



CORPORAL POLITICS

MIT List Visual Arts Center

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LOUISE BOURGEOIS

ROBERT GOBER

LILLA LoCURTO and WILLIAM OUTCAULT

ANNETTE MESSENGER

RONA PONDICK

KIKI SMITH

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

Essays by Donald Hall, Thomas Laqueur, and Helaine Posner

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## Art and Its Enemies

DONALD HALL

In 1990 fundamentalist preachers (aka fundraisers) joined with bigoted politicians and columnists to attack the National Endowment for the Arts. It had been noted that the collapse of the Communist empire left the right-wing heartsick for villains. Sex is the new villain, and its henchman is art. A conspiracy of intellectual capons—joining together Jesse Helms, George Will, Donald Wildmon, Patrick Buchanan, and Jerry Falwell—pretends to outrage over NEA-funded art, largely on the grounds of “obscenity” or “pornography.” This is disingenuous nonsense. Nothing the NEA has sponsored would sell for a nickel on the remainder table of your neighborhood pornshop, and the NEA remains the most benevolent of organizations. It supports quilt-making in Appalachia and ballet in Oklahoma; it reaches out to inner cities on the one hand and brings art to the outlands on the other. In its quarter century, the NEA has extended and multiplied the occasions of American art—both geographically and socially.

NEA attackers understand and loathe the organization’s deliberate virtue. They realize that anyone who funds work not yet assembled—be it an exhibition or a magazine—funds the incompletely known: consequently, something will inevitably offend somebody. If we wish to prevent all possible offense, our only recourse will abolish all funding. And abolition of support for the arts is the capons’ true agenda. Art is a comfortable target, for art commands no power source to hire lobbyists or contribute funds to politicians. Who supports the arts? Not very many people, not very much. Even liberal commentators—Sam Donaldson and Cokie Roberts on a celebrated occasion, for instance—collapse under the assault of the art-bashers, falling back and conceding that the federal government should withdraw its support for the arts. These are political not artistic people; they avoid the tedium of a struggle, and for them art is expendable, something to throw to the conservative wolves.

For others, art lives at the center of the examined life; the poet and obstetrician Williams Carlos Williams claimed for poetry that people die daily for the want of it. If in recorded history, all governments had refused funding to the arts, we would lack the art of Greece that Pericles funded; we would lack Renaissance painting and sculpture sponsored by the wealth of princes both secular and religious; we would lack music created for the supported orchestras and opera companies of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In human history, there is little art without prior support, because great art has seldom sold like bread or broomsticks. People who call for art to support itself in the marketplace call for the diminishment of art.

Art extends human consciousness, touching upon or exploring difficult feelings, making public our grief and our fear, our insecurity and our pride, our sexuality and our fear of death. This painful making public benefits our health. The forces of repression, however, dread and fear it because they must deny extreme emotion as well as diversity of experience. Art upsets us *in the cause of* expanding

and extending human consciousness, revealing the emptiness of conventions by looking under the surface. Often it is dark under the surface, and unpleasant—but art exposes reality with its conscious light. Therefore, art becomes an enemy for any group that wishes to deny its own desires or to hold itself down; art embodies the nervous reactionary’s alienated characteristics. When an artist provocatively titles a photograph *Piss Christ*, the title becomes a fundraising event and a weapon for art-bashing.

It is language, seldom an image, that offends—even in the visual arts. *Pineapple Juice Christ* would have captured no five dollar checks from the outback. It is not the art itself that provokes outrage—the pigment, the words of a poem, the performer on the stage—but repeated (often inaccurate) anecdotes of performance or poem or picture. The capons who endlessly tell these stories—how many times have we heard of a body smeared with chocolate?—never experience the work of art itself. But a work of art is only itself; it is not a story about itself.

