

## The Phobic Object: Abjection in Contemporary Art

Simon Taylor

Credit the American people with enough common sense to know that one who wallows in filth is going to get dirty.

—Charles H. Keating, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

Give me an issue. I'll give you a tissue. You can wipe my ass with it.

—Lou Reed.<sup>2</sup>

Since the English translation of Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* in 1982, the concept of "abjection" has entered the critical syntax of contemporary art.<sup>3</sup> Scatological assemblages, bodily fragments, and base materials—dirt, grunge, and the traces of sexual difference—have defiled the white cube of the gallery space, calling into question its ideological "neutrality" as a site encoded with a rhetoric of contamination. This body of production often incorporates what Lacan terms "*images of the fragmented body*," which is to say, "images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body."<sup>4</sup> Representing an oppositional practice rather than an ontology, this insurgent materialism in art asserts the claims of the body, sensuality, and difference over and against societal repression and its institutional architecture. Historically, it may be situated in an art historical genealogy characterized by its insistence on "antivision" which, as theorized by Rosalind Krauss, includes an important phenomenological component, with an emphasis on the haptic and tactile qualities of art.<sup>5</sup>

Desublimatory investigations of abjection within art—prominent in the work of Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Mike Kelley, Robert Gober, John Miller, and David Hammons, among others—imply not so much a lack of cleanliness or health as an



Mike Kelley, *Manipulating Mass-Produced, Idealized Objects*, 1990. Black-and-white photograph, 14 x 11 inches. Metro Pictures, New York



assault on the totalizing and homogenizing notions of identity, system, and order. This base materialism in art confronts and transgresses social prohibitions and taboos, reenacting psychic traumas, personal obsessions, and phobias, and challenging the stability of our bodily gestalts. While the body ego, formed at the time of the mirror stage, signifies a unified, phantasmatic gestalt of a newly formed subject's body, the stability of this imago is continually threatened from within by traces of abjection, such as corporeal wastes (excrement, urine, blood, breast milk, vomit, pus, and spit) that are jettisoned or leaked from the body. These traces of abjection represent both "me" and "not-me," referring back to the child's "physiological natal prematuration"<sup>6</sup> and the traumatic and liminal separation of self and other. Furthermore, the ideal bodily imago is also threatened from without, in a "society of control" which disperses bodies into desiring machines and part-objects.<sup>7</sup> Observing the early modern workplace, Georg Lukács noted that, "the fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject."<sup>8</sup> This slicing and portioning of the body finds its corollary in abjection.

In a recent essay, Susan Buck-Morss suggests that "the mirror stage can be read as a theory of fascism." Her thesis centers on Walter Benjamin's neurological conception of modernity as being based on shock. "Threatened bodies, shattered limbs, physical catastrophe," she writes, were the underside of modern technocracy.<sup>9</sup> It was precisely these bodily realities which were repressed by the fascists who declared, "technology is our uniform."<sup>10</sup> "Thus the significance of Lacan's theory emerges only in the historical context of modernity as precisely the experience of the fragile body and the dangers to it of fragmentation that replicates the trauma of the original infantile event (the fantasy of the *corps morcelé* [body-in-pieces])."<sup>11</sup> Abjection, as an indication of animality, returns to haunt the subject, undermining the metalized, fascistic body which armors itself as a defensive reaction against bodily "impurities." As theorized by Kristeva,

there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject.... Abjection pre-serves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.<sup>12</sup>

### The "Monstrous Feminine" and "Female Grotesque"

Signifying the frailty of Lacan's Symbolic Order (i.e., patriarchy), Kristeva's "abject" becomes a subversive force which "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>13</sup> In the pre-Oedipal stage, she explains, the child's experience of the world is totally undifferentiated and narcissistic, unable to distinguish the world from its own immediate desires and needs. During this period, the mother represents an "anacletic" (self-preservative) prop, her breast, the first part-object to which the child develops a phantasmatic attachment as a primary love-object. In a very striking way, Kristeva, following Lacan, characterizes childhood development in an anti-idealist portrayal, focusing on its aggressivity and sadism. The child splits the figure of the mother, like the breast, into a "good" object and a "bad" object, depending on the dialectic of presence and absence, that is, the mother's ability to gratify and frustrate the child's self-preservative needs and libidinal desires.

One of the implications of Kristeva's theory is that the abjection of the maternal body supplies the paradigm for social "othering." Since the young girl identifies with the gender of the mother, her need to distinguish herself is said to be far less insistent than the demands for separation vectoring on the boy. Barbara Creed's notion of the "monstrous feminine," though not exclusive to men, is a patriarchal myth originating in the masculine dread associated with the mother's genitals and the castration complex. It is repeatedly staged and enacted in the genre of horror films that typically return the viewer to the "primal scene." As Creed has written, the excessive violence and gore in horror films typically produce an ambivalent experience that signals

a desire not only for the perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images, being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, having taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator's seat).<sup>14</sup>

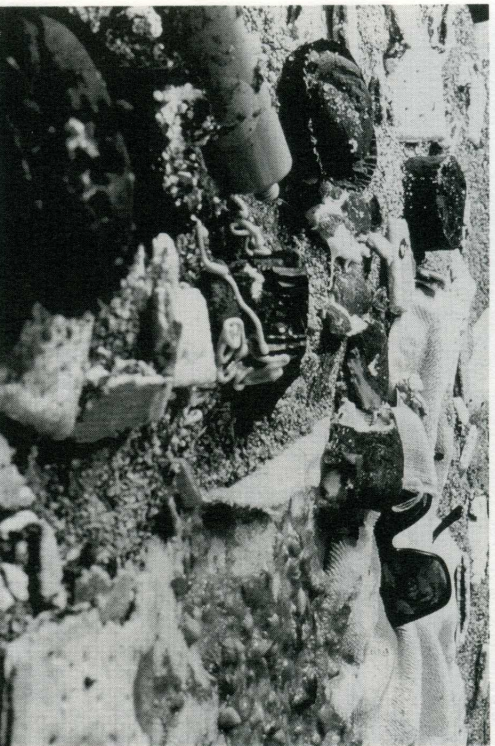
The abject in Cindy Sherman's and Kiki Smith's work is also characterized by its ambivalence and figures in relation to the "monstrous feminine" and Mary Russo's notion of the "female



grotesque.”<sup>15</sup> There is, significantly, an element of the carnivalesque in the work of both artists—each performs hysteria as a critical method, as exemplified by the interest in theatricality and masquerade. Produced in a context of struggles over the right to an abortion, of highly publicized rape trials, and the general backlash against women’s rights, their works examine the deployment of male-defined stereotypes, particularly the social construction of woman as abject.

