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The Liminal self

Kristen Hermanowski

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I, Kristen Hermanowski, prefer to be contacted each time a request for product is made. I can be reached at the following address:

Signature _____

Date 17 May 2000

Mom and Jim
With love and sincerity,
Thank you

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THE LIMINAL SELF

Liminal- adj. 1: of or relating to a sensory threshold 2: barely perceptible.

Limen- n. threshold.

Threshold- n. the point at which a physiological or psychological effect begins to be produced.¹

I intend to investigate the area of transition and metamorphosis. My focus will be to research the relationship between elements of motion and frozen motion—the twisting and developing, growing beyond the original confines which both restrict and protect. My life forms grow, barely contained at times, to reach maturation. My intention is to harness sculpturally and visually the transitional and liminal moments—as in life.

Defined in my thesis statement is the basic premise of my thesis: “My intention is to harness sculpturally and visually the transitional and liminal moments—as in life.” That said, I seek to engage my viewers in an experience which is a personal frozen moment in time. They will engage and bear witness to my own liminal journey. As they both engage and bear witness they encounter an alternate perception of the work as they complete the piece as its human element.

My goal is to transmit, through each individual element as well as the collective, the sentiment of my experiences, fears and expectations as well as confront the concept of change. My effort is to infuse vitality—an organic flesh-ness—into the piece. Surrounded by these elements the viewer (or engager as it were) will experience a moment in my time. I will research the state of liminality and apply its principles to achieve a memorable otherworldly effect. Also I will explore the works of other artists as they relate to my work.

LIMINALITY

When discussing any topic where the main focus is of a specialized nature, it is only fit to explore that topic to bring about greater clarity. Liminality, or to be in a liminal state, is a concept employed most widely in discussions of myth and folklore. In many cultures it is believed to be a magical state, e.g. possessed by shamans, and thought of with great reverence.

Two ways to speak of, or portray, a liminal theme are as follows: 1) a bridge between empires or worlds, and 2) a rite of passage. A bridge, often times, is just that:

a structure that joins two otherwise separate pieces of land, yet at the same time it enhances their separateness. One can travel across it, from one land mass to another, but while on it the traveler is neither in one place nor the other.²

The traveler is not quite in Buda and not quite in Pest. A bridge is the threshold to an anticipated destination.

When speaking in reference to rites of passage, the liminal period is the rite itself. John Paul O'Malley in "Myth and Ritual: Heracles the Liminal Hero" succinctly explains this example:

...these rites are split up into three distinct stages. The first is when the novices are removed from their normal sphere of existence. The second when they undergo teaching and transformation to enter the next stage of their life and the accompanying responsibilities. Finally the re-incorporation stage when they are returned to everyday life. The second stage is considered to be the liminal stage.³

In the process of the journey at the second stage, they are no longer a child and not yet proven as adult, but a liminal, sentient being. In either case, the liminal moments are not the before or after, but that strange and believed to be magical time when the voyager is 'in between'.

Water is also a magical theme of the 'in between' in which the symbolism stands for nothing other than the unconsciousness itself. In a story, to be lost at sea, as in the tale of Odysseus and his men, is to engage in a struggle with the unconsciousness. The journey is to be a struggle for and the hopeful return to consciousness. Consciousness, therefore, is transformed by

trials, tests, or rites. The result of the trial or rite is revelation. You enter the water thinking “A” and you survive and emerge believing “Q” (it is usually way beyond a mere “B”). What has occurred in the liminal state is a transformation of consciousness.⁴



Wading, 1999

WADING

The title of my thesis is *The Liminal Self*. The title of my art piece created for my thesis show is entitled *Wading*. The reference being wading through the waters of my liminal unconsciousness. I feel as if someone took a photograph of my liminal position with a mythological camera. In *Wading*, the ethereal frame of time has been slowed down to the point of being frozen and thus made real.

