

A COLEÇÃO SONNABEND

Meio século de arte europeia
e americana.
Half a century of European
and American Art.
Part 1

Museu
de Arte Contemporânea
de Serralves

THE SONNABEND COLLECTION



The Sonnabend Collection:
A Conversation Between
António Homem
and Suzanne Cotter
Fall 2015

Suzanne Cotter *You have talked about the importance of being able to curate the ways in which the Sonnabend Collection is shown. How does the presentation at Serralves relate to the way in which you are showing the Collection at the Ca' Pesaro in Venice, where many works are on deposit?*

António Homem When the Collection is exhibited, it is very important to me that it shows the way in which works that are apparently very different end up by revealing consistency in our choices. The exhibitions are always conceived in terms of the space where they will be displayed. The currents or groupings presented in Porto are pop and *nouveau réalisme*, *arte povera* and anti-form, and minimalism. Even though the spaces in Venice and Porto are different, and the works look different in each of them, the same kind of rationale seems to me to exist.

SC *How does your approach to the exhibition here relate to and differ from museum displays, considering the period covered—from the 1950s to the first decade of the 2000s?*

AH I think that normally a show like this would be presented chronologically and maybe also not mix

American and European artists. My idea is more to present works in groupings that associate them within a kind of emotional landscape and without rigid frontiers. Certain artists can be shown in more than one group, like Robert Morris shown both as minimalist and anti-formalist.

SC *Where (and when) was the Collection first shown as such?*

AH The first exhibition of the Collection was held in February 1985 at the Princeton University Art Museum. It was curated by Sam Hunter and was titled 'Selections from the Ileana and Michael Sonnabend Collection'. It presented only works from the 1950s and 1960s. It travelled to the Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin and to the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis. The first real show of the Collection was, however, the one that opened in October 1987 at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, which presented works from the 1950s to the late 1980s. It was curated by Jean-Louis Froment who was the director of the CAPC museum in Bordeaux, where the Collection was presented after Madrid. There was no intention of continuing the tour but other museums asked for it and it ended up travelling for four years in Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Japan. We very much liked the fact that the shows took place due to the enthusiasm of the museum directors. Several other exhibitions have taken place since then. Some of them were made for smaller spaces, such as the Peggy Guggenheim museum in Venice, where since there wasn't

enough space to show the whole Collection, themes had to be found — in the case of the Guggenheim it was the presence of Italy in the Collection. I found this approach very interesting because I wasn't aware of how much that theme was indeed present. The show at the Fundação Arpad Szenes-Vieira da Silva in Lisbon, a year ago, also consisted of works by the first artists to be shown in Paris, at the Gallery in the early 1960s. All these exhibitions were, for me, very revealing of currents in the Collection of which I was not always aware. One show — at the Essl Collection, just outside Vienna — that included works by only American artists was one I would not want to repeat as, through the absence of European artists, it made clear that the dialogue between America and Europe is essential in order to understand the Collection.

SC *Can you recall the context in which the different works came to be part of the Sonnabend Collection? Were they all shown in exhibitions at the Gallery, either in Paris or New York?*

AH The works entered the Collection as a result of encounters with artists and works in museum or gallery exhibitions and, even though many of them were, or became, artists shown by the Gallery, a few of them were never shown by us. Sol LeWitt and Richard Serra are examples that come to mind. The fact that we didn't show an artist we admired had generally to do with the artist already being represented by another gallery.

SC *Ileana Sonnabend is known for her cosmopolitanism. Were many of the artists who she showed and supported friends with one another? What was the relationship, for example, between European artists in the 1960s, such as Anselmo, Arman, Kounellis or Pistoletto, with their American contemporaries?*

AH Until the 1980s the European and American art scenes were very different worlds. As a matter of fact, even the New York and California art scenes seemed very separate from each other. The late 1960s was a very unusual period in the sense that the Italian *arte povera* was conceptually very close to American anti-form, and the link between them was possibly even stronger than the one between American pop, *nouveau réalisme* and European pop. In that period many younger American artists were showing with European galleries because the European collectors, unlike the American ones, were interested in their work. This, with time, created antagonisms with the European artists who, even when very well-known, were less favoured by the European collectors who preferred buying works by Americans, while the American collectors were, until the 1980s, indifferent to both American and European artists of that period's avant-garde. There were, of course, European artists, like Arman and Christo, who were also part of the American art scene, and American artists were part of the European art scene, like Cy Twombly, who lived in Rome, and Jim Dine, who lived in London for some years in the 1960s, but they were exceptions.