In contrast to her earlier *Untitled Film Stills*, which critics linked to issues of voyeurism, scopophilia, and womanliness as masquerade,<sup>16</sup> since 1983 Sherman has increasingly produced monstrous representations of the feminine—wearing false breasts, pig snouts, and other prosthetics in some pictures, depicting vomit in others (alluding to bulimia?). If the early *Film Stills* adopt the codes of B-movies and the films of Hitchcock or Douglas Sirk, the more recent images recall horror films and the sub-genres of “splatter,” “slasher,” and “meat” movies, as well as pornography and the 1930s doll assemblages by the Surrealist Hans Bellmer. Sherman’s large-scale color photographs are beautiful and seductive from afar; as we approach them, phantasmatic tableaux of hysterical women, zombies, and monsters appear in scenes awash with repugnant details of bodily fluids and deformed anatomies. By virtue of their large scale, excessive fetishism, and taboo subject matter, many of these photographs threaten to exceed the limits of the frame by corporealizing vision. Like the scene of Chinese torture and execution depicted in a 1905 photograph described by Georges Bataille in *Les larmes d’Eros*, Sherman’s photographs, along with Andres Serrano’s recent morgue photographs, frequently present the “spectacle of death, spectacle’s end.”<sup>17</sup>

Sherman’s strategy, one of abrupt defamiliarization, precipitates a visceral as well as psychic, response in viewers which does not accommodate passive, desirous contemplation. As her imagery becomes increasingly monstrous, it challenges and subverts dominant conceptions of “woman as nature” (therefore as exterior to culture); as in horror films, Sherman’s terrorizing photographs sever the identificatory bonds between the viewer and the image. After a point, the spectator turns away, ultimately “punished for his/her voyeuristic desires.”<sup>18</sup> Sherman’s imagery enacts a sadomasochistic dialectic, drawing upon, in order to thwart, pervasive desires and fantasies of woman.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1987. Color photograph, 49 1/4 x 73 inches. Metro Pictures, New York

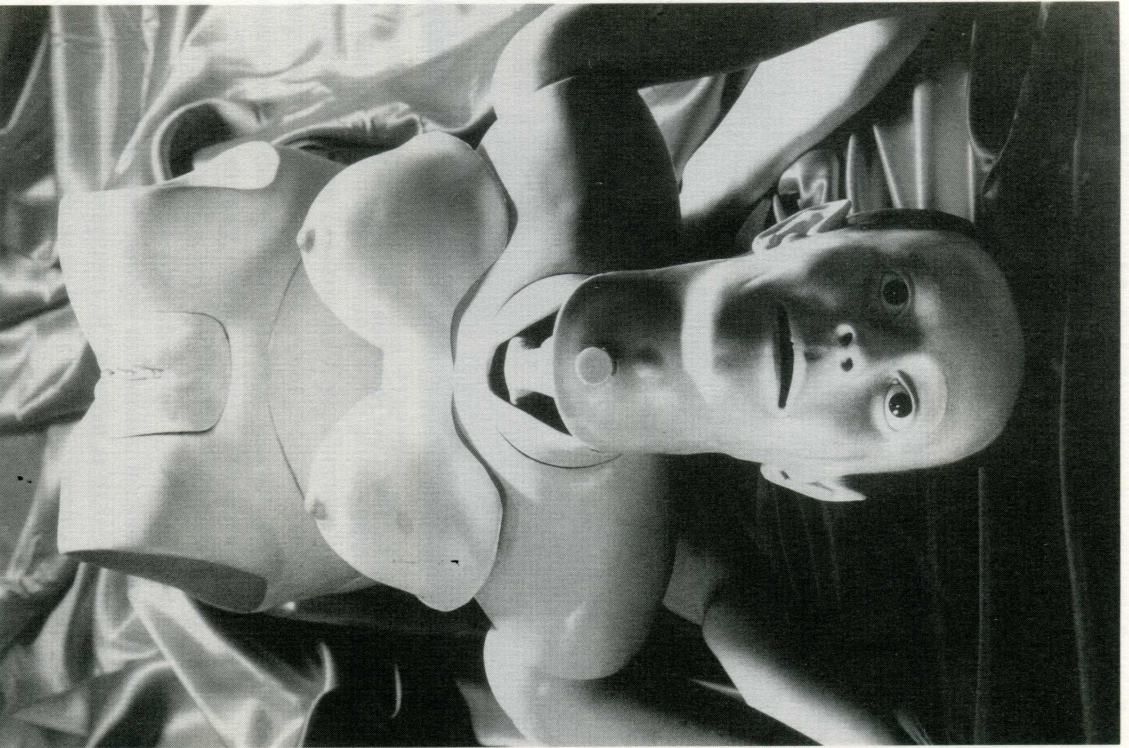


Paralleling the photographs of Sherman, Kiki Smith's sculptures frequently refer to the maternal body and the reproductive organs; in the most explicit cases, this involves sculptures of wombs and uteri, paper scrolls depicting fetuses, lactating women, and pregnant bellies. *Trough* (1990), one of her most horrifying sculptures, consists of a white plaster cast of a hollowed-out female body, sliced crosswise and mounted horizontally on the wall to form a watering hole, which literalizes notions of the woman's body as ciphers and vessel. That a woman's agency, as conceived in patriarchal society, depends upon her reproductive capabilities explains why those who work to proscribe abortion border on the fascistic. Such reactionary attempts to limit and define women through the maternal role deny fundamental matters of agency.