The 'before' and 'after' surrounds *Wading*, which allows for entrances and exits at all angles. Most importantly, these portals create an invitation inside to experience the liminality. Through the placement of the objects that make up the work the viewer is asked to become engaged in the piece as part of the work—as its human element. The viewer, now 'traveler', moves through the space and the piece and partakes in the liminal experience. They are in the 'in between'. They navigate, or wade, through the sea of floating elements working to reach the other side.

The viewer wades through objects which look as though they exist illusorily suspended in space. These objects communicate thoughts or stories, each with its own tale. Some appear to make reference to the egg. They are intact, fully enclosed and encapsulated. These elements allude to the various aspects of the beginnings or the 'before'. Their shells protect and yet smother, provide security and as well as limitations to what is contained inside. One is compelled to question at what expense the insides are safe.

There are components of *Wading* that represent what I have and continue to endure and learn during my trials. In the words of Louise Bourgeois,

In order to express...tensions, I had to express my anxiety with forms that I could change, destroy and rebuild.⁵

There are those components which are right at the threshold. It seems that they are so close that the threshold itself becomes blurred. These anomalies I regard as quintessentially liminal and fantastic. In these elements exists a vitality and excitement. Their metamorphosis is tangible and desirable.

The remainder of the elements interpret my anticipation or what I aspire to attain as I move out of my testing or trial stage and embark upon my own

third stage. They incorporate what I ask for myself, my relationships, and for those involved with me. These are the results of a successful journey, regardless of the current trials. The quantity of these elements are much lower with regards to the others. This is so to emphasize liminality as the current state of existence.

Once the viewer's journey is complete the 'after' or third stage is the actual closing to the work as a whole. The expectation is that they will go away feeling something—anything. Both positive and negative responses are appreciated as either validates the success of the 'in-between' sensation. 'What exactly was all of that?' It is an alternate state of consciousness made physical.



