

A mid-career exhibition of Mike Kelley highlights a pervasive concern with states of regression and abjection, while Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, and others use figures of the broken body to address questions of sexuality and mortality.

Although well known in the sixties and seventies, Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse became truly influential only in the eighties and nineties, as they had to await a context once again sympathetic to an exploration of body and space shaped psychologically by drives and fantasies. This reception was prepared by feminist artists such as Kiki Smith (born 1954), Rona Pondick (born 1952), and Jana Sterbak (born 1955), who wanted to return to the female image after its partial taboo in feminist art of the late seventies, but not necessarily in the “positive” manner of feminist art in the early seventies. It was also assisted by gay artists like Robert Gober, who, in response to the AIDS crisis, worked to transform Surrealist fetishes of heterosexual desire into enigmatic tokens of homosexual mourning and melancholy. Like Bourgeois, these artists have developed a model of art as “the re-experiencing of a trauma,” which they understand sometimes as a symptomatic acting-out of a traumatic event, in which the art work becomes a site where memory or fantasy can be attempted, as it were, and sometimes as a symbolic working-through of such an event, in which the work becomes a place where “treatment” or “exorcism” can be attempted (Bourgeois).

Fantasies objectified

As the critic Mignon Nixon has argued, some of these artists appear to objectify the fantasies of a child. For example, in her installations Rona Pondick has set up a quasi-infantile theater of oral-sadistic drives, not only in *Mouth* [1], an array of dirty mouths with nasty teeth, but also in *Milk Milk* (1993), a landscape of mammarian mounds with multiple nipples. Meanwhile other artists have focused on the imagined effects of such fantasies, especially the effects on mother and child. Like Bourgeois, Kiki Smith evokes both subjects, but in a way that is more literal than Bourgeois. Smith has often cast organs and bones like hearts, wombs, pelvises, and ribs in various materials like wax, plaster, porcelain, and bronze. In *Intestine* (1992) we see a clotted line in bronze, as long as an actual intestine (thirty feet), that stretches out, inert, on the floor. “Materials are also sexy things,” Smith has remarked, “that have either life in them or death in them.” Here it is mostly death, and if there is a primary drive evoked in her work, it is the death



1 • Rona Pondick, *Mouth*, 1993 (detail)

Rubber, plastic, and flax, six hundred parts, dimensions variable

drive. Smith imagines the insides of the body not as animated by aggression, as they are in Bourgeois, so much as evacuated by it; all that remains are the hardened scraps of viscera, bare bones, and flayed skin.

Smith has spoken of this loss of “insides” as a loss of self, as intimated in *Intestine*. But more often this anxiety about loss seems to center on the maternal body, as suggested by *Tale* (1992), a naked female figure on her hands and knees who trails a long straight tail of spilled entrails. This figure recalls the maternal body as conceived, according to the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, as the medium of the ambivalent child who imagines it damaged and



2 • Kiki Smith, *Blood Pool*, 1992

Painted bronze 35.6 x 99.1 x 55.9 (14 x 39 x 22). Cast two of an edition of two

restored in turn. In the plaster *Trough* (1990) this body lies cut in half, an empty vessel long dead and hollowed out, while in the bronze *Womb* (1986) it appears intact, even impervious. Smith echoes this ambivalent imagining of the mother in her representation of the child. In one untitled figure in wax with white pigment (1992), a girl crouches low, her submissive head tucked down, her elongated arms extended with palms upward in a gesture of extreme supplication. Smith also presents the child in a manner as abused as the mother: in the grisly *Blood Pool* [2], a malformed female child, painted a viscous red, is posed in a fetal position, her spine a double row of extruded bones like teeth. It is as if the oral sadism of the child evoked by Pondick in *Mouth* had returned, now to attack the child. As often with Bourgeois, Smith suggests an assault on patriarchy, but whereas Bourgeois imagines the man destroyed, Smith focuses on the woman violated and/or mourned.