Because the art-bashers bash, should the artist cower and self-censor? When INDIGNATION in capital letters leaps from the office machinery of fundamentalist fundraisers, should administrators of the arts prostrate themselves? Dangerous titles are potent but so are bigotries. When Patrick Buchanan runs against George Bush, he scores three hits in one at-bat by advertising excerpts from a film (art, score one) about black homosexuals (score two, score three) funded in a small way by the NEA. Hatred and fear of sexuality contrive and conspire with fear of ethnic minorities; a third and less noticed fear is that of art, most especially of living artists. These three companions wear the same face, since all symbolize or embody the unleashing of human feeling and therefore the expansion of consciousness.

When Calvin Thomas runs out of topics for columns, art-bashing fills up the blank space. James J. Kilpatrick rolls on his back in stereotypes of “poets in their garrets.” Art makes bullies nervous, so art is something to gang up on. From the rise of modernism late in the nineteenth century, idiots and columnists have hated all new art. It’s axiomatic: After one’s senior year in college, nothing new is any good. I can imagine two good reasons for this continuing commonplace: First, it excuses laziness (never underestimate laziness as a source of human behavior) because if it’s no good you don’t have to read it, see it, hear it, or listen to it; second, art often uses as its material the concerns of our own time, forcing us to acknowledge a difficulty or an injustice about which we might (if persuaded) need to change our minds or our behavior. The art of earlier times, deriving partly from obsolete social or psychological concerns, fails to charge us with responsibility.

Current leadership at the NEA has worked to disconnect the Endowment from anything that might upset anybody. (I speak of leadership only, for I believe that the rank and file of the NEA—and even the National Council—remains largely committed to promoting art and excellence.) When President Bush fired John

Frohnmayr in 1992 in response to Patrick Buchanan's bigotry, Frohnmayr's assistant, Anne-Imelda Radice, who had been planted at the NEA by White House neoconservatives—became acting chair, in which capacity she served her sponsors.

On May 5, 1992, testifying before Congress, the acting chair vowed to deny funds for art that was “sexually explicit,” or otherwise incorporated “difficult subject matter.” In effect, Radice promised to overturn Congress's original insistence, written into the law that founded the NEA, that decisions be aesthetic and not based on subject matter. She went on, “If we find a proposal that does not have the widest audience . . . we just can't afford to fund that.” If this statement were taken literally, 98 percent of the NEA's proposed grants would go unfunded. As little as one half of one percent of NEA grants feature sexual explicitness; but certainly a good half of them are “difficult”—and most of them do “not have the widest audience.” Heavens to Betsy, neither Rembrandt nor Beethoven nor Shakespeare nor Puccini—not even the *Nutcracker*—has the audience of *Cats*, “Studs,” the dog track, or Leroy Neiman. As soon as we suggest that some things are better than other things, we become elitist. Fair enough. Should we propose a National Endowment for Kitsch?

One week after her congressional testimony, the acting chair overturned a grant to the MIT List Visual Arts Center for *Corporal Politics*. At the same time, she denied a grant to the Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University for a show that also included images of sexual organs. The proposal for *Corporal Politics* featured four eminent contemporary artists and was recommended on aesthetic grounds by an NEA panel—composed of people knowledgeable in contemporary art. When Radice overturned the panel's recommendation, she claimed that she acted for aesthetic reasons, but the art world understood that she was fulfilling her congressional pledge to deny funds for anything “sexually explicit.” The exhibition contains—among other bodily images such as hands and feet—representations of mammary glands, testes, and phalluses—organs never before seen in works of art, except, of course, in fifth-century Greece, the Renaissance, and nineteenth-century France.