Detail no. 1 of Wading



Detail no. 2 of Wading



Detail no. 3 of Wading



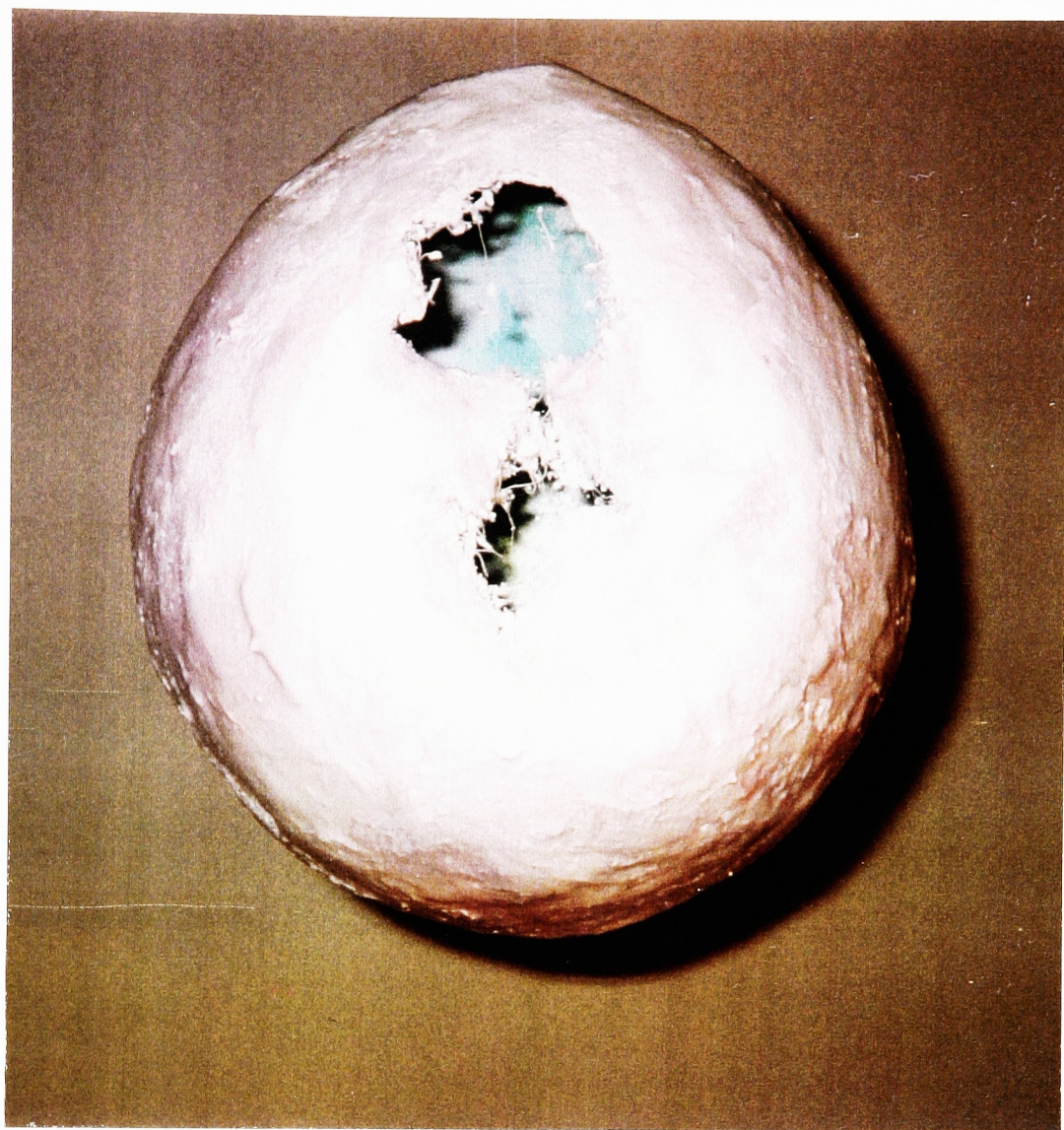
Detail no. 4 of Wading



Detail no. 5 of Wading



Detail no. 6 of Wading



Detail no. 7 of Wading



Detail no. 8 of Wading



Detail no. 9 of Wading



Detail no. 10 of Wading

EVOLUTION

Dating back to even my earliest sculptural works, I have always been fond of involving some aspect of human interaction. This can come in the form of light, touch, and now exploration. I feel these aspects engage viewers on an alternate level as a result of this interaction. They walk away having been part of the piece, though they may not always be pleased once the interaction is complete. What is most important, as I have stated above, is not the viewer's acceptance or rejection of the work, but that an emotional reaction was created. I have in particular two older pieces of mine that I refuse to part with even though I have become accidentally caught on them several times resulting in a cut. People are surprised when I laugh. I laugh in pleasure at the validation of my work. "The crazy piece got me again!" I am then left with an alternate perception of the piece unachievable by viewing alone.

Although I have given up endangering my audience, the quest to physically engage them is continually examined. I look to other sculptors as a resource for ideation. I find it fascinating the way one can walk through Louise Bourgeois' *Spider* series and become part of the piece as it leers protectively, menacingly, lovingly overhead.⁶ To view her series of *Cells* from the outside must validate even further the sense of bizarre loneliness she had in mind. To stand within the small rooms containing peculiar instrumentation must be the pinnacle achievement in the drive at alternate perception with the human element as the completion to the piece.

Sculptor/painter Eva Hess' works also have an interest in the involvement of the human factor. To surprise and intrigue her viewers is a goal of her work, however it is uncertain to what degree the addition of the human element of which I speak was intentional. Because of her dangling work entitled *Connection*, 1969, and monumental pieces such as *Expanded Expansion*, 1969, and *Sans II*, 1968, I would find it difficult to say that she was altogether uninterested. It was noted that Hess was disappointed when she was consequently forced to separate *Sans II* into four sections in order to facilitate sales.⁷ Therefore, it would appear that she did have concerns since she preferred the piece to completely overwhelm her viewers. Two connected rows of fiberglass boxes spanning 21'6" involve its audience in a most specific way.

My association with the human relationship in my work is not my only driving force. I habitually focus on referencing natural or organic shapes.