SC *It is notable that there is only one woman artist represented in the exhibition. Did Ileana collect the work of any women artists?*

AH Gender was never of interest to us. Neither were race, nationality or sexual orientation. We did work with some women artists who were part of artistic duos — we actually worked with several duos, which was quite unusual, whether there was a woman in them or not. They were Bernd and Hilla Becher, Gilbert & George, Anne and Patrick Poirier, and Andrea Robbins and Max Becher. The Gallery also showed women artists like Lee Bontecou and Dorothea Rockburne, but they had only one show. Gender had nothing to do with them being shown, nor with the collaboration being short-lived. I am so unaccustomed to think in terms of gender that, answering your question, it took me a moment to realize that there is one woman artist in the show. It is Rona Pondick and we have been working with her close to fifteen years.

SC *From the artists represented, which works excite you the most?*

AH They all do in many different ways. There are artists in the Collection whose work we found very exciting who later on made work to which we didn't respond in the same way. It is interesting to me that, even in those cases, I still see what there is in them that we found, and I still find, exciting.

SC *Do you see any of the artists in the Collection as having a greater significance now than was recognized at the time? I am*

thinking of the inclusion in the show of Robert Watts, for example, whose work was part of the generation of American pop artists but is less known.

AH Many of the artists in the Collection have not yet found the recognition they deserve and I find it important to show them together with those who have been recognized. Two years ago the Museum of Modern Art in New York made a show about Ileana ['Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New']. It was about presenting works by artists shown by Ileana that MoMA felt were important. The critic of the *New York Times* said it was a pity that the show only presented works by the artists who became very famous, which was not entirely true, but that he would like to see a show where the artists who never became as famous were also presented. I thought all he had to do was see the show of the Collection that has been presented several times but then I am afraid that for him to review it — or even know about it — it would have to happen in a New York museum.

SC *How do you see the role of the Sonnabend Collection in relation to museum collections?*

AH It would be nice to have the Collection installed permanently somewhere but I don't think it is absolutely necessary. I quite like the fact that the Collection keeps reappearing in different places, in different ways. What is important for me is that one can see how these works relate to each other and create a kind of portrait and biography of Ileana — of me also,

since I was totally involved in the Collection after 1968. Most important collections want to portray the period in which they were made but the Sonnabend Collection is entirely about our sensibilities and our choices. This, however, is something I think one must be careful about as the works must also have their own life. The Barnes Collection in Philadelphia is admirable but Dr Barnes didn't want anyone to see his works of art in a way different from the way he saw them. It is like being invited to a marvellous concert by someone who keeps telling you how you should react to it and doesn't let you listen. The works are hostages to the collection and can never be seen in a different context. I don't want that to happen with us and the works are, as they always have been, constantly available to other shows that don't relate to the Collection. I remember a friend saying, when Ileana died, 'The Collection has been so important because so many shows would never have happened without your loans.'

SC *You said that after 1968 you were very involved in building the Collection. Can you elaborate on how you and Ileana made your choices?*

AH The choices were very instinctive and had to do with all kinds of personal interests and inclinations, but once a work entered the Collection we found it very difficult to sell it. Ileana had a kind of negative reputation because of that and people, especially at the beginning of her career, saw that as her being capricious — there was probably also some chauvinism in that view of her. The Collection and the

Gallery were not seen by us as entities in themselves, they were just extensions of our lives. Collecting was an act of self-definition and dealing, of wanting to share our enthusiasms with others. We never took artists because we felt others would like their works but rather because we felt they didn't have the success they deserved and wanted to help them get it. Both Ileana and Leo [Castelli] have this reputation of having been great business people but business didn't interest them and they always had money problems. The Gallery always lost money — the Collection was where the money came from, most of the time.

SC *That seems surprising.*

AH Ileana never thought about money until she had to think about it and then she had to sell something important from the Collection. When MoMA made the show about Ileana, people were very surprised when I said this because they asked all the artists in the exhibition whether they thought Ileana was a good businesswoman. As they didn't print the questions made in the interviews, the reader is misled into believing that all the artists wanted to talk about that subject. All I mean is that money was not important for Ileana in her dealings, it was just something that allowed her to live her passion for art.

