, found form and piling many shapes and parts into each individualized crate or base, Nevelson did away with nearly all conceptions of purity.

The comparison with David Smith was pressed explicitly in a June 1958 issue of *Arts Digest* devoted to sculpture. While critic Clement Greenberg had established David Smith

3 David Smith, *Agricola I*, 1951–52. Painted steel, 73 ½ x 55 ¼ x 24 ⅝ in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966 © Estate of David Smith / Licensed by VAGA, New York. Photo, Lee Stalworth

4 Louise Bourgeois, *Louise Bourgeois: Sculptures*, installation at Peridot Gallery, New York, 1950. Photo, Aaron Siskind / Louise Bourgeois Studio





5 Louise Nevelson standing in the *Gold Room* at the Venice Biennial, 1962 (detail) © Estate of Louise Nevelson / SODRAC 2007. Photo, Loomis Dean / Getty Images

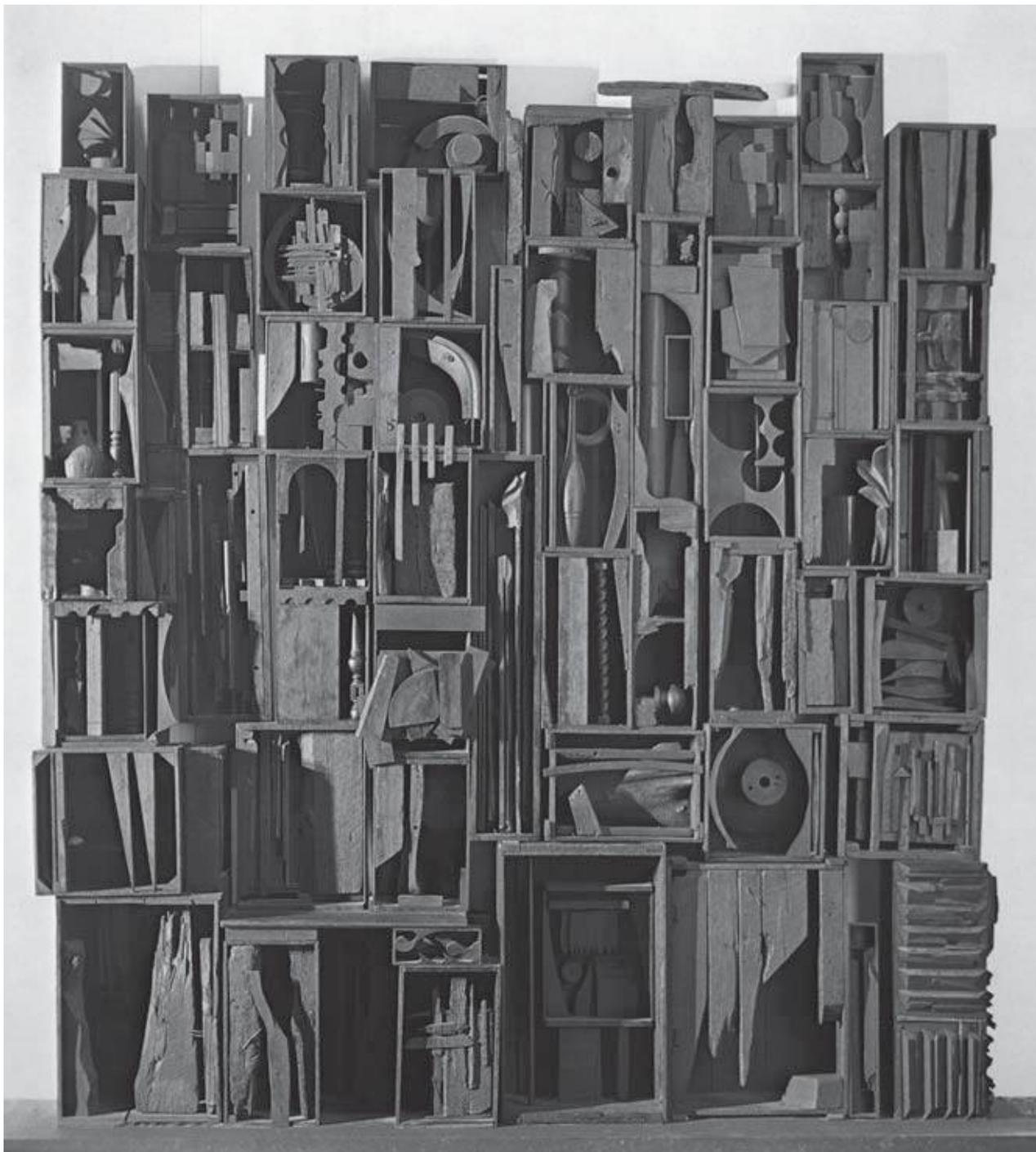
as the hope for the new American sculpture, Hilton Kramer promoted Nevelson as an artist of equal caliber in a feature article about her that he contributed to the *Art Digest* issue, including a section drawing parallels and distinctions between the two artists' work. Nevelson's reputation peaked in 1962 when she represented the United States at the Venice Biennial (fig. 5). At that time, Annette Michelson, writing in *Arts Magazine*, spoke of her delight in observing Nevelson's "imperious, irresistible success," and suggested that the only potential problem it raised was that Europeans would come to see American sculpture solely as the work of Nevelson and Smith.⁵