The way Smith explores the exterior and interior regions of the body, examining the nervous, digestive, and urogenital systems, skin, orifices, and bodily fluids, suggests an investigation of body symbolism, one that rejects the bourgeois hierarchy of the body, which privileges the head and denigrates the lower bodily stratum. Many of her most recent works focus on the body's excretory functions—shitting, pissing, cumming, vomiting, and bleeding—and overtly relate to, in her own words, “the abject loss of selfhood—recognition—necessity, loss of flesh, sex, fluid.”<sup>19</sup> Smith conceives of her sculpture in more general terms, as a critique of the objective, anatomo-clinical gaze, concerning the way the

mind/body dichotomy...has had enormously devastating ramifications in the society...to justify great quantities of oppression...we have this split where we say the intellect is more important than the physical. And we have this hatred of the physical.<sup>20</sup>

*Untitled* (1990) comprises nude male and female wax figures, impaled and suspended on metal stands where they are made to resemble putrefying, bruised cadavers being readied for autopsy. While an undeniable morbid sensibility infuses the work—it smells and its creamy wax surface collects dirt—“sperm” dripping from the man's penis and “milk” trickling out of the woman's breasts signal the regeneration of the grotesque body. In response to recent installations by Smith, and similar figurative sculptures by Sue Williams and Robert Gober, Margaret Morgan observed,



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1992

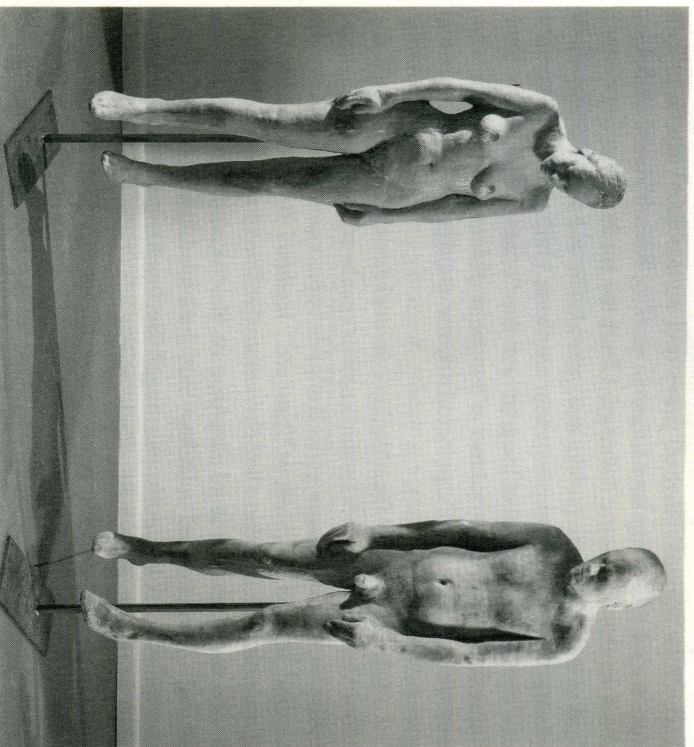


"the very particular familiarity of these figures and the scenarios suggested are what save both bodies of work from undifferentiated humanism."<sup>21</sup> These works have to be seen in terms of their historical context, following upon the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings ("a nationwide airing of dirty linen"), the general curtailment of women's rights, and pro-choice demonstrations by groups like WHAM and WAC on the eve of the 1992 election.

Like Kristeva, Sherman and Smith have been vulnerable to the charge that their interest in abjection and the monstrous feminine reinforces patriarchal ideas about women's bodies, but this charge seems to be abstracted from the actual political context described above. I disagree with Jennifer Stone, who trashes Kristeva's theory of abjection, claiming that "whenever theory is used to explain the repellent, it runs the risk of promoting it."<sup>22</sup> If an abiding stereotype persists, surely it is better to confront it rather than disavow it. While it may be true that transgressing social taboos has the effect of ultimately drawing attention to the power of the norm, once a transgression has been made, destabilization is the general result. Thus, while I argue for a subversive reading of the abject, as have—perhaps in slightly different ways—feminist critics such as Catherine Liu and Christine Tambllyn,<sup>23</sup> I do not claim that the abject gives us access to a radical exteriority, merely that its invocation, under certain historical circumstances, can be used to renegotiate social relations in a contestatory fashion.

### Abject Masculinity

Traditionally, Jackson Pollock's drip paintings have been discussed in terms of Action Painting and "opticality." Clement Greenberg's late-formalist criticism elided any discussion of the body, focusing exclusively on the viewer's retinal sensations. In the mass media of his time, however, Pollock was sensationally named "Jack the Dripper," an allusion to the notorious rapist and murderer of prostitutes in turn-of-the-century London. Andy Warhol wrote of the macho posturing of the Abstract Expressionist crowd and, although fascinated with Pollock's work, found the artist's aggressive personality completely anathema to the camp sensibility of his own circle. Larry Rivers recalled the "kind of guy [Pol-



Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1990



lock] was. He would go over to a black person and say, 'How do you like your skin color?' or he'd ask a homosexual, 'Sucked any cocks lately?'"<sup>24</sup>

In his *Painting with Two Balls*, Jasper Johns had offered the most explicit critique of the "Stud Club" that comprised the New York School. Warhol, privy to a rumor that Pollock had an anti-social proclivity to urinate in public, reinterpreted Pollock's work in the *Oxidation Paintings*, which he made by having friends and celebrities urinate on horizontal, floor-bound canvases. If young boys are known to measure their virility by seeing who can urinate furthest and longest, was the "triumphant" New York School, by extension, a kind of symbolic pissing contest? To what extent was Abstract Expressionism the product of a homosocial grouping of men?

Like Warhol, Mike Kelley's irreverent attitude toward the New York School mocks the implicit machismo of the group and their works, as in some of Kelley's felt banners, which profane the exalted, sacred function of "fine art." *Rothko's Blood Stain (Artist's Conception)/Body Print (Self-Portrait as the Shroud of Turin)* (1985) is based on a remark made by one of Rothko's friends after the artist had committed suicide—that the bloodstain Rothko's body created was his best stain painting.<sup>25</sup> By invoking the auratic presence of the artist-messiah, Kelley appears to be mocking the mystification of art-world "masterpieces." Georges Didi-Huberman's comments on the Shroud of Turin could be equally applied to the reverence traditionally accorded to expressionist painting: "It is interesting that all this hermeneutic analysis of stains—non-iconic signifiers, pure effects of support or tonality—tends to define, in fact, a new art of *iconic devotion*."<sup>26</sup> Another banner by Kelley, *Strokes of Genius*, imitated Franz Kline's calligraphic abstractions and was named after a PBS documentary series of the early 1980s that blandly reiterated familiar clichés about the "heroic" Abstract Expressionist group.