SC *What proportion of the Sonnabend Collection is on show to the public in the exhibition at Serralves?*

AH The Sonnabend Collection is quite large. It includes a collection of decorative arts from the first half of the twentieth century, as well as photography, drawings and prints, and multiples. The main nucleus, of American and European art, is the one being shown here. There are large numbers of works from some of the artists and if one wants to show the overall picture of the Collection one can't show all the works because it would look unbalanced. There are special situations in which more works by a group of artists will be shown. For instance, in the summer of 2017 there are plans to present an exhibition in Venice that includes only works that are connected with the concept of *arte povera*. I also think that at a certain point it will be interesting to make a show of the drawings; and maybe also one of a selection of the editions; and then, as well, a show of photography. This exhibition was designed as Part 1 because it doesn't deal with some fundamental themes of the Collection, which would belong to a Part 2. Those would be the use of photography, a theme pioneered by the gallery, and the work of artists from the 1980s, like Jeff Koons, in which we saw a re-reading of pop art through conceptualism joining two subjects that have been fundamental to us.

SC *In the history of art, who do you consider the most important art collectors of their time?*

AH There are many different kinds of important collectors and important collections and, in the end, the works are what is most important, but the ones that interest me most are those that

are a reflection of the collector's interest and taste. The Barnes Collection, in that sense, is extraordinary, whether you agree with the points of view of the collector or not. There are, however, much less important collections that I find equally interesting, even though the works are not comparable. For instance, the English art historian and critic David Sylvester had, at the time of his death, a collection that I found wonderful because everything in it was put in relation by his vision — Egyptian, Roman, African, Indian sculptures, English furniture, as well as drawings by Claes Oldenburg and Willem de Kooning, etchings by Rembrandt, Goya and Barnett Newman, and tapestries and Persian carpets... It was all sold at auction when he died. Each thing remained what it was, but the link he made between all the objects is unfortunately gone — nothing of it remains except for an auction catalogue!



RONA PONDICK (1952)

Nascida em 1952 em Brooklyn, Nova Iorque, Rona Pondick estudou na Escola de Artes da Universidade de Yale (New Haven) com Richard Serra, então artista visitante. Contudo, o minimalismo era um quadro de referência demasiado estreito para ela: “Havia um enorme tabu em relação a qualquer uso da metáfora ou representação do corpo. Tudo o que fosse figurativo ou histórico era proibido. Senti que tinha de cortar conscientemente os laços com o minimalismo, sobretudo pela importância que a metáfora tinha para mim”.

A metamorfose e o conceito de hibridização entre animal e humano foram desde o início temas fundamentais do trabalho de Pondick. A artista vê-os como parte de um contínuo de fertilização artística cruzada, em que arte

e ideias viajam através do tempo e das fronteiras — desde a Esfinge egípcia até aos seres de Goya e de Odilon Redon, desde a mitologia de Ovidio até à *Metamorfose* de Kafka e à perturbante possibilidade de manipulação genética no futuro.

Dog é a sua primeira escultura híbrida, fundindo uma cabeça e mãos humanas (as da artista) com o torso de um cão. Embora seja fácil compará-la com a Esfinge, a peça está longe de uma estilização e tem uma fisicalidade que provoca um forte impacto psicológico e uma resposta visceral instintiva. Sobre *Dog*, a artista afirmou: “Há uma comunicação visual transmitida numa linguagem corporal que requer pouca explicação e espero ter conseguido capturá-la”.

Dog
[Cão]
1998-2001

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Rona Pondick studied at Yale University School of Art, in New Haven. Richard Serra, who was a visiting artist at the time, was her tutor, but minimalism was too tight a frame for Pondick: ‘There was a strong taboo against any kind of use of metaphor or bodily representation. Anything figurative or historical was forbidden. I felt I had to consciously sever my ties with minimalism mainly because metaphor was so important to me.’

Metamorphosis and the concept of the human/animal hybrid were, from the beginning, major themes in her work. Pondick sees them as part of a continuum of artistic cross-fertilization in which art and ideas have travelled across time and borders—from the ancient Egyptian Sphinx to the creatures depicted by Francisco Goya and Odilon Redon, from Ovid’s mythology to Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and the disturbing possibility of genetic manipulation in the future.

Dog is Pondick’s first hybrid sculpture, merging human hands and head (those of the artist herself) with the torso of a dog. Even though it is easy to compare this morphed figure to the Sphinx, it is far from stylized and it has a physicality that provokes a strong psychological impact, an instinctive visceral response. Commenting on the work, the artist remarked: ‘There is a visual communication spoken in body language that needs little explanation and I hope to have captured it.’