Kramer and many other critics based their characterizations of Nevelson's work on *Moon Garden*, an exhibition perhaps most memorable for its format. Sculptures appeared to fill the entire space of the somewhat small Grand Central Moderns Gallery, blanketing almost every wall, crowding the center of the room, hanging from the ceiling, and blocking windows. As it was installed there, the largest single piece in the room, *Sky Cathedral*, did not stand significantly apart from the other works; it was perceived, rather, as one part of a whole (fig. 6). The abundance of wooden assemblages, the fragmentary look, and the baroque quality of the flared, energetic lines and arcs combined to produce a charged space. The multitude of wooden beams, boxes, blocks, and shapes also created a sense of vibrating movement. Suggestive of an organic environment, the

effect was jarring in the context of the architectural scale the work conveyed. The covered windows, dim lighting, and strategic spotlights enhanced the monochrome black of the wood and acted to unite the space further by producing sharp shadows and dramatically lit areas that would have, in 1958, resembled a theatrical conception of outer space. The first televised pictures of lunar exploration had debuted only a year earlier after the Soviet Union sent its Sputnik satellite aloft.

Critics pointed out the encompassing aspect of the exhibition in an attempt to distinguish *Moon Garden* from other shows; they felt that viewers were not only seeing the work but entering into it. Kramer was most explicit in his attempts to redefine the perceptual experience of the exhibition space by first contrasting it with Nevelson's previous exhibitions.

Whereas the exhibitions of a year or two ago tended to use the floor space of the gallery as a pedestal, upon which sculptures were grouped very much as forms upon the flat platforms of individual works, this year her exhibition took on the character of a sculptural enclosure, following the recent development in her work of an enclosed, boxed-in space which seems to be the ubiquitous preoccupation of her current production. . . . In her most recent exhibition, in January, nearly every conceivable demand was made on the gallery space. It was entirely transformed into a continuous sculptural enclosure.⁶



6 Louise Nevelson, *Sky Cathedral*, 1958. Painted wood, 11 ft. 3 ½ in. x 10 ft. ¼ in. x 18 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Mildwoff © Estate of Louise Nevelson / SODRAC 2007. Photo, Pace-Wildenstein

Nevelson's advocates became preoccupied with describing the experience of encountering her new pieces. The way the sculptures appeared to wrap around the body was greeted as something novel and exciting. "Perhaps 'enclosures' is more adequate a word than 'sculptures' to describe these works on the theme of *Moon Garden*," an anonymous reviewer for *Arts Digest* commented, agreeing with Kramer. "The artist abandons the freestanding protrusions of last year's forest and explores a kind of twilight kingdom where night suns and day moons reveal treasured objects sheltered in chests or tall boxes." Here the critic

focused on the way the works seemed to box in their components; Kramer would extend the act of enclosure to the bodies of the viewers. He noted that this new wraparound space advanced beyond the metaphors of Nevelson's painterly predecessors, the abstract expressionists, whose large-scale canvases were seen to reach beyond the viewers' fields of vision and so visually bathe them in paint and surface. As Kramer explained, Nevelson's spaces (he and other writers would describe them as "environments" in later years) "follow the lead of current abstract painting in projecting an image so large that the spectator is invited to feel 'placed' (or trapped perhaps?) within it."⁷ *Moon Garden* had a crucial advantage over recent abstract expressionist painting: its reality. It physically rather than virtually surrounded its spectators, allowing for an experience of the site as a whole. Size, lighting, and the spatial disposition of the sculptures formed the first literalizing of what had been metaphoric or iconographic references, the province of painting, up to this time.

