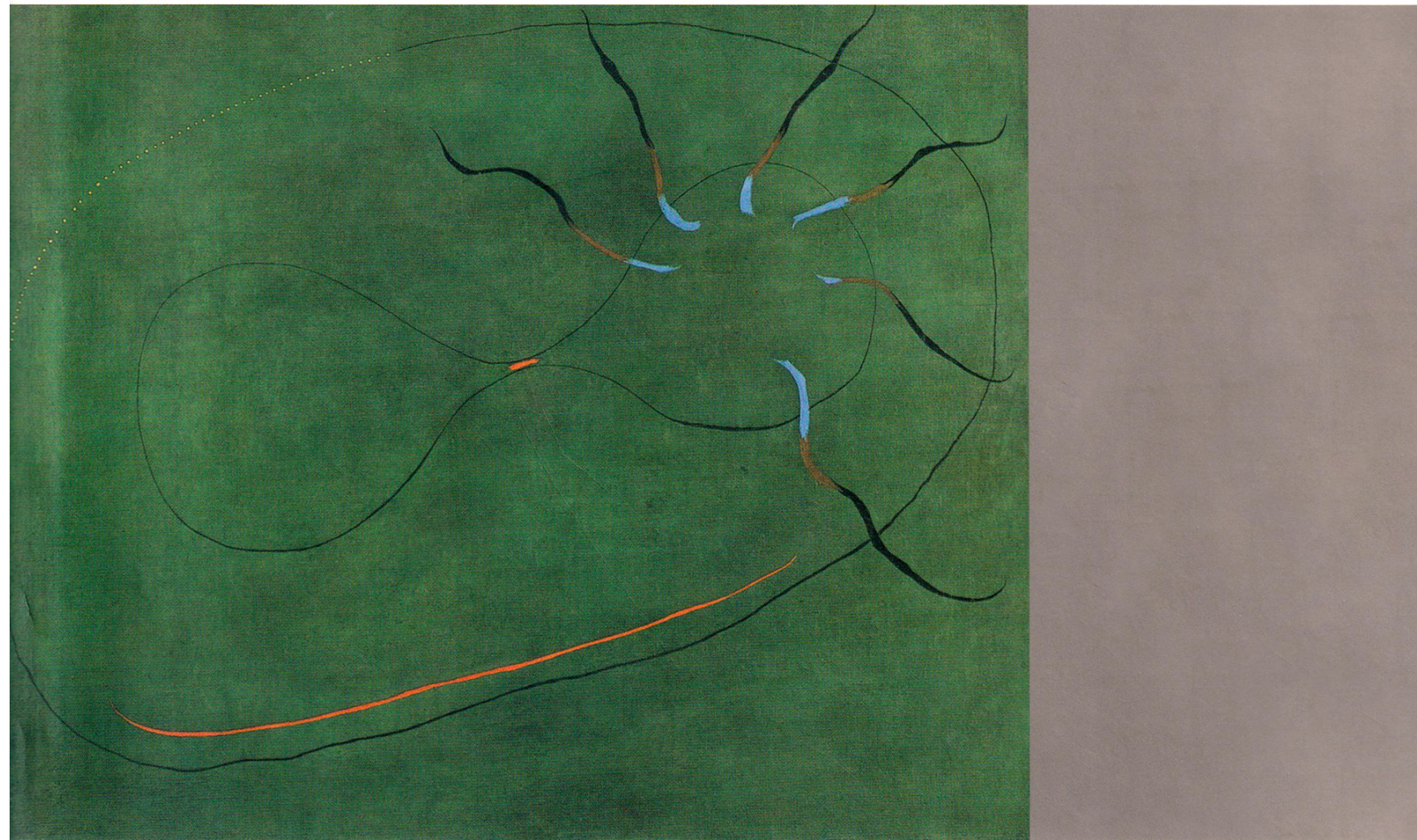


# art since 1900

modernism  
antimodernism  
postmodernism



hal foster  
rosalind krauss  
yve-alain bois  
benjamin h. d. buchloh

**Thames & Hudson**



# art since 1900

modernism  
antimodernism  
postmodernism

volume 2  
1945 to the present

with 364 illustrations,  
236 in color

hal foster  
rosalind krauss  
yve-alain bois  
benjamin h. d. buchloh



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.