One of the most controversial issues surrounding Kelley's work has been his appropriation of so-called "women's work" (e.g., sewing) and general interest in "unmanly" things like dolls. Influenced by the feminist critique of masculinity, as revealed in several of his caricatures, stuffed animal sculptures, and felt banners, Kelley produces objects deeply involved in issues of sexuality and gender difference. His deliberately insipid felt banners,

starting with *The Sublime* project (1984), mock the aesthetic of the sublime and its attendant idealism. High-minded notions of the sublime, prevalent among the Abstract Expressionist group (Barnett Newman, for example), were revived during the 1980s by Ross Bleckner and others within the context of the art boom. Kelley's first felt banner, *Janitorial Transcendence* (c. 1985-86), relates to his *Filth* (1985) and *Garbage Drawings* (1988-89). It represents a pre-industrial form of labor and parodies banners made in the 1960s by a Catholic nun, Sister Mary Corita Kent, which expressed a feel-good "sunshine aesthetic...imply[ing] that you're not supposed to think about negative or contradictory things."<sup>27</sup>

Where Kelley differs from his Conceptualist peers is in his blunt refusal of antiseptic media (e.g., photo-text) and presentational methods (e.g., vitrines), which invariably fetishize the pure art object. His interest lies instead in deploying "the worst and trashiest stuff that the main culture abhors"<sup>28</sup> through his choice of materials as well as subject matter (e.g., masturbation, torture, Nazism, and serial killers). The found, handmade stuffed animals he uses in his sculptures, ordinarily considered too trivial or unworthy to be seen in an art context, represent the epitome of low ("white-trash," infantile, and regressive) culture. The disturbing proportions of these "humanoid morphologies," as Kelley calls them, appear to reflect the self-images of their anonymous makers. The animals and afghans are often dirty, soiled with the infant's bodily spit, urine, and feces. We may describe these toys, to invoke the term of D. W. Winnicott, as "transitional objects" in so far as they represent the outward trajectory in the infant's subjectivity.<sup>29</sup> Transitional objects, such as a piece of fluff, a blanket, or a favorite toy, become constant companions for the child, serving as intermediaries between self and other. Sometimes, the animals are distributed on the floor in sexual positions, or within "arenas" delineated by blankets that function as physical boundaries.

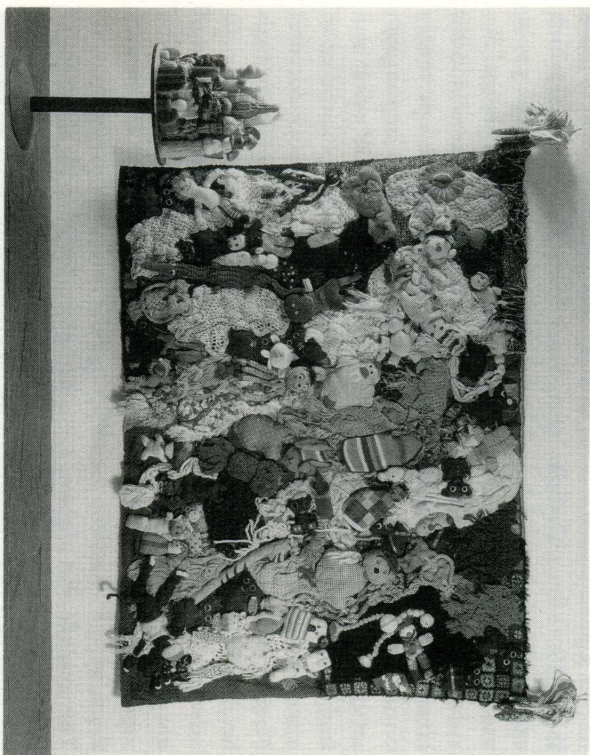
In its visual all-over structure, Kelley's *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987), incorporating stuffed animals and corn husks, recalls Pollock's field paintings. It was initially conceived in relation to the notion of the gift, or potlatch, as put forth by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss.<sup>30</sup> In gift-giving, a pre-capitalist form of exchange, writes Mauss, the recipient is obliged to return the favor—with interest. Examining the phenomenon of giving toys to children, Kelley hints at how parents manipulate



their children with gifts, covertly letting them know that they owe them something in return. "Basically, gift-giving is like indentured slavery or something. There's no price, so you don't know how much you owe."<sup>31</sup> *More Love Hours*, therefore, casts a shadow on "family values"; its title exposes the concealed aggression behind gift-giving and the power-dynamic between children and their parents.

When Robert Gober began exhibiting in the mid-eighties, his art works, representing a schizophrenic combination of Surrealism and Minimalism, were similarly interpreted as being subversive in their relation to the nuclear family and the domestic environment. The austerity, asceticism, and spartan look of Gober's art, beginning with his sinks, is frequently made convulsive. Of all his works, his torturous-looking playpens and cribs suggest the ubiquitous "dysfunctional family" and reflect on the social systems that impinge on the nuclear family, making it obsolescent in late capitalism. There was nothing unusual about the appearance or shape of Gober's first playpen, merely its distancing from the everyday, domestic environment. More recently, he began to mutate these forms, creating the *X-Playpen* (1987) and the *Pitched Crib* (1987) in a series of sadistic configurations. These works cause the viewer to reflect upon the original playpen as a kind of prison or cage, a panopticon of sorts, socializing the infant in preparation for a life of surveillance and unfreedom. Both Gober and Kelley, therefore, share a desire to plumb the depths of early childhood experiences. They have also engaged in activities like sewing that trespass on traditional areas of "women's work"; significantly, Gober's first sculptures were dollhouses.

In reference to Duchamp, Gober told me, "I think there was a big effort on his part, and I think it came through his sense of humor, to redefine masculinity in art."<sup>32</sup> For Gober, the important issues raised by Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) have to do with the sexual ambiguity of the object, especially the fact that when inverted, the urinal resembles a female torso or uterus, which is related to Duchamp's ideas about androgyny and his transvestite alter ego, Rose Sélavy. In its day, the *Fountain* was deployed as an object which would serve "to fight bigotry in America," as "The R. Mutt Case" had stated.<sup>33</sup> Yet art historians have demonstrated a remarkable ability to sublimate the object's sexual and psychological impact. Gober recuperates the subversive dimension of the