The use of lighting was the most explicitly theatrical component of Nevelson's exhibition. The absence of natural light—all the windows were blocked—combined with the use of sharp dark blue and white spotlights created a play of shadows that led many critics to compare the work to nightscapes. Stuart Preston, writing for the *New York Times*, drew a clear connection between the lighting and the exhibition's generally surreal ambience, saying, "Gradually, through the encircling gloom, we identify some of the multitudinous objects—narrow coffins, shadow boxes made like traps and a whole host of objets trouvés nailed together—that stand guard by a huge abstract reredos." He concluded, "In this startling exhibition she [Nevelson] makes geometrical constructivism outdo surrealism on its own ground, the summoning up of mystery and irrational fear."⁸ The dim ambience allowed the viewer to focus on the physical and temporal experience of the work as a whole; it took time for the eyes to adjust and for the space to become both visible and palpable.

Preston's reference to mystery and fear reminds us that the exhibition was based on a radical devaluation of pure visuality—an unusual decision for the time. In *Moon Garden* it was difficult to see the stuff of sculpture: facture, shape, and volume were only partially visible, leaving the spectator unable to examine precisely how all the parts fit together. Instead, the viewer had to rely on an experientially based comprehension of the work, one that was embodied rather than visual.

Perhaps this deflation of the work's conventional visual components inclined some critics to extol the literary or poetic virtues of the exhibition by noting its imaginary and symbolic qualities. Critics speculated about the mysteries of Nevelson's sources and analogies. A writer for *Arts Digest* suggested that the sculptural forms appeared Eastern, having more to do with "Zen than with Christianity," and perhaps primitive, with "[e]choes of African sculpture and Surrealism." This writer applauded *Moon Garden's* "mystical concern for subtle, burgeoning things" and its dominant quality of "a child's playful wisdom."⁹ The title, *Moon Garden*, was one of many nighttime references Nevelson would make in her work. The range of association was diverse, and often it was not rooted in the specific formal properties of the work.

Because the overwhelming impression of *Moon Garden* was its presence as a totality, critics generally did not focus on individual components in the cluttered space. Writer Dore Ashton, a champion of abstract expressionism, did so, however, in picking up on Kramer's connection with current abstract paintings. Ashton noted that one piece in *Moon Garden* resembled "a large tondo with splinters arranged in a manner which suggests a cross between an abstract expressionist painted landscape and a mysterious sundial from some culture we have never heard of." Her choice of references, blending abstract painting with Christian symbolism and an object from an unknown civilization, seemed intended to capture something about the space the sculpture created: it was both abundantly present in its materiality and equally ephemeral, leading the visitor to a poetic, imaginary place. Indeed, mystery and magic were consistently mentioned by critics. Such language reached

its extreme in articles in *Time* and *Life*, which capitalized on the eeriness of the exhibition. *Life* magazine presented a ten-page photo spread entitled “Weird Woodwork of the Lunar World,” in which its writers went so far as to characterize Nevelson as a sorceress, featuring a photograph of Nevelson in her characteristic eccentric dress, including the gypsy-like turban she often wore, as corroborating evidence.¹⁰

Collecting Experiences

In the late 1950s critics invoked mystery and the surreal to distinguish an experience of the world that was physical or phenomenological from one that was primarily intellectual or visual. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* was first published in English translation in 1962, but as Merleau-Ponty pointed out in his preface, “a manner or style of thinking” that privileged descriptions of experience had been available for years through the writings of thinkers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, and more formally in those of philosophers Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl. It was even available in direct connection with art through John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (a publication of lectures he delivered at Harvard in 1932).¹¹ The view of perception that was central to a theoretical understanding of art in the early 1960s, however, was fairly simple and based largely on the centrality of material objects.

Many writers and theorists concerned with aesthetics seized on Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of perception as an intersection of the material object and the experience of it by the body of the person who encounters it. In his well-known essay “The Primacy of Perception,” he declared that “matter is pregnant with its form.” This catchphrase suggests that the object actively presents itself rather than simply awaiting apprehension. The resulting encounter is the “lived experience.” By highlighting it, a new premium came to be placed on moments of interaction between people and material things in the sensory world, which could prompt a greater sense of wholeness and a richer understanding.¹² These moments of exchange seemed laden with a new significance for artists as well, despite the fact that they were continuous and, often, habit driven.

