

Indecent Exposure

the village VOICE

By Elizabeth Hess

"Corporal Politics"

MIT List Visual Arts Center
20 Ames Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts
Through February 14

"Corporal Politics," as the catalogue says, is not funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. But it almost was and should have been.

Last May, after the first week of her blessedly short term, Anne-Imelda Radice vetoed a \$10,000 grant for this exhibition. At the time, the proposed show, organized by Helaine Posner, curator of the List Visual Arts Center, included four artists: Robert Gober, Annette Messager, Rona Pondick, and Kiki Smith. What was the problem? Radice was the problem. And her resignation from president-elect Clinton's new NEA is cause for relief.

For the last several years, we have had the pleasure of watching right-wingers attempt to set cultural policy in America—not to mention move into the White House. Their stunning failure to take over the entire country is no surprise, but their interest in the arts is not necessarily dead. The battle over censorship—which began in 1989, when then director Christina Orr-Cahall censored Robert Mapplethorpe's retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art—might be over, but the war against the religious right goes on. Thus far, the Reverend Donald Wildmon and his flock have found no better way to make news and raise funds to fight abortion, gay and lesbian rights, and sex education than to attack art.

Wildmon and other extremists, who include Radice, push the notion of "decency" as if they had a monopoly on moral values. As NEA attorneys are discovering, however, legislating what is or is not decent is difficult as well as unconstitutional. (A case brought against the endowment is still pending in California.) Conservatives used to worry about quality; now they obsess about decency. This is not progress. But whatever the jargon, art has been somewhat lost during the censorship crisis. The controversy over *Piss Christ* was all in the name, and apparently "Corporal Politics" got tagged because of *Male and Female Genital Wallpaper*: the title of a Gober work.

What is indecent art? You haven't seen anything yet, but there's a generation of artists working on it. Let the official decade of Indecent Art begin!

Almost inadvertently, "Corporal Politics" (I keep wanting to write "Corporal Punishment") has become a telling and significant exhibition. When curator Posner found out that her show was the object of much NEA anxiety, her initial response was amazement. Gober, Messager, Pondick, and Smith are all successful, highly visible artists with commercial dealers. Their works are immersed in current theories of sexual politics and identity, or gender, which makes them timely. (There are essentially three issues at the moment: race, class, and

gender.) This is a midcareer group that was radicalized in the '60s and '70s, when feminism was not a collection of essays on the shelf but a revolution. Two decades later these artists are making objects that have provocative, sexual, content. It makes sense.

Unlike the spineless Orr-Cahall, who collapsed completely in the face of political and potential economic pressures, Posner rose to the occasion, standing behind her artists and her own curatorial integrity. Support was quick to follow: Aerosmith, a Boston rock group, replaced the missing \$10,000 for MIT; playwright Jon Robin Baitz contributed additional funds; Beacon Press refused a \$39,000 NEA grant in protest and agreed to copublish the "Corporal Politics" catalogue, which is a great read. Not only did Posner insist that the show go on, but she decided to make it larger and stronger, adding Louise Bourgeois, Lilla LoCurto and William Outcault, and David Wojnarowicz—an old NEA favorite.

Protecting the show became Posner's challenge, and it was

worth the struggle. Thanks to the crisis, "Corporal Politics" became a more ambitious event, attempting to pinpoint a historical moment, if not the beginnings of an identifiable movement in art. As Thomas W. Laqueur writes in a captivating catalogue essay, "The processes of civilization in the past four hundred years have served to secure the body's boundaries." Now, we are beginning to see the body come unbound in an agonizing group of objects that ranges through discursive mediums. Death is a visitor in virtually every piece in this show. The causes of death range from AIDS to censorship (speak of the devil). Innumerable injustices will come to mind as viewers walk through this surprisingly emotional exhibition, but there is also a palpable activist resistance evident. These artists have been taking their revenge as distinct individuals, but here, for the first time, they form a dangerous community.

"Corporal Politics" begins with Bourgeois, fixing her as the moth-

er figure for this generation. (Who's the father? Beuys?) Bourgeois has been carving up the body for a few decades in relative anonymity, but theoretical debates over the past several years have updated the context for her Surreal sculptures. One wants to see more of her in this show, but even the two pieces included give all the objects an added, art-historical dimension. *Henriette* (1985) is a black bronze leg, a prosthetic artifact that hangs from the ceiling as if it had been lynched.