Mike Kelley, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin*, 1987

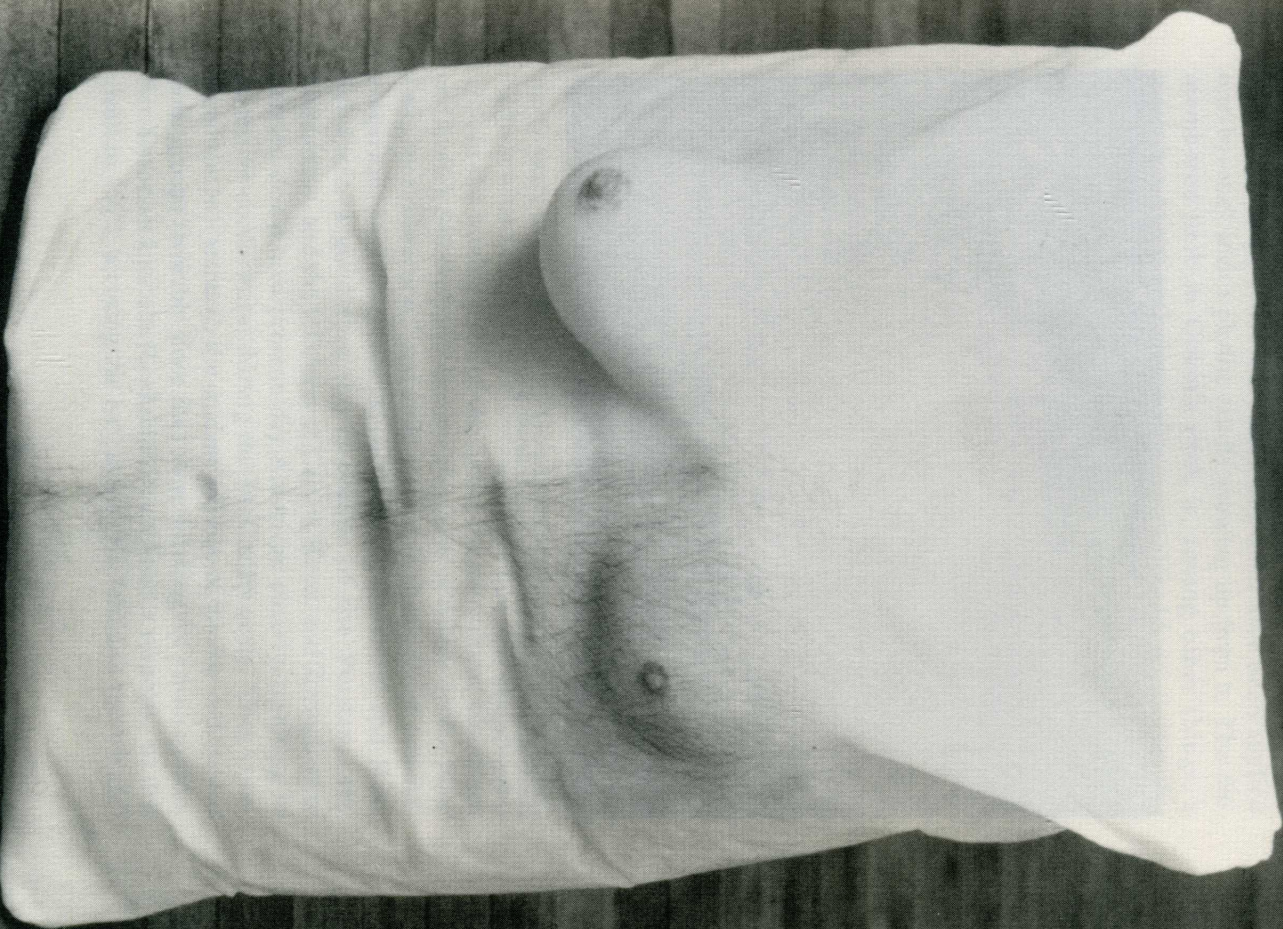


*Fountain* in his homoerotic *Pair of Urinals* (1987) which, as Gary Indiana has written,

tell[s] you about pissing, standing next to other people pissing, about cocks and having one or not, having one in a disposal situation, and being watched while you piss. Which is so much more basic than modern art, really.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most important aspects of Gober's work has concerned the visibility of gay male desire. He began making his sinks shortly after the AIDS epidemic entered public consciousness and panic spread about catching the virus through physical contact. Due to the absence of any plumbing fixtures, faucets, and pipes, the sinks (symbolic of cleansing and purification) were dysfunctional, conveying the lack of any possibility of cleansing—signifying, according to the artist, the lack of a cure for AIDS. The presence/absence relation frequently noted in Gober's work—how the body is at once present and absent—ultimately seems to derive from the “good” object/“bad” object dialectic of the part-object described earlier; indeed, one of Gober's works consists of a female breast appearing on a wall, recalling Duchamp's *Please Touch*, a design for an exhibition catalogue cover of Surrealist art, with a three-dimensional breast.

Gober's body-part sculptures, like his amputated legs and hermaphroditic, hairy-chested breasts, resonate with a macabre, Swiftian irony. A confrontational untitled work of 1990 was created shortly after William H. Buckley, Jr., suggested tattooing HIV-infected men on their buttocks. Gober's apparent response was a sculpture of a male backside and legs emerging from a wall; on the backside is engraved a musical score in imitation of a figure from Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*.<sup>35</sup> (Krisieva refers to the grotesque imagery of the body in Bosch's fantastic visions and links abjection to biblical abomination in Judeo-Christian culture.) Gober's most recent sculptures—“imagos of the fragmented body”—invoke the abject through the sense of horror they elicit in the viewer, a horror-related to the fear of dismemberment and death. In relation to his leg sculptures, Gober has explained that they were partly inspired by a story his mother once told him about being handed an amputated leg while working as a nurse in a hospital operating room. “But I also realized, looking at this sculpture of a leg that's cut off just above the calf,



Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1990. Beeswax and human hair, 24 x 15 1/2 x 12 inches.  
Collection of Lisa Spiegel Wilks

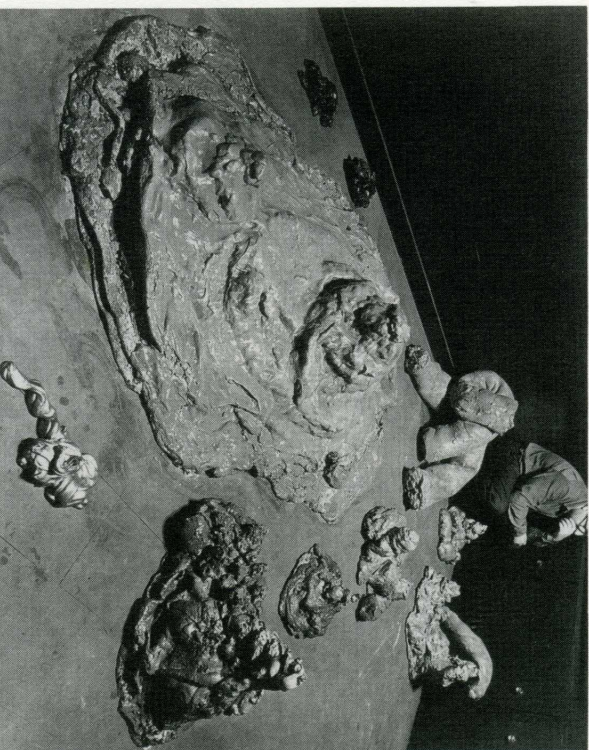


that it's the sight you see if you glance under a stall in a men's room."<sup>36</sup> His *Leg with Candle* (1991) consists of a horizontal, wax male leg wearing a leather shoe and unexpectedly thrusting out at floor level from a wall; a section of trousers at the shin is cut away to reveal a hairy, cadaverous limb (the hairs have been applied one-by-one) with a phallic candle growing up from it. The dismembered limb in Gober's work is, among other things, a metaphor of the pathology of homophobia. Ideologically, the fragmented body functions as a critique of the body politic, continuing a long tradition in political satire and iconography.