Both Nevelson and Joseph Cornell, for instance, were obsessive collectors, and their relation with objects, whether wooden fragments and furniture parts or small glasses, dolls, and postcards, shared much with Merleau-Ponty’s views. Through their encounters with these things, each artist sought a sensory or aesthetic experience, but Cornell was more fastidious in his methods. This can be seen most easily, perhaps, in the way he made his small diorama box sculptures, juxtaposing small objects that often had little real-world connection. The act of collecting these objects was the foundation of his working method and a pathway to productive free association. Cornell first scoured the contents of thrift stores and shops in Manhattan and brought his found treasures home to sort through and catalogue. He relentlessly classified and organized them, creating his famous dossiers and source boxes that were laboriously labeled and arranged (fig. 7). Then, in making his sculpture boxes, he recombined the elements in surreal and poetic ways.

Cornell wrote in his diary of “the prospect of cluttered cellar— / creative filing / creative arranging / as poetics / as technique / as joyous creation.” In other words, in dividing the act of art making into collecting, archiving, and constructing a material work, he found an ultimate progression from the material to the immaterial. His general interest in mysticism and belief in Christian Science, which was founded on the denial of physical matter, most likely fed such views. But it was also a mind-set that resonated culturally at the time, and that Nevelson seemed to share. Cornell “collected” a quotation from Jean Renoir that aptly summarized the sculptors’ goals: “I believe that during the past 50 yrs. man has been

losing contact with his physical senses and is becoming too intellectualized. The artist's mission today . . . is to recreate a direct contact with nature."¹³ Cornell and Nevelson appeared just as intent on collecting moments of immediacy and experience as they were on amassing antiques, wood, and ephemera, and then translating them into artworks.

Nevelson shared Cornell's passion for collecting in order to experience the world in sensory ways, but her methods were less meticulous. Her lack of organization reputedly led to her largest "wall" sculptures, such as *Sky Cathedral* (see fig. 6). Photographs and her own account attribute the inception of her environmental aesthetic to the way in which she stacked and piled incomplete works in her home-studio and combined them with other collections of art, African artifacts, and various pieces of junk or wood scraps found on the streets (fig. 8). Her view of the act of collecting was indicative of the almost physicalist ethos Nevelson embraced regarding her artistic process. Ultimately it was as if she, like Cornell, was relying on an excess of material objects to produce immaterial experiences. Nevelson said she simply wanted to create—through her object-laden, collaged environments—encounters with "in-between places of dawns and dusks."¹⁴

When Nevelson spoke about her work and her methods around the time she made *Moon Garden*, she used a rhetoric that suggests Merleau-Ponty's "lived experience"—what it is like to feel the world through your body—as the root of aesthetic value. On the topic of beauty, for instance, she said:

When a thing functions, that's beauty. . . . I think Frank Lloyd Wright was a beauty, believe it or not, (laugh). . . . Let's assume that I do agree in principle with Frank Lloyd Wright. That there is an architecture, there's an architecture about our bodies, there's an architecture about the place we're in, there's an architecture about the things we build (it doesn't have to be a house). If you think in terms of that principle and if those principles of that architecture flow together—that's beauty.¹⁵

7 Joseph Cornell's storage area.
Photograph from the Joseph
Cornell Study Center, Smithsonian
American Art Museum

8 The living room at Louise Nevelson's
Spring Street residence, New York,
ca. 1970. Photo, PaceWildenstein



By emphasizing the relation between bodies and spaces, Nevelson began to suggest why critics placed such a premium on the experience of her work and on its ability to enclose, wrap around, or reach out to the spectator. Here beauty functions for Nevelson as no more than an indication of value based on the bond between object or space and inhabitant or user. For her, structure was the linchpin that guaranteed the interactive relationship.

Painters and sculptors wrestled with notions of what constituted art in this era and often used equivocating language to discuss it. Nevelson denied in interviews and lectures that she made art, for example, while nonetheless maintaining that she was born an artist. What emerges from the words and collecting habits of artists like Nevelson and Cornell is the idea that art should be defined as a way of experiencing the world. For this reason, art was not, in its pure form, an object that could be made. Thus during the late 1950s and early 1960s there was sometimes talk that there could be artists but not art. It was useful to be an artist and to create things that could potentially engage the viewer in an aesthetic way, but the experience—not the object—was the primary work of “art.”