The acting chair defended her actions by citing the lack of “artistic excellence and artistic merit,” as well as “long-term artistic significance . . .” Repeatedly asked to elaborate, she refused. Poverty of language indicates ethical poverty; the refusal to argue proclaims disingenuousness. Predictably, the neo-conservative *Washington Times* ran several stories praising these tough-minded aesthetic decisions, and a small men's chorus of art-bashing right-wing columnists praised the acting chair for withholding funds from two art exhibitions they had never seen. When a New York playwright donated his NEA money to MIT, his reward was columnar petulance from George Will. In the resulting chaos, the NEA lost staffers of unusual ability, two artists refused to accept gold medals for the

arts, and two panels—convened to recommend future grants—refused to finish their work: Why struggle, when disinterested aesthetic judgment may be overturned by hypocrisy attempting to appease art's enemies?

Some results of this brouhaha are happy, and the artists of *Corporal Politics* may profit from official shabbiness. More people will attend the exhibition, more people will read this catalog. The artistic excellence of *Corporal Politics* will become obvious when viewers see actual art instead of reading stories about it. They will find this exhibition both new and traditional. Artistic separation of body parts is not new. Even the classic bust is an abstraction, and sketches or cartoons of body parts have appeared in all ages. Both praying hands and analytic cubism dissected the body. In the fragmentation of *Corporal Politics*, we find elements of iconoclasm, as if noses and genitalia removed from old sculptures—by zealots and target-practicing soldiers—have migrated to the List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge. Little of the exhibit is genitalia. It is probable that the title of one work—Robert Gober's *Genital Wallpaper*—provided, frivolously enough, the source of official stricture. *Genital Wallpaper*, like its title, is witty: Lavatory graffiti, ironically domesticated as wallpaper, makes an art that is serious, funny, and disturbing. If fundable art must not disturb us, the best art will go unfunded.

If Gober's work is witty, so is Rona Pondick's, who makes fearsome doll-like fragments embedded like certain tumors with human teeth, or multiplies bottle-breasts in an assemblage dark and comic together. Kiki Smith, however, is a cool and classic maker, and the provenance of her art includes surgery and the microscope. The French collagist Annette Messager is fourth of the original artists whose work, it was deemed, lacked "artistic merit" and "artistic excellence." The List Center has since this judgment added two sculptures by Louise Bourgeois (who will represent the United States at the 1993 Venice Biennale), work by the late David Wojnarowicz, and a video-installation by Lilla LoCurto and William Outcault.

We can learn much from the wide sources and resources brought to the walls of the List galleries in this exhibition, from graffiti to the scientist's laboratory to the workshop of the mad dollmaker. Our American arts thrive—and public policy toward the arts needs overhauling, if merely by the moderate courage it takes to deny the deniers, the cabal of art-bashers among politicians, columnists, and appointed officials.

Donald Hall is a poet  
and member of the National  
Council on the Arts.

## Separation Anxiety

HELAINÉ POSNER

The history of Western art has in large part been the history of the representation of the human form. Throughout time, the human figure has been the most valued instrument for exploring and asserting a culture's prevailing worldview. *Corporal Politics* examines a startling phenomenon in late-twentieth-century art, the striking preponderance of the body fragment as a highly charged metaphor for the psychological, social, political, and physical assaults on the individual. The disturbing isolation of body parts and limbs, internal organs, and bodily fluids emphasizes the vulnerability of our bodies and implies physical violence, sexual oppression, and ultimate loss. Artists Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, Lilla LoCurto, William Outcault, Annette Messager, Rona Pondick, Kiki Smith, and David Wojnarowicz depict the fragmented form in works that range from the archetypal and universal to the intensely personal and autobiographical.

The dismembered body is the site for the investigation of some of our most urgent contemporary concerns including sexism, sexual identity, reproductive rights, homophobia, social inequity, brutality, disease, and death. Appropriation artist and sloganeer Barbara Kruger warns each of us that "your body is a battleground," while critic Roberta Smith describes the body as a "canvas of conflict." It is difficult, if not impossible, for the individual to maintain a coherent identity and integrated sense of self while under attack. This war on the body and the experience of disconnection it engenders is most often revealed in the work of female and gay male artists. From perspectives outside the white male power structure they are in a painfully privileged position to comment on and critique the politics of division, exclusion, and loss.