### Political Scatology

In 1964, Sam Goodman and Boris Lurie, the leading figures in the now-obscure NO! art movement, collaborated on the "NO! Sculpture Show" at the Gallery Gertrude Stein in New York. Committed to a radical leftist ideological position, these artists were outraged by the complicity of their fellow artists with the moneyed elite. Their provocative installation, anticipating Anti-Form art, consisted of several *trompe-l'oeil* piles of excrement made of papier-mâché, painted brown, with red areas indicating hemorrhoids. In a photograph of the installation, Goodman posed amid the piles of shit, crouched in the manner of Rodin's *The Thinker*, with his hand on his chin in the classical position of melancholia. "I'd like it understood this is my final gesture after thirty years in the artworld," Goodman was quoted in *Art Voices*, "This is what I think of it."<sup>37</sup>

In the waning years of the sixties counterculture, Goodman and Lurie's *Shit Sculptures* became the focus of debate on the New Left, "permissiveness," and child rearing in the pages of *Leonardo* magazine. In 1971, two psychoanalysts, Emanuel and Reta Schwartz, argued that the traditions of the Puritans, the Huguenots, and the followers of Calvin, Knox, and Zwingli were carried down into present-day American society, resulting in excessive conformism during the McCarthy years. They compared the NO! artists to the student activists of the day and viewed both groups favorably since they were working for emancipation. Art historian Lincoln Rothschild published a response to this claim in 1972, accusing the NO! artists of a "childish throwback"



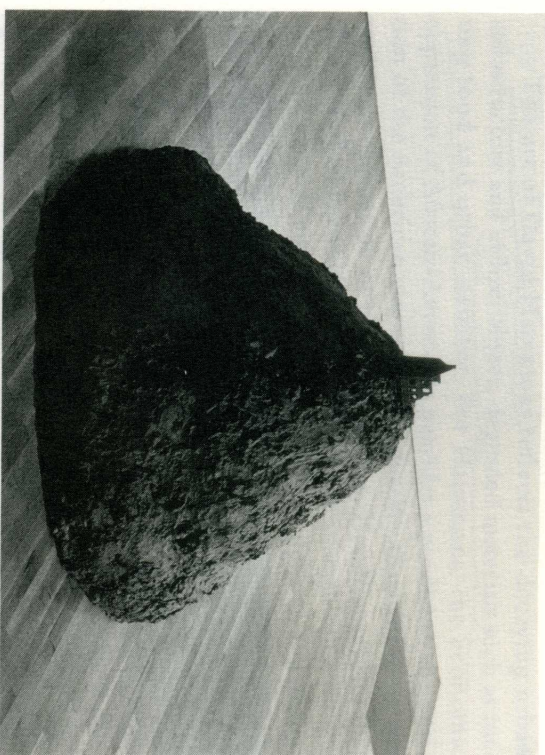
Sam Goodman and Boris Lurie, "NO! Sculpture Show,"  
Gallery Gertrude Stein, New York, 1964



and calling for "social hygiene."<sup>38</sup> What is of particular interest in this series of exchanges was the way the arguments became a meta-discussion on the New Left and the student uprisings. In short, Rothschild's critique of the NO! artists mirrored certain counter-revolutionary arguments which were being used to undermine the student revolts of the late sixties and early seventies. Psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim made the trivial argument that parents had been too "permissive" with their children in the postwar years. By the 1980s, this critique of permissiveness was extended from child rearing to all the aspects of social life that the authoritarian neo-conservatives sought to control, whether concerning women's rights or equal opportunities for people of color, gays, or lesbians.<sup>39</sup>

From the perspective of 1993, the excremental revolt of the NO! artists in the early sixties appears as the "return of the repressed" in John Miller's work, reigniting old contradictions in the social order which have been silenced in the conservative reaction following 1968. Miller's excremental sculptures, like those of Goodman and Lurie, represent the unsuppressed expression of the instinctual drives, defeating the anal regime of the puritan mentality. His painting *The Horrible Negation* (1986), composed of shaped letters forming the word NO in viscous brown paint, suggests that he is aware of the NO! precedent. Recalling the desublimatory art impulse behind much of the art of the sixties, Miller writes: "Within the present capitalist political economy, sublimation may serve to reinforce patriarchal ideologies than to protect civilization from individuals' unchecked libidinal impulses."<sup>40</sup>

A number of Miller's coprophiliac sculptures, such as *Untitled* (1988), resemble piles of shit or fecal sticks. Like Kelley, Miller seems determined to undermine idealizing notions of the sublime and the beautiful. His untitled sculpture of 1985, a bouquet of plastic flowers in a vase, the whole saturated in brown paint, was a precursor of his excremental sculptures. Georges Bataille, in his 1929 essay "The Language of Flowers," noted how flowers have come to represent the human ideal of the beautiful. Yet flowers spring from the manure pile, and "even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centers by hairy sexual organs";<sup>41</sup> ultimately they wither and die, becoming excremental. Miller's 1986 painting *The Rotten Sun*, depicting a brown sun on a blue sky, has a similarly de-idealizing effect; the title, in fact,



John Miller, *Untitled*, 1988

derives from a Bataille essay that meditates on Icarus soaring toward the sun. Bataille noted how "the search for that which most ruptures the highest elevation, and for a blinding brilliance has a share in the elaboration or decomposition of forms."<sup>42</sup>

The excremental trope in Miller's work is partly a response to the consumerist excesses of the yuppie generation of the eighties. In its 1984 review of "The Year of the Yuppie," *Newsweek* claimed that "what the Yuppies have discovered is nothing less than a new plane of consciousness, a state of Transcendental Acquisition."<sup>43</sup> During this period artists too were implicated in the gentrification of downtown neighborhoods like New York's East Village and San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury. The *Newsweek* article cited a female yuppie from Boston, who admitted being "totally infatuated with the world of real estate....It makes me feel smart and it gives me more control over my life."<sup>44</sup> Yuppie speculation, however, ended abruptly with the collapse of the Dow on October 19, 1987—many of their investments ultimately turned to shit, as indicated by a number of Miller's sculptures, such as *Untitled* (1988), which depict houses, tenements, and assorted buildings smeared with brown acrylic paint.