The Dance and the Crypt

Perhaps this experiential view of art also explains why fewer distinctions were drawn among the various arts themselves. Nevelson’s working methods, like those of a number of visual artists in the late 1950s, were informed by modern dance and the ways in which critics and dancers conceived of dance performance. She had trained in modern dance as well as voice and dramatics. Now modern dance was being performed in spaces designed by sculptors, and the convergence of media was important for her visual art career. Dances and stage sets connected to Martha Graham especially attracted Nevelson’s interest. Isamu Noguchi and Frederick Kiesler, among other sculptors, designed these sets, and critics remarked at length on the phenomenon.

For instance, in 1948 John Martin wrote an article entitled “The Dance: Noguchi; Designing the Stage for Modern Movement.” In it he distinguished between the ways in which Noguchi’s sets (fig. 9) operated—he characterized them as specifically sculptural—and the ways painted sets typically worked in ballet performances. Modern dance required something different from the ornamental or decorative sets used in ballet, he reasoned, because it is more abstract in nature than the narrative “stories” of the ballet, and because its movements are more “expressive” than “pantomimic.”¹⁶ Martin went on to explain how Noguchi’s sets worked: “The greatest emphasis of his settings is spatial, and that is where he has made such a valuable contribution to the subject as a whole. . . . Specifically his designs usually consist of several units—sculptural forms, constructions, or what you will, each alone or in close groups.” Ultimately, Martin’s analysis placed Noguchi’s stage sets in the realm of environmental sculpture, especially in terms of their operational “unfolding”: “His setting unfolds, as it were, with the unfolding of the choreographic material to which it is so functionally allied. It becomes thus essentially dynamic design.” The cohesiveness of Noguchi’s design was paramount. Though composed of several units, the set acted as one “total area” and had an overall haptic (i.e., physically touchable) quality. Both Noguchi’s stage set and Nevelson’s environments were seen to embody a dynamic conception of space. Using language similar to the critical response to *Moon Garden Plus One*, Martin described Noguchi’s set designs as abstract yet having a “definite sense of a place,” and said, “Everywhere he has not only created evocative forms, but he has created them in materials which have evocative tactile values, colors, tensions.”¹⁷



9 Isamu Noguchi, *Embattled Garden*, 1958. Wood, canvas, and rattan stage set for Martha Graham. © 2007 Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, Long Island City/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Martha Swope

The enigma associated with premodern space derives in part from the mythical crypt or tomb. Rather than a space premised on visibility, the crypt is a space a visitor experiences, a dark, cold, cramped interior whose aura is almost palpable. By connecting Nevelson's environments and the crypt, Ashton also demonstrated the point at which Herbert Read's ideas on modern sculpture, most fully expressed in his book *The Art of Sculpture* (1956), coincided with the contemporary critical view of *Moon Garden Plus One*. Read was the art critic most dedicated to promoting modern sculpture, particularly any that conformed to his ideal, which was based on haptic properties. He argued in his book that pictorial perspective had imposed itself on sculpture for centuries, denying the possibility of a bodily experience.¹⁹ His main target was religious relief sculpture, but he suggested that sculpture had long conformed to a presentation that, like one-point perspective in painting, required viewing from a distant, particularized point. Such an orientation prevented the viewer from experiencing sculpture's tactile, three-dimensional physicality in space, the guarantor of sculpture's relational capacities, and, thus, its value.

That is, Read drew a hard distinction between seeing sculpture and experiencing it. Nevelson's environments (which were unknown to Read, but well known by Kramer, whose position may have been informed by Read's ideas) embodied the latter mode. In groupings like *Moon Garden*, shadow, light, and line combined to create the kind of enclosing space that relied less on visibility than on a sacred, expressive encounter to convey its meaning. This lingering relation with the sacred seemed slightly out of place in 1958, a time when religious sculpture was rarely, if ever, considered part of the avant-garde scene. Yet when they ventured into Nevelson's environments, critics seemed to sense a quality of sacred mystery despite the lack of any explicit elements derived from traditional religious art.²⁰

Shortly after the time that Nevelson began producing her environments, theorists from a number of fields began discussing certain spaces as relics—time capsules from the premodern world. Their views were later consolidated in Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space*, published in 1974. Lefebvre posits a nostalgia for spaces like the crypt or cave, which had disappeared with the advent of modernity. The most significant shift, he said, occurred in