Pondick looks most like one of Bourgeois's progeny, yet her objects are much more psychologically, or psychoanalytically, charged. The artist gets to the core of what she interprets as a damaged female psyche. The work suggests that being female is a punitive, almost physical, sentence. Pondick's *Double Bed*, covered in baby bottles that are tied up in ropes, describes the ultimate impossibility of reproductive freedom for women, or freedom from reproduction. *Little Bathers* is a number of fetal balls with old teeth that lie randomly on the floor, looking tired of being born. They're all painted a cynical and congratulatory baby pink.

Bourgeois's works have a visceral, often poignant, reality, yet

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they can also be viewed as abstract objects. Pondick pushes us further toward undeniable traumas. Bourgeois suggests a breast, but Pondick gives us two round piles of drooping sacs with bottle nipples, which look as if they have absorbed one too many fixations. For Pondick, abstraction is the place where viewers begin, rather than finish. Bourgeois leaves us more to our own devices.

Gober's work still makes me queasy, especially his forays into hermaphroditism. Perhaps this is his strength. Radice should know that his sketchy genitalia wallpaper is his sweetest piece. There are



Rona Pondick: *Milk* (1989)

also three sculptures, including a half male and half female torso (shown at the previous Whitney Biennial) that is Gober's most disturbing work. The artist's use of hair on his amputated figures makes them look both alive and dead. An obviously phallic candle, with sparse hair on its base, waits to be lit, knowing that it will burn into oblivion. Gober's candle becomes an ingenious metaphor for sex in the time of AIDS, which promises a slow burn, resulting in

darkness.

AIDS is the issue, because there is no sex or possibility of reinventing the genders without considering AIDS. The addition of Wojnarowicz to this show is absolutely key. As most readers know, Wojnarowicz took on the NEA and Wildmon in different episodes of the censorship crisis—and won. Putting him in this show is a triumphant act of aggression. This is the first exhibition for the artist since his death in July from

AIDS. Posner has placed Wojnarowicz's 1988–89 signature AIDS work and his last text about his own death next to each other, in what becomes an upsetting installation. The early piece, *Untitled (for Peter Hujar)*, is a collage with photographs of Hujar on his AIDS deathbed, beneath a furious text by Wojnarowicz, which became the clarion call for a movement to combat the government's gross negligence. This hangs alongside the artist's final work,

Untitled, a text over a photograph of a pair of bandaged hands; the words describe the artist's imminent end: "I am waving my hands. I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough."

Wojnarowicz loved to make sperm swim upstream all over his canvases, and Posner has installed Kiki Smith's school of glass sperm near a bunch of them. Smith's work, steeped in feminist issues, reinscribes bodily fluids, taking them out of their normative contexts in order to question the assumptions we bring to them. A series of glass jars sit on a shelf waiting to collect sweat, vomit, urine, diarrhea, and every conceivable fluid that finds an escape hatch out of the body; each jar is labeled as if it were part of a scientific experiment. But Smith's paper-and-wax women are the artist's real triumph. One paper-thin female hangs headless from the ceiling; an umbilical cord and a baby dangle between her legs.

Ms. Crotch and Mr. Cock are the focus of a number of works, not because they are lurid, but because they have been made lurid. The artists in this show, ironically, have been likened to pornographers when they are trying to rescue the body from the ultimate pornographers: the folks who really want to control your body. Perhaps Smith's hanging figure died in childbirth because she had been denied the right to choose; perhaps Gober's candle must burn because he did not have the right to sex education. Wojnarowicz sutures a broadside written by Wildmon into a painting; the reverend charges the artist with being, among other things, a "homosexual."

The show's newcomers (to me

at least) are a collaborative team, Lilla LoCurto and William Outcault, from California. Posner has set up their interactive video installation in a separate room, which makes sense because the noisy piece is so unlike the other works. Viewers are asked to sit down and place a hand on a pulse-taker. We stare at stacked video monitors inside a giant bubble that flash different parts of male and female bodies; our heads appear in the top box. It's amusing, for instance, for women to see themselves with penises, or for men to see themselves with vaginas. Suddenly a red fluid starts rushing through tubes around the transparent womb, and the sound of our heartbeat fills the room. The piece gives us a frightening awareness of our own insides.

The catalogue cover for "Corporal Politics" shows a detail of a work by Annette Messager that includes dozens of tiny but shocking portraits of tongues, noses, nipples, feet, ears, and other parts that the artist has isolated and fetishized. It's a strong, seductive image. (Eat your heart out, reverend.) But in the actual object, it's more evident that each of the portraits hangs by a thin string, which could easily be cut. There's a fragility operating throughout the show that betrays how far we need to go before we are able to securely put Humpty Dumpty back together again. It might be some time before artists can depict the whole body again. It might be some time before we get a vaccine. Eventually, we will collectively remember that there were once indescribable pleasures, where there are now indescribable pains. There's not a disappointing work in this show. ■