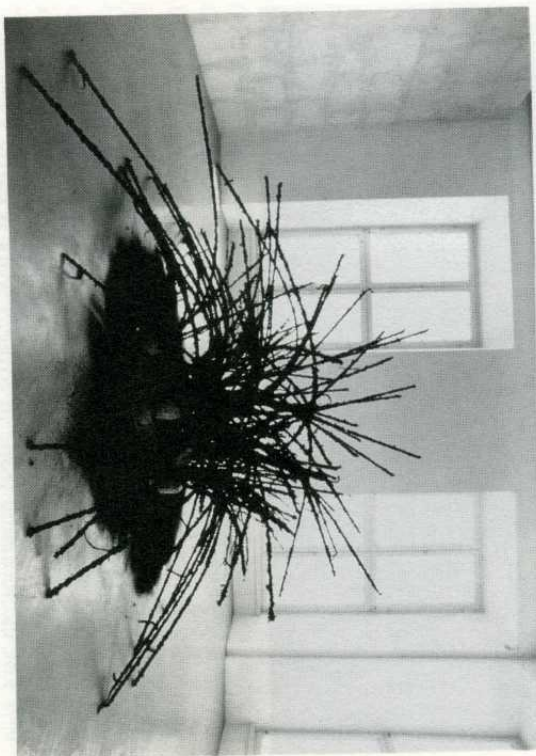


The art of David Hammons reflects the decaying urban infrastructure and utilizes abject, degraded materials such as rotting food and urban detritus. For Hammons, the economic oppression of African-Americans provides a parallel to the position of the American working class. Rather than assuming the unilateral oppression of blacks by whites, Hammons notes that "blacks and whites are being played out against each other for the capitalist gains of a few individuals."<sup>45</sup> His sculptures, installation art, and performance works deploy found objects typically scavenged from the urban environment, especially from low-income neighborhoods such as Harlem and the East Village. During the 1970s, he showed at Just Above Midtown and earned notoriety in the Harlem area for his basketball hoop installation, entitled *Higher Gods* (1983), which commented on the lack of job opportunities for inner-city youth. His street art pieces have involved sidewalk displays of old wine bottles and snowballs in the manner of a street hawker, recycling old materials, making something from nothing.

Hammons creates his sculptures out of castoff, base materials such as greasy bags, chicken bones, semi-gnawed ribs, elephant dung, and human hair; his art is imbued with the poetic sense of the everyday. Often his art works refer to the human body, as in some of his *Body Prints* (1960s), in which he applied grease to his body, and then made impressions of his face and hands on paper. His *Untitled* (1992), in the form of a spider or plant, is constructed of 6-foot dreadlocks made of real human hair swept from the floor of a barber shop. Mary Douglas discusses the cultural relativity of dirt, noting how

what is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, and vice versa. The idiom of pollution lends to itself a complex algebra which takes into account the variables in each context.<sup>46</sup>

One of the most radical aspects of Hammons' art centers around this "ideology of dirt"; in its positive, non-judgmental attitude toward hybrid states, dirt reflects the everyday environment and offers itself as a critique of antiseptic polish and anality (authoritarianism). In contrast to the obsessive cleanliness of the Neo-Geo work of the mid-1980s (exemplified by Jeff Koons' vacuum cleaners), Hammons "has always chosen the dirtiest



David Hammons, *Untitled*, 1992



materials available. He looks for the traces of time in his dirty materials, the physical evidence of human use."<sup>47</sup>

The proliferation of bodily fragments and degraded materials in contemporary art represents, on the one hand, the exteriorization of all interiority in the contemporary world; in the present-day postmodern age, we are "bodies without organs," "desiring machines," or "cyborgs." The increasing tendency among artists to "recuperate" the body metonymically via fragments, fetishes, traces, and part-objects must be viewed historically at a time when the body is being replaced and eclipsed by technology and prosthetics. On the other hand, malevolent associations of the other with the abject (e.g., women and menstrual blood, gay men and disease, the working class and trash, blacks and dirt) have been deployed by artists to force stereotypes to resignify and circulate in alternately parodic, celebratory, and non-oppressive ways. Abjection within recent art practices signals a profound attack whose weapons are the very forces that the armored subject most fears: "sexuality and the unconscious, desire and the drives, the *jouissance*... that shatters the subject, that surrenders it precisely to the fragmentary and the fluid."<sup>48</sup> The recent production of abject art, at a time of AIDS, backlash against women's rights, and "private telematics"<sup>49</sup> (the dematerialization of the body in postmodernism), signifies the irrepressible resurgence of the body in an era of diminishing returns.

## Notes

## THE PHOBIC OBJECT

- \* I would like to thank Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Sarah Bayliss, Hannah Feldman, and Kimberly Price for their helpful comments.
1. Charles H. Keating, Jr., quoted in *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. ix.
2. Lou Reed, "Take No Prisoners," *Arista Records* (AL 8502), 1978.
3. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Leon S. Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). The major problem with Kristeva's model is its dependence upon the traditional, Oedipal account of childhood development. Might not the historical challenges of women's suffrage, feminism, gay and lesbian politics, combined with alternatives to traditional "mothering"—equal parenting, the proliferation of one-parent families and same-sex parents—amount to a "waning of the paternal imagos," precipitating the obsolescence of Oedipus as a universal myth? Can the notion of the abject be reconfigured in a way that is no longer dependent upon Oedipus or repression? Some of the critiques of Kristeva have held her personally responsible for reinscribing the Oedipal myth, thereby overlooking the hegemonic centrality of Oedipus which persists in the dominant culture.
4. Jacques Lacan, "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," in *Essays: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), p. 11. That phantasmagorical visions of the fragmented body recur with frequency in dreams was significant to Lacan in corroborating the existence of the Freudian death drive. Following Henri Wallon, Lacan posited a "mirror stage" occurring at the age of six months, when the child recognizes its own image in a mirror. This is the first instance when the child is able to distinguish self and other; it represents entry into the Symbolic Order of language, and plays an important role in the child's conception of the bodily ego, or gestalt. The development of the ego and subjective agency results in this founding moment of self-alienation.
5. Rosalind Krauss, "Antivision," *October*, no. 36 (Spring 1986), pp. 147-54.
6. Jacques Lacan, "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," p. 19.
7. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript to the Societies of Control," *October*, no. 59 (Winter 1992), pp. 3-7.
8. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class-Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Rodney Livingstone, trans. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971), p. 89.
9. Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and An aesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October*, no. 62 (Fall 1992), p. 27.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
12. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 9-10.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
14. Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen*, 27 (January-February 1986), p. 48.
15. *Ibid.*, and Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 213-29.
16. The early critical response to Sherman's work was framed in terms of Laura Mulvey's