Trends that emerged from stage design and dance informed responses to Nevelson's environments, but critics were also mesmerized with the way her works generated their own particular arcane spaces. In writing about these, Ashton, for example, recalled, "André Malraux once suggested that until modern art goes underground—and he meant it literally for he was referring to the crypts of early Christian Rome—it can never fulfill its function of mystery." Ashton proposed that Nevelson's spaces conveyed a sense of subterranean mystery and power through their cave-like appearance: "Nevelson, more than any sculptor to date, has understood that function. Her show is installed to create a total ambience; a dream-suspended universe of what she has called the 'inbetween places.'"¹⁸

10 Louise Nevelson, *The Chapel of the Good Shepherd*, ca. 1977. Wood painted white with gold leaf on cross. St. Peter's Church, New York City © Estate of Louise Nevelson / SODRAC 2007. Photo, Al Mozell / Pace-Wildenstein



late medieval cities when cathedrals began to embody idealized, rational space. With this came the gradual decline of places like the crypt—where premodern space had been essentialized—in favor of the vast, open space of the cathedral aboveground. The remnants that survived “w[ere] transformed into ‘heterotopical places,’ places of sorcery and madness, places inhabited by demonic forces—places which were fascinating but tabooed.”²¹

Nevelson’s environments seemed to invoke both the taboos and the nostalgia of such lost spaces. They had a manifest material feel that replaced rationality and visuality with the sensory and the magical. At play was the concept of “spatial belonging,” a medieval worldview that saw the conjoinment of person and world as unbroken, unreflective, and unmediated. Modernity had replaced “spatial belonging” with distance, reflection, and understanding.²² Whereas the former suggests metaphors of touch and proximity, tying the body to the physical world, the latter relies on values associated with sight—with visuality.

Moreover, where modernity and reflection are often taken to be masculinized concepts based on logic and order, the ideal of premodern conjoinment had feminized associations that made it all the more compelling a metaphor for sculptural environments made by a woman. In his *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre linked the notion of spatial belonging with ideals of the feminine realm and the home. He wrote that in earlier eras, dating back to Grecian civilization, “The female realm was in the household: around the shrine or hearth; around the omphalos, a circular, closed, and fixed space; or around the oven—the last relic of the shadowy abyss.”²³ Historically, feminine space was highly restricted, a proximate space and a private, perhaps even mysterious one that was closer to the space of the crypt or cave than to the cathedral, he said. There was, then, a historical connection between the mysterious, constricted space of crypt or cave and spaces understood to be feminine.

Nostalgia for this kind of feminine spatial embodiment and belonging was present not only in the philosophical theories of the phenomenologists but also in their popularization through the writings of architectural theorists, aestheticians like Read, and communication theorists like Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan, for instance, took the geodesic dome of Buckminster Fuller as his point of departure to promote a reintroduction of the primitive “wraparound” space that had been abandoned when habitats ceased to be round. For the crypt or cavern, McLuhan substituted the hut, teepee, and igloo in sketching out a line of descent to contemporary spaces, which were restructured around the emerging culture of automobiles and the dynamic relationship television established with its viewers.²⁴

Nevelson’s 1958 environments embodied such premodern ideals of experience and spatial belonging without relinquishing localizing, modern elements. Whether or not the critics believed her spaces to be somehow feminine, they nonetheless perceived them to have properties linked historically to an embodied, antirationalist order. These properties derived explicitly from the contradictory ways her environments operated. They were seen, for instance, to be both materialist and illusionist, poetic and formalist, civilized and primitive, pictorial and dynamic, constrictive and transporting. But their primary qualities seemed to originate from a kind of displaced sacredness, perhaps the only modern conception left of spatial conjoinment or belonging. Without behaving precisely like a crypt or even like a chapel, Nevelson’s environments summoned up the experience one would expect to have in such a place.

A poem written about Nevelson in 1960 by artist Jean Arp addressed precisely this concept when it asked about “the gray bottles filled with the dust of the catacombs” in her work (“Ou sont les bouteilles grises emplées de poussière des catacombes?”) as if to suggest that her works contained the remnants, if not the actual trappings, of those dark spaces.²⁵ Evidence suggests that these questions of experience, belonging, mystery, and sacredness did not disappear when her format and style changed in the late 1960s. In 1977 Nevelson was commissioned to design and construct an actual semisubterranean chapel, the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at St. Peter’s Church in New York City, where it stands today (fig. 10).