The Greek ideal of classical beauty is the tradition on which modern Western art is founded. In the ancient world, the order of nature parallels the order of human reason and man,<sup>1</sup> according to Protagoras, is "the measure of all things." Intellectual and physical perfection are attainable goals and mankind is likened to the gods. The glorification of the human body in the form of the idealized nude male youth or Kouros symbolizes man's elevated status within the cosmos. The practical Romans borrowed Hellenic models and transformed them into monuments to the power, wealth, and administrative prowess of the empire. The strain of realism in Roman portrait statuary emphasizes the position of the rulers as unique individuals of enormous value and authority. In each culture the human body is presented as whole and integral, an image of the perfectibility and power of the individual and the state.

Inspired by the Platonic ideal of beauty, Michelangelo, the archetypal Renaissance thinker, created some of the most enduring and revered works of monumental, heroic sculpture in Western art. In addition to its great physical splendor, Michelangelo's *David* is invested with contained passion, coiled energy, and psychological intensity. During the Renaissance the human figure was regarded as

beautiful not simply because of its natural form but also because of its spiritual significance. The body, biblically inspired and superhuman, was the manifestation of something far greater than its physical form, the character, or the soul. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the classical figure served as the embodiment of heroism, civic duty, and revolutionary fervor in the highly dramatic tableaux of the Neoclassical and Romantic painters and sculptors. From David's noble Horatius brothers swearing on their swords to fight to the death for Rome to Delacroix's majestic image of Liberty allegorically leading her people in revolt, the grandeur of the figure was seen as the epitome of such values as courage and patriotism during the formation of modern Europe.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries major advances in the natural sciences, psychology, sociology, and politics begin radically to reshape the human psyche, and classical and Christian models of the whole, perfect human body start to break apart. Stripped of protective beliefs and traditions, the individual confronts a new and persistent crisis of identity. Mankind's status as the pinnacle of creation is questioned by Darwin's thesis that human beings evolved from lower life forms. The theory of relativity represents the disintegration of any concept of the world as static and predictable, describing a dynamic universe where everything is changing and in process. In this uncertain world, the sound mind is as dislocated as the sound body. The quintessentially human ability to reason and act, which had been extolled from the time of the Greeks to the Enlightenment, is refuted by Freud's psychoanalytical theories revealing man to be basically irrational and subject to the dictates of his subconscious impulses. The Industrial Revolution draws the worker from the farm to the factory so that a formerly integrated agricultural existence is replaced by the alienating, repetitious routine of the assembly line. The once valued individual is absorbed into the anonymity of the crowd. According to Karl Marx, a modern worldview assumes a universe in which "all that is solid melts into air."<sup>2</sup>

The destruction of a centuries-old viewpoint can cause only anxiety. With the approach of the twentieth century, artists could no longer represent reality as a set of fixed ideals; external parameters kept shifting and the artist turned instead to the private world of bodily experience as a creative source. Rodin's magnificent fragmented torsos of the late nineteenth century startled viewers with their lack of historical reference and sensual immediacy. According to the artist, "a well-made torso contains all of life."<sup>3</sup> However true this may be for an artist of Rodin's skill and temperament, the partial figure is also "an attack upon the integrity of our own body image" and appears with greatest frequency during times of stress.<sup>4</sup> The Cubist painters, influenced by Einstein's view of a dynamic physical world, fractured the traditionally unified picture surface. The human figure, presented from multiple viewpoints and various points in time, is transformed into an abstract series of discontinuous planes. The life of the subconscious mind,

1. I have chosen to use patriarchal language in writing about the Western patriarchal tradition and hope the reader will not be offended by this convention.
2. See Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 15.
3. Cladel, *Rodin, l'homme et l'oeuvre*, pp. 97-98, cited in Albert E. Elsen, *The Partial Figure in Modern Sculpture: From Rodin to 1969* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1969), p. 94.
4. Elsen, *The Partial Figure in Modern Sculpture*, p. 92.