Aside from its austere beauty, I find the life cycle of natural elements, especially bulbs and/or early plant stages, to have a direct parallel with the stages in rites of passage. Initially I worked more literally with the forms depicting the early growth of the plants. Feeling limited with the range of expression I was able to achieve, I again found in the works of Bourgeois my next step. I began to look within the elements themselves. Because of works like *The Quartered One*, 1964-65, and *Le Regard*, 1966, I opened up my objects and dealt directly with the insides as opposed to my usual inference of what may be contained. I cracked, gauged, split, liberated and violated the shapes. What could be revealed to the viewer via their imagination was so much more. One could peer inside and see something, maybe, or maybe nothing but think it is something. What a fantastic curiosity! It provided a glimpse, at times, an air hole. I experimented and works became completely exposed or demonstrated that something had escaped or moved on. It was another way to heighten the human interaction as well as grow creatively.

A final look at the importance of human interaction in my work is the one that I find the most compelling: my own. Unlike Hess who made every attempt to ignore her personal life and well-being when it came to the conceptualization of her work, I take what is at the core of myself and out of sheer necessity create my personally and emotionally driven works. This is the most inspirational element in Bourgeois' own legacy. Part of both the Modern and Post Modern eras, it was not any 'ism' that she brought into that has sustained her interest through the years, though she is often linked with surrealism. It is her "tensions" and "anxiety". She stated in an interview with Paul Gardener, "Everything I create comes from something personal; some memory or emotional experience."⁸

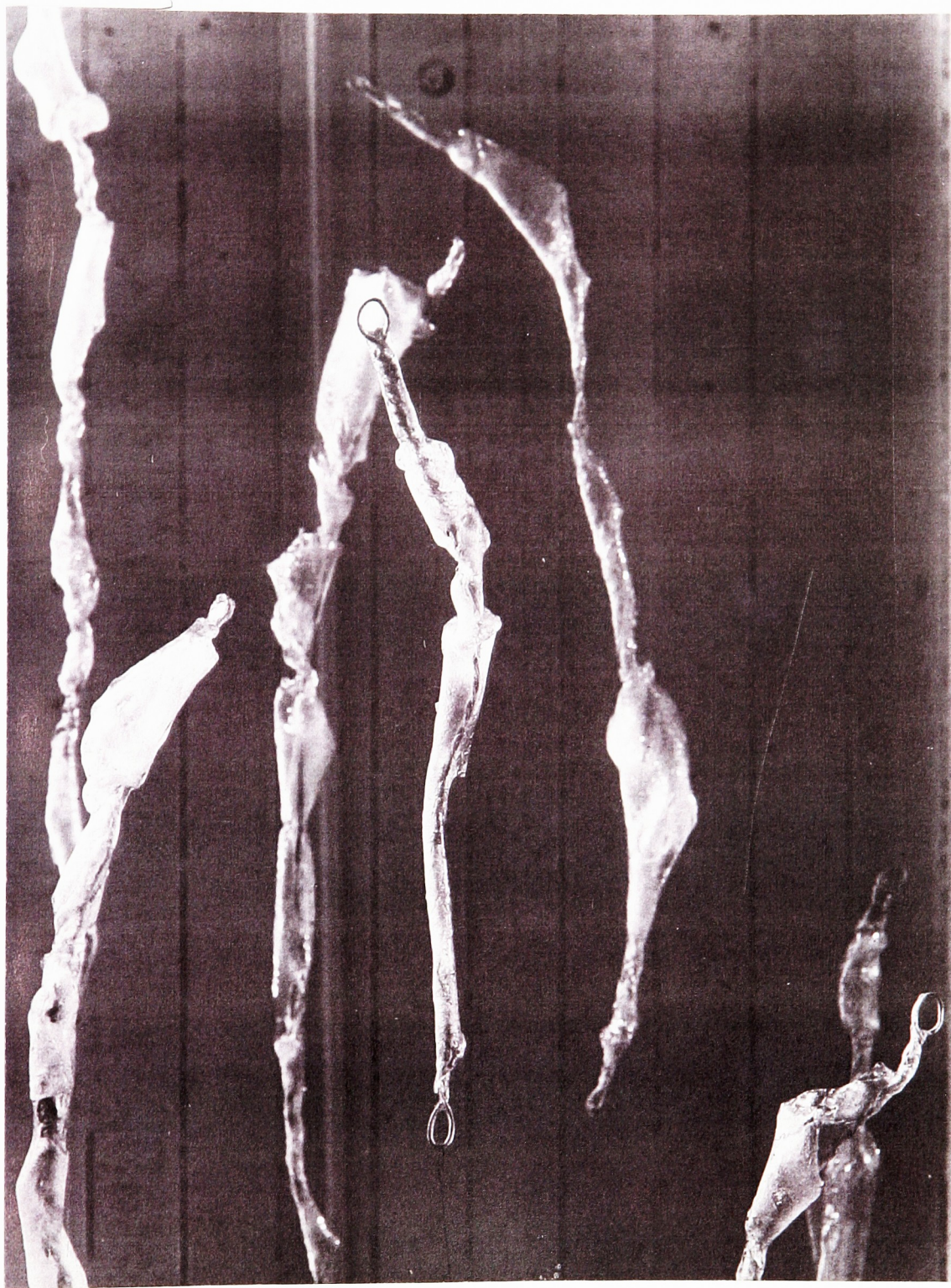
I create art because I cannot imagine myself doing anything else. Most times it is instinctual. I'm dedicated to enjoying every aspect of my human element, including each cut and emotional revelation.