Mourning of another kind is evoked by Robert Gober, who also casts body parts like male legs and buttocks in wax and other materials, set alone on the floor or in spare settings with strange decor. Often these parts, nearly all male, appear truncated by the wall, and they are clad, with boots, trousers or underpants, only enough to seem all the more exposed. Even more oddly, they are sometimes tattooed with bars of music or planted with candles or drains [3]. Like Bourgeois, Smith, and Pondick, Gober presents these body parts in order to query the intricate relations among aesthetic experience, sexual desire, and death. His art is also involved with memory and trauma: "Most of my sculptures," he has remarked, "have been memories remade, recombined, and filtered through my current experiences." Often his tableaux do not evoke actual events so much as enigmatic fantasies, and in this respect Gober is both more realistic and less literal than Smith. Indeed, he has called his installations "natural history dioramas about contemporary human beings," and sometimes they do possess the hyperreal,

almost hallucinatory dimension of such displays. They place us in an ambiguous space—as in a dream we seem to be both inside and outside the scenes—that is also an ambiguous time—"memories filtered through my current experiences." In this way we are like ▲ sudden voyeurs of forgotten events, as if from our own lives. The result is an uncanny experience that seems both past and present, imagined and real.

But unlike Bourgeois, Smith, and Pondick, Gober stages adult desires more than infantile drives. Thus with his enigmatic female breast (1990) presented in relief as a part-object, Gober seems to ask: "What is a sexual object, and for whom?" And with his strange hermaphrodite torso (1990), one side coded male, the other female, he seems to wonder: "What is a sexual subject, and how do we know which kind we are?" Even as he questions the origins of desire, Gober also considers the nature of loss. In effect he reworks the Surrealist aesthetic of desire, tilted strongly to the heterosexual, into an art of melancholy and mourning, here tinged gay—an art ● of loss and survival in the age of AIDS. "For me," Gober remarked in 1991, "death has temporarily overtaken life in New York City."

Abject states

When we look back on such art of the early nineties, and wonder at its many figures of damaged psyches and wounded bodies, we must remember that this was a time of great anger and despair about a persistent AIDS crisis and a routed welfare state, about invasive disease and pervasive poverty. In this grim period many artists staged regression as an expression of protest and defiance, often in the form of performances, videos, and installations. This regression was especially aggressive in the work of Paul McCarthy (born 1945) and Mike Kelley (born 1954), both based in Los Angeles with continuous ties to Performance art there, whether focused on the pathos of failure, as with Bruce Nauman, or on the pathologies of ■ transgression, as with Chris Burden. McCarthy and Kelley combined both modes of Performance and took them to new extremes. ◆ In the mid-sixties, unaware of the precedent of Yves Klein, Paul McCarthy torched his canvases, and called the charred remains "black paintings." In the early seventies he developed these antiaesthetic actions into outright performances in which his own body became the brush, with food products like ketchup as paint: a portrait of the artist as infant or madman or both. In his performances thereafter, many of which were filmed or videotaped, McCarthy attacked conventional figures of male authority, with the aid of grotesque masks and bizarre costumes sometimes based on deranged pop-cultural icons. Some of these characters performed roles or functions entirely alien to them—in *My Doctor* (1978) the male protagonist gave bloody birth to a doll out of his head like some horror-movie Zeus—while others (fathers and grandfathers, a sea captain, *Mad* magazine's Alfred E. Newman) are pushed beyond stereotype to grotesquerie. McCarthy reserved his nastiest ridicule for the figure of the artist, especially the expressionistic painter, whom he presented as a monster of regression.