- feminist essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which concerned images of women in Hollywood cinema and the male viewer as the bearer of "the look"; see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 14-26. Recently, this theory has been questioned for, among other things, adopting the view that men were the exclusive possessors of the gaze; as Victor Burgin has written, "one effect of Laura Mulvey's essay was that all man-made images of women were henceforth viewed, without discrimination, as instruments of sadistic objectification, and were therefore proscribed." The result was a perceived iconophobia which, in the context of the culture wars of the last few years, could be appropriated by advocates of censorship. There was also a major theoretical problem with Mulvey's essay insofar as it literally applied Lacan's diagrammatic rendering of mirror stages; see Victor Burgin, "Geometry and Abjection," in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, eds., *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 105.
17. The 1905 photograph was the centerpiece in the recent exhibition "(Dis)member" at the Simon Watson Gallery, New York. For Bataille's description, see Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, Betsy Wing, trans. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989), p. 84.
18. Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," p. 64. Laura Mulvey has also looked at Cindy Sherman's recent photographs in terms of Creed's article: "A Fantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review*, no. 188 (July-August 1991), pp. 136-51. According to Norman Bryson, Sherman's work "overloads the iconic to the point of breakdown"; "Interim and Identification," *Mary Kelly—Interim*, exh. cat. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), p. 29.
19. Handwritten notes by Kiki Smith, in *Kiki Smith: Silent Work* (Vienna: MAK, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, 1992), p. 27.
20. Kiki Smith, quoted in Kristen Brooke Schleifer, "Inside & Out: An Interview with Kiki Smith," *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, 22 (July-August 1991), p. 86.
21. Margaret Morgan, "Notes: Smith & Williams," *Art & Text*, no. 43 (September 1992), p. 7.
22. Jennifer Stone, "The Horrors of Power: A Critique of Kristeva," in Francis Barker et al., eds., *The Politics of Theory* (Colchester, England: University of Essex, 1983), p. 41.
23. Catherine Liu, "Editorial," *Lastimbia*, 1, no. 4 (1993), pp. 216-25. Christine Tamblyn, "The River of Swill: Feminist Art, Sexual Codes, and Censorship," *Affirmation*, 18 (October 1990), pp. 10ff., and "No More Nice Girls: Recent Transgressive Feminist Art," *Art Journal*, 50 (Summer 1991), pp. 53-57.
24. Larry Rivers, quoted in Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPsism: The Warhol '60s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 14.
25. "Mike Kelley Interviewed by John Miller," in William S. Barrman and Miyoshi Barosh, eds., *Mike Kelley* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1992), p. 33.
26. Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Index of an Absent Wound (Monograph on a Saint)," Thomas Repensek, trans., *October*, no. 29 (Summer 1984), p. 79; see also David Humphrey, "Stained Sheets/Holy Shroud," *Arts Magazine*, 65 (December 1990), pp. 58-62.
27. Mike Kelley Interviewed by John Miller, p. 36.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
29. D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 34 (1953), pp. 89-97.
30. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925), W.D. Halls, trans. (London: Routledge, 1990).
31. "Mike Kelley Interviewed by John Miller," p. 18.
32. Interview with the artist, November 8, 1988.
33. "The R. Mutt Case," *The Blind Man*, no. 2 (May 1917).
34. Gary Indiana, "A Torture Garden," *The Village Voice*, October 27, 1987, p. 105. My 1988 interview with Gober confirmed this interpretation of his *Pair of Urns*.
35. This was noted by Jean-Pierre Criqui, "Review: Paris, Robert Gober, jeu de Paume," *Artforum*, 30 (January 1992), p. 115.
36. Quoted in Gary Indiana, "Success: Robert Gober," *Interim* (May 1990), p. 72.
37. Sam Goodman, in Boris Lurie and Seymour Krim, *NO! Art: Pin-Ups, Excrement, Potent, Jew-Art* (Berlin and Cologne: Edition Humdermark, 1988). See also Martin Pops, "The Metamorphosis of Shit," *Salmagundi*, no. 56 (Spring 1982), p. 34; "Rodin wants to believe...that thinking is a function of the body as natural as shitting. Yet the fact remains that those farts are not clenched and that the Thinker seems absentmindedly apart from (not one with) his body, an archetype of sublimation gone awry in the West."
38. See Lurie and Krim, *NO! Art*; Emanuel K. Schwartz and Reia Schacknow Schwartz, "NO-Art: An American Psycho-Social Phenomenon," *Leonardo*, 4 (1971), pp. 245-54; Lincoln Rothschild, "Violence and Caprice in Recent Art," *Leonardo*, 5 (1972), pp. 325-28; Boris Lurie, "Violence without Caprice in 'NO-Art,'" *Leonardo*, 7 (1974), pp. 343-44.
39. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), devotes several sections to the debates on perversities.
40. John Miller, "Artist's Films: The Body as Site," *Flash Art*, no. 161 (November-December 1991), p. 99.
41. Georges Bataille, "The Language of Flowers," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Allan Stoekl, ed. and trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 12.
42. Bataille, "Rotten Sun," in *Visions of Excess*, p. 58.
43. "The Year of the Yuppie," *Newsweek*, December 31, 1984, p. 19.
44. Carrie Cook, cited in "The Year of the Yuppie," p. 17.
45. Quoted in "Speaking Out: Some Distance to Go..." *Art in America*, 78 (September 1990), p. 80.
46. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 9.
47. Tom Finkelpearl, "On the Ideology of Dirt," in *David Hummons: Rousing the Rubble*, exh. cat. (Long Island City, New York: P.S. 1 Museum, The Institute for Contemporary Art, 1991), p. 74.
48. Hal Foster, "Postmodernism in Parallax," *October*, no. 63 (Winter 1993), p. 10; see also Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1, *Women, Fluids, Bodies, History*, Stephen Conway, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
49. Jean Baudillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. 128.