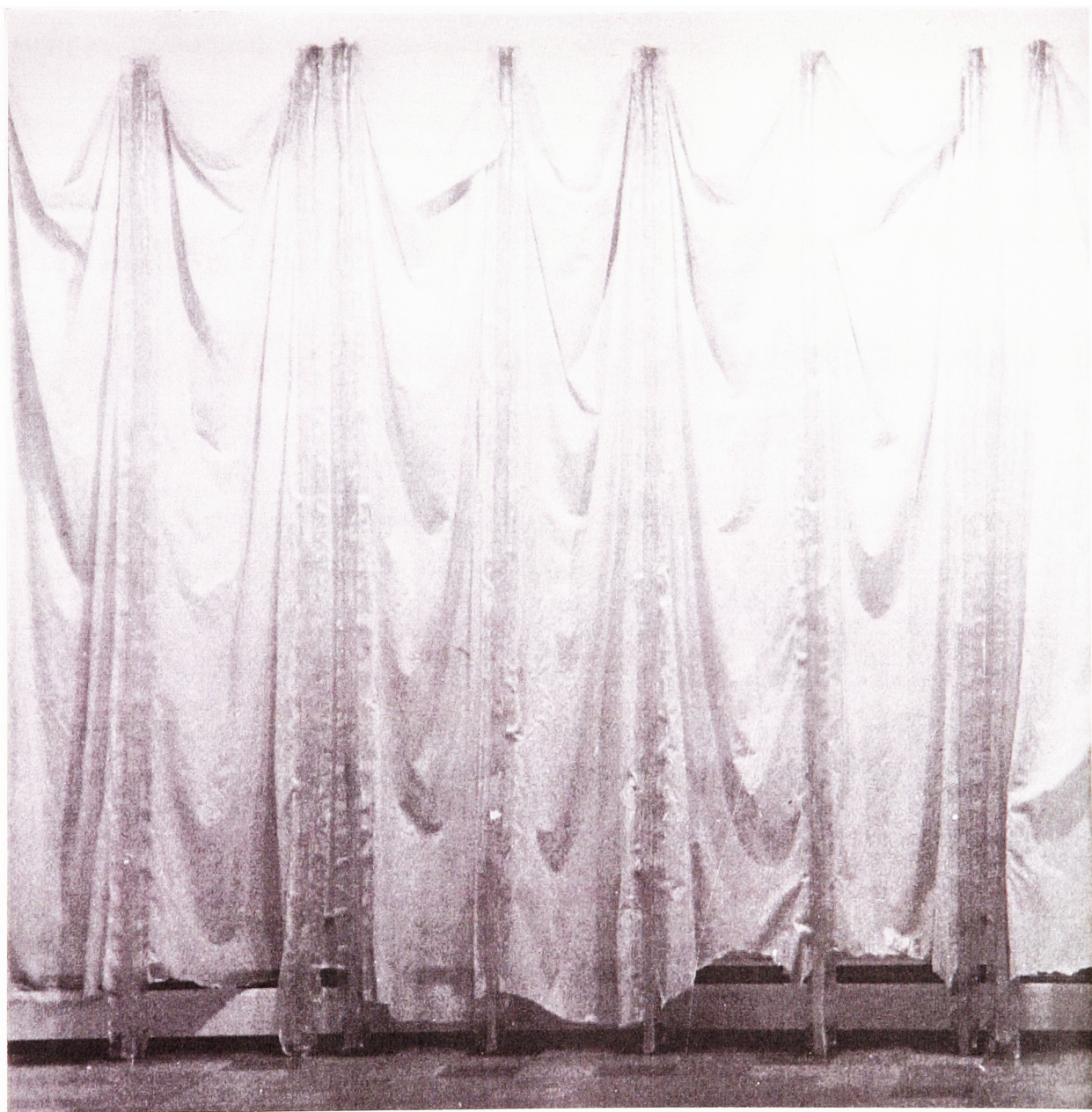
Spider, 1997



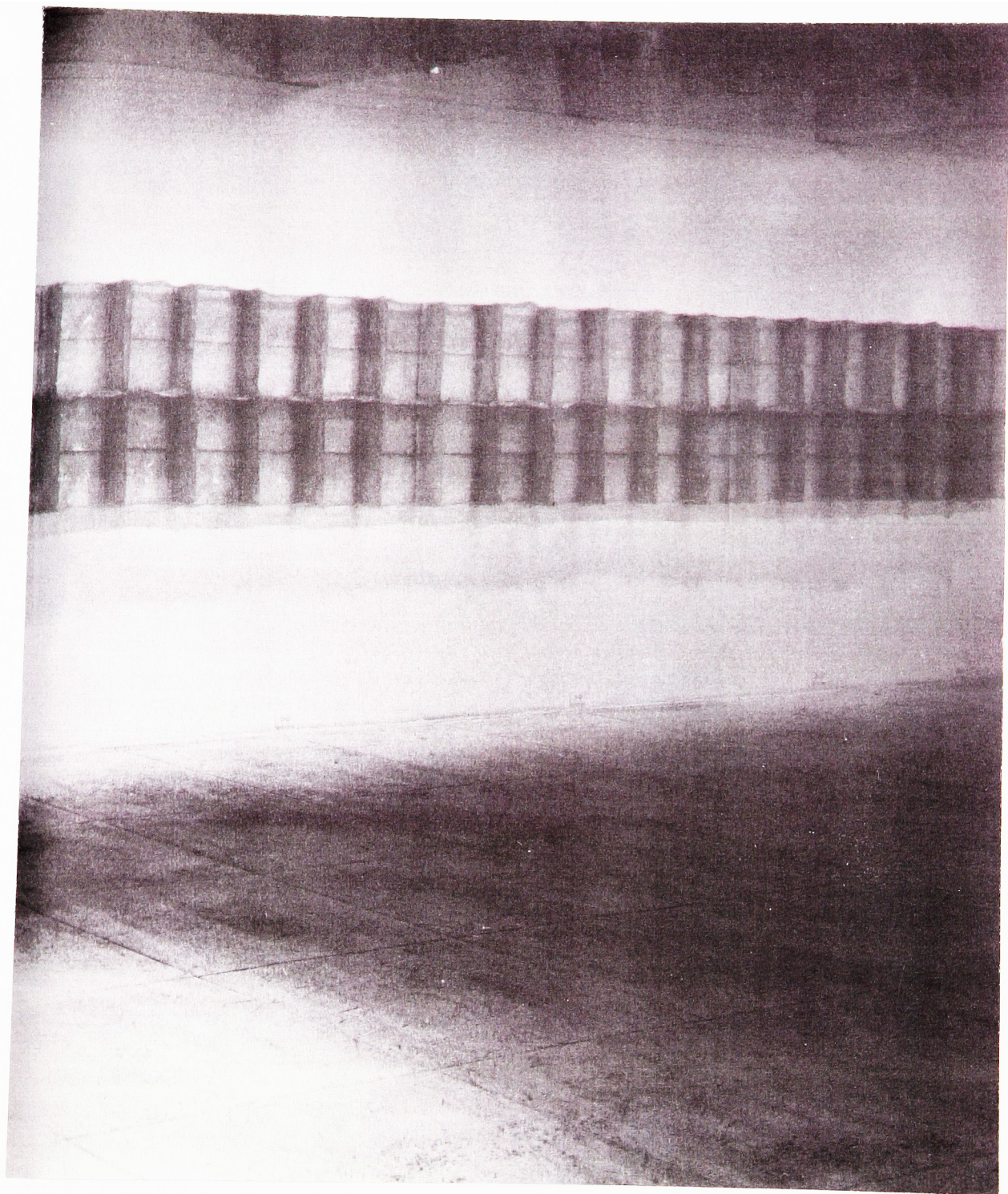
Cell I, 1991



Connection, 1964



Expanded Expansion, 1969



Sans II, 1968



The Quartered One, 1964-65



Le Regard, 1966

NEXT

Moving through *Wading*, I feel great satisfaction. There is a real sense of entering and exiting the piece due to the specially placed components at eye level, which are intended to be viewed peripherally. While inside, there is this incredible sensation of having been transported to another place. Even without knowing each object's tale, it is easy to detect there exists something underlying their diversity. You know that you are now part of a place composed of complex and beautiful elements which elicit both wonder and tranquility; a transformation of conscience has occurred.

Always next is to figure out how to further explore a concept and take it to the next level. *Wading* is my first attempt at hanging works from the ceiling. I find myself continuing to work in this vein while further examining the objects' shapes. They are becoming more elongated and bound. The openings are evolving as well as what is inside: the feel is much more tangible. I am also working the elements to lie on the ground