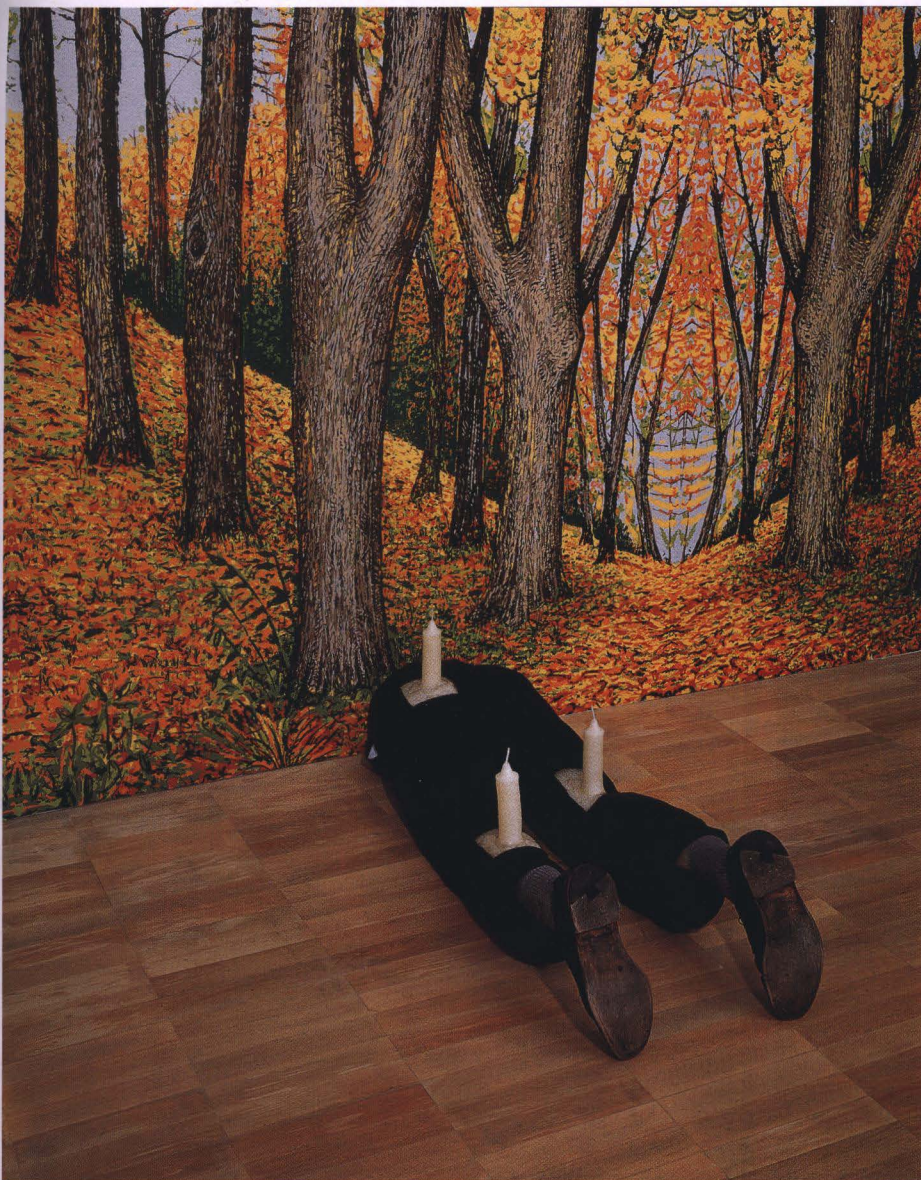
1990–2003

▲ 1966b

● 1924, 1931, 1987

■ 1974

◆ 1960a, 1967c



3 • Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1991

Wood, beeswax, leather, and fabric
 38.7 x 42 x 114.3 (15¼ x 16½ x 45)
 (shown with *Forest*, silkscreen on paper)

1990–2003

In the eighties and nineties McCarthy often displayed the props of his performances as installations—such things as stuffed animals, dolls, and artificial body parts found on the street or in junk shops. Some of these installations turned into contraptions that staged outrageous actions, such as couplings of figures that defy all lines of difference—young and old, human and animal, person and thing [4]. In his own account McCarthy uses his props “as a child might use them, to manipulate a world through toys, to create a fantasy.” Yet, even when comic, these fantasies are usually obscene, darker than any precedent in American Gothic art or fiction, for again and again McCarthy shows the orders of both natural and cultural worlds in disarray, and all structures of identity—especially the family—in dissolution.

On several points Mike Kelley is close to McCarthy, with whom he has collaborated on several performances and videos (their *Heidi* [1992] recasts the Swiss family tear-jerker as an American horror home-movie). Kelley also deploys carnivalesque reversals

of character and inversions of role, but in a way that is more specific in its social references and cultural targets. Often he draws on aspects of his Roman Catholic, working-class childhood as well as his rock-and-roll, subcultural adolescence; and like his long-time associates John Miller (born 1954) and Jim Shaw (born 1952), he is very alert to connections between social oppression and artistic sublimation, between hierarchies in class and values in culture (Shaw, for example, has curated shows of found amateur paintings, placing marginal works in central galleries). If McCarthy assaults the symbolic order with performances of infantile regression, Kelley reveals this order to be already cracked in installations that often track the deviant interests of the adolescent male. Kelley uses this persona, whom he calls “the dysfunctional adult,” to dramatize failures (or refusals) of accepted socialization, and in this respect he is drawn more to “the abject” than to the grotesque. Indeed, his work favors found things that, even if reclaimed, cannot be quite redeemed—things like worn stuffed animals and



4 • Paul McCarthy, *Tomato Heads*, 1994

Sixty-two objects, fiberglass, urethane, rubber, and metal clothing, 213.3 x 139.7 x 111.7 (84 x 55 x 44)

dirty throw rugs from the Salvation Army, things that have dropped out of use, let alone exchange, things that Kelley renders even more pathetic through juxtaposition and combination.