Notes

- 1 Allan Kaprow completed his first environment, later referred to as “Beauty Parlor,” in March 1958 and exhibited it at the Hansa Gallery in New York that year. Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2004), 21.
- 2 These ideas of the 1960s will be most famously expressed by art critic and historian Michael Fried in his “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* (Summer 1967), reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968), 116–47.
- 3 “Behind a One-Woman Art Show: Louise Nevelson’s Revolt as a Pampered Wife,” *New York Post*, October 16, 1941. Key sources on Nevelson’s life and career include: Arnold Glimcher, *Louise Nevelson* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972); Louise Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks: Taped Conversations with Diana MacKown* (New York: Scribner, 1976); Jean Lipman, *Nevelson’s World* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, in association with the Whitney Museum of Art, 1983); and Laurie Wilson, *Louise Nevelson, Iconography and Sources* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1981).
- 4 Colette Roberts was also one of Nevelson’s most important critics, and her vision of Nevelson’s work shaped much of its reception.
- 5 Clement Greenberg wrote about David Smith numerous times in the 1940s and 1950s. See *Clement Greenberg, the Collected Essays and Criticism* ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 2:53–54, 140–41, 166, and vol. 3 (1995): 109–13, 276–78. Hilton Kramer, “The Sculpture of Louise

- Nevelson," *Arts Digest* 32 (June 1958): 26–29. Annette Michelson, "On the Venice Biennale," *Arts Magazine* 37 (October 1962): 26.
- 6 Kramer, "The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson," 27.
 - 7 For the anonymous review, see "Reviews," *Arts Digest* (January 1958): 54; for the Kramer quote, see "The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson," 29.
 - 8 Stuart Preston, "The Rising Tide of Exhibitions for 1958," *New York Times*, January 12, 1958, Louise Nevelson Archives, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
 - 9 For the quotes see, "Reviews," *Arts Digest* (January 1958): 54.
 - 10 For the Ashton quote, see Dore Ashton, "Art," *Arts and Architecture* 75 (March 1958): 33; for the *Life* article, see "Weird Woodwork of the Lunar World," *Life*, March 25, 1958, 70–80.
 - 11 For the Merleau-Ponty quote see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), viii.
 - 12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception," reprinted in *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology: Selected Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. John O'Neill (London: Heinemann Educational, 1974), 196.
 - 13 For both Cornell quotes see Lindsay Blair, *Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order* (London: Reaktion, 1998), 24.
 - 14 See Louise Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks: Taped Conversations with Diana MacKown* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1976).
 - 15 Louise Nevelson, interview by Tal Streeter, November 25, 1959, 8, Martha Jackson Gallery Records, Archives of American Art.
 - 16 John Martin, "The Dance: Noguchi; Designing the Stage for Modern Movement," *New York Times*, February 29, 1948, X3.
 - 17 Ibid.
 - 18 Dore Ashton, "Art," *Arts and Architecture* 76 (December 1959): 7.
 - 19 Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 67.
 - 20 Nevelson's environments could be compared to the conception of premodern space suggested by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974). Metaphors of the crypt and cave persisted throughout the reception of all periods of Nevelson's career and were not limited to American criticism. One critic suggested that a "mortuary element" was a primary feature of all of Nevelson's environments. "Reviews," *Art News* 60 (May 1961): 10. See also R. Oxenaar, *Louise Nevelson* (Otterlo: Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1969), unpaginated.
 - 21 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 264. Though his use of the term "heterotopias" relates his view to Michel Foucault's conception of the atypical spaces that he distinguishes from those of everyday life, it is not clear that Lefebvre means quite the same thing as Foucault. Less important than an accurate picture of the heterotopia for my purposes is Lefebvre's reliance on the medieval space of the crypt as his means of conveying its order.
 - 22 See, for instance, Joseph Koerner, "Hieronymous Bosch's World Picture," in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. Caroline Jones and Peter Galison (New York: Routledge, 1998), 299–300. For a history of the modern denigration of vision, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993).
 - 23 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 248.
 - 24 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964). See, for instance, his discussion of the "wraparound space of small cars," 275.
 - 25 Jean Arp, "Louise Nevelson" (1960), reprinted in Glimcher, *Louise Nevelson*, 93.