5. Cited in Gardner's *Art through the Ages, 6th ed., vol. 11, Renaissance, Modern and Non-European Art* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1975), p. 738.
6. Deborah Wye, *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), p. 33. I am grateful to Deborah Wye for her insights into Bourgeois's work.
7. Louise Bourgeois, statement, in Dorothy Seiberling, "The Female View of Erotica," *New York Magazine* (February 11, 1975), p. 56, cited in Wye, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 27.

as revealed in dreams, fantasies, and private obsessions was the charged subject of the Surrealist painters between the two world wars. In the *Surrealist Manifesto*, André Breton laid out the artist's metaphorical mission "to reestablish man as psychology instead of anatomy," in essence creating a visual counterpart to the psychoanalytic work of Freud.<sup>5</sup> The bizarre and paradoxical juxtapositions of objects and dismembered parts of the anatomy represent a fusion of the artist's internal and external "realities," the familiar, if continually disturbing, experience of dreams and nightmares.

The fragmented figure proliferates in a multitude of guises throughout the twentieth century. It appears as the master ironist Marcel Duchamp's mechanized bride defiled by her bachelors or as his faceless nude displayed spread-eagle behind the barn door; as the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning's energized, erotic, and mutilated women of the 1950s; or as Jasper Johns's realistic wax body fragments, remote and isolated parts never to be made whole. In contrast to the basically objectified depiction of the fragmented female form by numerous male artists and in keeping with the Surrealists' goal of exploring and expressing the unconscious in art, Louise Bourgeois has created a body of work that is among the most personal, autobiographical, and emotionally rich in contemporary sculpture. She has often used the body part to give physical form to urgent emotions in a remarkable career spanning nearly fifty years. Bourgeois draws directly on her childhood experiences and anxieties to embody such intense feelings as helplessness, fear, and sexual vulnerability, as well as anger, betrayal, and revenge. Incorporating aspects of Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism, the work of Brancusi and Giacometti and developments in Minimalism and Post-Minimalism at various points in time, Bourgeois's art eludes stylistic categorization. In fact, style is not her fundamental concern. Her art is the concrete record of a highly individual and idiosyncratic artist's lifelong attempt to come to terms with the conflict and pain of early experience. Her fearless confrontations with gender, sex, isolation, and death have inspired many younger artists who, like Bourgeois, make art as a personal "strategy for survival."<sup>6</sup>

In many works Bourgeois merges sexual opposites to create new hybrid forms. As she says, "Sometimes I am totally concerned with the female shape—clusters of breasts like clouds—but often I merge the imagery—phallic breasts, male and female, active and passive."<sup>7</sup> At their most primal level, these accumulations of protruding forms, as in *Untitled*, 1990 (p. 32), represent fecundity or the life force—a powerful synthesis between the generative penis and the nurturing breast. Like the artist they are repetitive, obsessive, and express a desire for intimacy countered by feelings of aggression. Bourgeois also explores the tenuous relationship of the individual to the group in the tight clustering of her separate yet related shapes. The artist possesses an uncanny ability to invent biomorphic forms that are as private as her sister *Henriette's* (p. 33) stiff leg yet universal in their poignant connection with the emotional life and experience of the viewer.

Bourgeois's profoundly psychological sculptures, rooted in the Surrealists' examination of primal impulses, has borne fruit in the work of Rona Pondick. The younger sculptor is both offended and fascinated by the writings of Freud. Her recent work returns us, perhaps unwillingly, to his anal and oral stages of development and asks us to acknowledge, even revel in, these fixations and their associated taboos. Borrowing such standard Freudian fetishes as feces, the breast, and the shoe as subject matter, Pondick shares Bourgeois's remarkable ability simultaneously to provoke, arouse, and repel the viewer. Pondick addresses cultural fears and repressed anxieties concerning sexuality, bodily functions, and traditional gender roles in works that move from the deadly serious to the darkly and comically absurd.