The notion of the abject took on great currency in art and criticism of the early nineties. According to the canonical definition of the psychoanalytical theorist Julia Kristeva, the abject is a psychically charged substance, often imagined, which exists somewhere between a subject (or person) and an object (or thing). At once alien to us and intimate with us, it exposes the fragility of our boundaries, of the distinctions between what is inside and what is outside. Abjection is thus a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, “where meaning collapses” (Kristeva)—hence its attraction for artists like Kelley, McCarthy, and Miller, who often figure it through social detritus and bodily remains (which are sometimes equated). Indeed, art of the early nineties often seems pervaded by the dejected and the rejected, mess and scatter, dirt and shit (or shit-substitute). Of course, these are states and substances resistant to social order; in fact, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930)

Freud argues that civilization was founded on the repressing of the lowly body, of the anal region and the olfactory sense, and the privileging of the erect body, of the genital region and the visual sense. In this light it is as if abject art sought to reverse this first step into civilization, to undo repression and sublimation, especially through a flaunting of the anal and the fecal. Such defiance is a strong subcurrent in twentieth-century art, from the coffee grinders of Duchamp, through the cans of shit of Piero Manzoni, to the messy practices of Kelley, McCarthy, and Miller, with whom it is often self-conscious, even self-parodic. “Let’s Talk About Disobeying” reads one home-made banner by Kelley that is emblazoned with an image of a big cookie jar. “Pants-shitter and Proud of It” reads another.

However pathetic, this defiance can also be perverse, a twisting of laws of sexual difference, a staging of regression to an anal universe where difference as such is obscured. This is the fictive space that artists like Kelley, McCarthy, and Miller set up for transgressive play. For example, in *Dick/Jane* (1991) Miller stained a blonde,

▲ 1959a



5 • Mike Kelley, *Dialogue #1 (An Excerpt from "Theory, Garbage, Stuffed Animals, Christ")*, 1991
Blanket, stuffed animals, and cassette player, 30 x 118 x 108 (11¾ x 46½ x 42½)

blue-eyed doll brown and buried her neck-deep in shit-substitute. Familiar characters in old school primers, "Dick" and "Jane" taught several generations of North American children how to read—and how to read sexual difference. In the Miller version, however, Jane is turned into a phallic composite and plunged into a fecal mound. Like the stroke between the names in the title, the difference between male and female here is both erased and underscored, as is the difference between white and black. In this way Miller creates an anal world that tests the conventional terms of difference—sexual and racial, symbolic and social.

Kelley also often places his creatures in an anal universe. "We interconnect everything, set up a field," Kelley has the bunny say to the teddy bear in *Theory, Garbage, Stuffed Animals, Christ* [5], "so there is no longer any differentiation." Like McCarthy and Miller, Kelley explores this space where symbols mix, where "the concepts *faeces* (money, gift), *baby* and *penis* are ill-distinguished from one another," as Freud wrote of the anal stage. Like the others, Kelley does so less to celebrate material indistinction than to trouble symbolic difference. *Lumpen*, the German word for "rag" that gives us *Lumpenproletariat* ("the scum, the leavings, the refuse of all classes" that so interested Karl Marx), is a crucial

term in the Kelley lexicon, a kind of cognate of the abject. And his art is indeed one of lumpen forms (dingy toy animals stitched together in ugly masses, dirty throw rugs laid over nasty shapes), lumpen themes (pictures of dirt and trash), and lumpen personae (dysfunctional men who build weird devices ordered from obscure catalogues in basements and backyards)—an art of degraded things that resist formal shaping, let alone cultural sublimating or social redeeming.

FURTHER READING

- Russell Ferguson (ed.), *Robert Gober* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997)
John Miller, *The Price Club* (Geneva/Dijon: JRP Editions, 2000)
Mignon Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," *October*, no. 71, Winter 1995
Helaine Posner (ed.), *Corporal Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1992)
Ralph Rugoff et al., *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996)
Linda Shearer (ed.), *Kiki Smith* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1992)
Elisabeth Sussman et al., *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993)

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with 637 illustrations,
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art since 1900

modernism antimodernism postmodernism

To Nikos Stangos (1936–2004), in memoriam

With love, admiration, and grief, we dedicate this book to Nikos Stangos, great editor, poet, and friend, whose belief in this project both instigated and sustained it through the course of its development.

We would like to thank Thomas Neurath and Peter Warner for their patient support, and Nikos Stangos and Andrew Brown for their editorial expertise. The book would not have been begun without Nikos; it would not have been completed without Andrew.