or stand erect at various levels much in the way of *Wading*. In lying or standing, these elements aspire to take on anthropomorphic connotations—as if to say they are the vessels or bodies of my issues at hand.

What would remain true to *Wading* as well as my earlier works is the importance of the relationship between viewer and piece. Moving through and about, standing high or crouching low, the viewer will be coerced into engaging in the work. I remain interested in the 'stages' of the personal discovery process especially since I feel there is so much to learn and will continue to incorporate this concept with the human element. With respect to my career, though I do not desire for myself any limitations as far as material, content, or form, I do aspire to be known for my emotional connection with my work, and thus with my audience.

NOTES

¹ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1983), s.v. "liminality," "limen," "threshold."

² Alby Stone, "The Perilous Bridge," *At The Edge* No. 1. P.8, March 1996 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/pbridge.htm>; Internet; accessed 22 January 2000.

³ John Paul O'Malley, "Myth and Ritual: Heracles the Liminal Hero," *Bard* January 1999 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.bard.ie/index.htm>; Internet; accessed 22 January 2000.

⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, produced by PBS with interview by Bill Moyers. 360 min., (1988).

⁵ Paul Gardener, "The Discreet Charm of Louise Bourgeois," *Art News*, February 1980, pp.80-86 [article on-line]; available from http://sheldon.unl.edu/HTML/ARTIST/Bourgeois_L/SSII.htm; Internet accessed on 23 January 2000.

⁶ And there are of course the more obvious examples like *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts*, 1978, where the art was made as costume-like clothing, a definite attempt at human interaction without any subtlety. Since the general population of viewers will never have the opportunity to wear the art I do not consider this an appropriate example.

⁷ Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hess* (New York: New York University Press, 1976; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), p. 129

⁸ Paul Gardener, "Studio Visit: Louise Bourgeois," *Contemporanea*, October 1986, p. 66 [article on-line]; available from http://sheldon.unl.edu/HTML/ARTIST/Bourgeois_L/SSII.htm; Internet accessed on 23 January 2000.

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