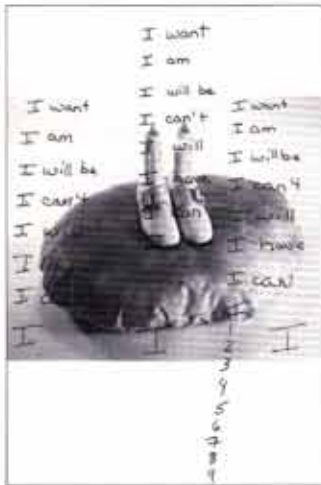
The bed and its myriad and ambivalent associations is the site of a number of Pondick sculptures. Encompassing birth and death, and much that lies in between—sex, illness, pain, dreams, comfort, intimacy, and vulnerability—the bed occupies an enormous niche within our collective psyche. *Double Bed* (p. 37) consists of two thirteen-foot long white vinyl pillows lashed together by a rope grid with numerous baby bottles attached at regular intervals. This pure white island of tranquillity and milky nourishment is violated by occasional black bottles and rope, often associated with bondage. The baby bottle is deftly conflated with the female breast in the sculpture *Milk* (p. 36). Pondick has fashioned two spherical mounds of multiple breast-forms from paper towels and rubber nipples. This profusion of disembodied milk-producing breasts suggests its function as the infant's source of sustenance and its subsequent transformation into an "erotic emblem" by the adult male.<sup>8</sup> Its isolation evokes the fear of loss of the mother in particular and separation anxiety in general. *Milk* is a witty and disturbing symbol of orality, sexuality, bodily function, and gender identification.

*Loveseat* (p. 36) is one of a recent series of sculptures in which the artist has anthropomorphized various chairs. The seat of this bizarre piece of furniture is shaped like buttocks and covered in lace. Two substantial "legs" wearing men's shoes flank a tiny "leg" wearing a little girl's Mary Jane, its suspension between the "thighs" suggesting male genitals. Elizabeth Hess observes that "this object is anatomically disturbed...Slowly, the family drama on the couch turns out to be about incest. It isn't obvious, just like the crime, but it becomes clear as we sink into this seat."<sup>9</sup> The identification of the shoe both as a surrogate for the body or individual and as a sexual fetish, which is defined by Freud as an object selected as a substitute for the penis, supports this dark interpretation. Pondick's narrative sculptures regularly transgress socially acceptable bounds to expose the primal urge behind the civilized mask.

Sculptor Robert Gober explores the anxieties of childhood and adolescent domestic life in the 1950s and the solitary and vulnerable generation of adults that it spawned. He expresses a longing for the post-World War II ideal of the secure home and family tainted by an understanding of its banality and latent potential

8. Kirby Gookin, *Rona Pondick: Milk, Bed Shoe* (New York: fiction/non-fiction, 1989), unpaginated.
9. Elizabeth Hess, "Nasty Girl," *Village Voice*, May 7, 1991, p. 85.

RONA PONDICK



Rona Pondick  
*Baby Fat*, 1991  
Tights, polyester stuffing,  
shoes, and acrylic resin  
Photograph by Jennifer Kotter

facing page  
Rona Pondick  
*Little Bathers*, 1990-91 (detail)  
Wax, plastic, and rubber teeth  
Photograph by Jennifer Kotter







above  
Rona Pondick  
*Milk*, 1989  
Paper towels, wax, plastic,  
and baby bottles  
Photograph by Jennifer Kotter

right  
Rona Pondick  
*Loveseat*, 1991  
Wax, shoes, plastic, wood,  
and lace  
Photograph by Jennifer Kotter

facing page  
Rona Pondick  
*Double Bed*, 1989  
Plastic, rope, plastic pillows,  
and baby bottles  
Photograph by Jennifer Kotter