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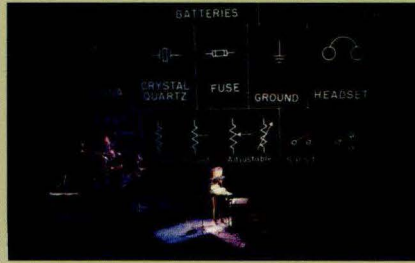
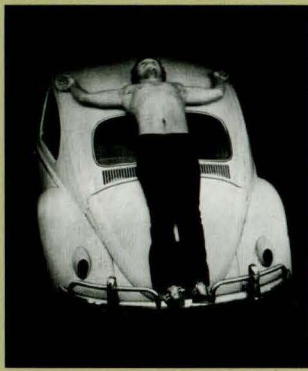
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560 1973 The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance opens its own space in New York: video art claims an institutional space between visual and Performance art, television and film.

565 1974 With *Trans-fixed*, in which Chris Burden is nailed to a Volkswagen Beetle, American Performance art reaches an extreme limit of physical presence, and many of its adherents abandon, moderate, or otherwise transform its practice.

570 1975 As filmmaker Laura Mulvey publishes her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Mary Kelly develop different positions on the representation of women.
box • Theory journals

576 1976 In New York, the founding of P.S. 1 coincides with the Metropolitan Museum's "King Tut" exhibition: important shifts in the institutional structure of the art world are registered by both alternative spaces and the blockbuster show.

580 1977 The "Pictures" exhibition identifies a group of young artists whose strategies of appropriation and critiques of originality advance the notion of "postmodernism" in art.

1980–1989

586 1980 Metro Pictures opens in New York: a new group of galleries emerges in order to exhibit young artists involved in a questioning of the photographic image and its uses in news, advertising, and fashion.
box • Jean Baudrillard

590 1984a Victor Burgin delivers his lecture "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Post-Modernisms": the publication of this and other lectures by Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler signals a new approach to the legacies of Anglo-American photoconceptualism and to the writing of photographic history and theory.

596 1984b Fredric Jameson publishes "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," as the debate over postmodernism extends beyond art and architecture into cultural politics, and divides into two contrary positions.
box • Cultural studies

600 1986 "Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture" opens in Boston: as some artists play on the collapse of sculpture into commodities, others underscore the new prominence of design and display.

605 1987 The first ACT-UP action is staged: activism in art is reignited by the AIDS crisis, as collaborative groups and political interventions come to the fore, and a new kind of queer aesthetics is developed.
box • The US Art Wars

612 1988 Gerhard Richter paints *October 18, 1977*: German artists contemplate the possibility of the renewal of history painting.
box • Jürgen Habermas

617 1989 "Les Magiciens de la terre," a selection of art from several continents, opens in Paris: postcolonial discourse and multicultural debates affect the production as well as the presentation of contemporary art.
box • Aboriginal art

1990–2003

624 1992 Fred Wilson presents *Mining the Museum* in Baltimore: institutional critique extends beyond the museum, and an anthropological model of project art based on fieldwork is adapted by a wide range of artists.
box • Interdisciplinarity

630 1993a Martin Jay publishes *Downcast Eyes*, a survey of the denigration of vision in modern philosophy: this critique of visibility is explored by a number of contemporary artists.

635 1993b As Rachel Whiteread's *House*, a casting of a terrace house in east London, is demolished, an innovative group of women artists comes to the fore in Britain.

639 1993c In New York, the Whitney Biennial foregrounds work focused on identity amid the emergence of a new form of politicized art by African-American artists.

645 1994a A mid-career exhibition of Mike Kelley highlights a pervasive concern with states of regression and abjection, while Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, and others use figures of the broken body to address problems of sexuality and mortality.

650 1994b William Kentridge completes *Felix in Exile*, joining Raymond Pettibon and others in demonstrating the renewed importance of drawing.

654 1998 An exhibition of large video projections by Bill Viola tours several museums: the projected image becomes a pervasive format in contemporary art.
box • The spectacularization of art

659 2001 A mid-career exhibition of Andreas Gursky at the Museum of Modern Art in New York signals the new dominance of a pictorial photography, which is often effected through digital means.

664 2003 With exhibits such as "Utopia Station" and "Zone of Urgency," the Venice Biennale exemplifies the informal and discursive nature of much recent artmaking and curating.

670 Roundtable I The predicament of contemporary art

681 Glossary

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