

**Encountering Mimetic Realism:  
Sculptures by Duane Hanson, Robert Gober, and Ron Mueck**

by

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**To My Dad**

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## **Abstract**

### **Encountering Mimetic Realism: Sculptures by Duane Hanson, Robert Gober, and Ron Mueck**

by

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Co-Chairs: Patricia Simons and Rebecca Zurier

This dissertation examines the mimetic realist production of three artists—Duane Hanson (1925–1996), Robert Gober (b. 1954), and Ron Mueck (b. 1958)—whose sculptures exemplify changing attitudes toward figural realism over the past fifty years. This is an historically grounded study that is also informed by a theoretical awareness of the oscillation between representation and actuality, which is central to the viewer’s experience of mimetic realism. The primary objectives of this study are to dissect the technologies of making, the conceptual practice of display and reception, and the moments of encounter that characterize these projects. Sculptures by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck are handmade. These artists deploy traditional techniques of modeling, casting, and painting to recreate with mimetic accuracy human figures, body parts, and objects that stand-in for bodies. They explore unorthodox materials for sculpture, including wax and plastics, and draw upon methods used in the production of waxworks, special-effects models, and prosthetic limbs in order to simulate the complex look and texture of human flesh. Each artist represents a notably different approach to achieving vividly real

figurations. Hanson and Mueck employ extreme verisimilitude, which renders an eerily convincing visual illusion of fine corporeal details: blemishes, wrinkles, fingernails, and follicles that sprout hairs. Gober, on the other hand, never reproduces whole human figures. Instead he remakes everyday objects—light bulbs, sinks, urinals, and drains—that are used by the body during daily rituals such as sleeping, eating, cleaning, and excreting. His project serves to highlight the multidimensionality of mimetic realism that moves beyond the actual representation of a person to mimicking the very palpable presence of another human being. All three sculptors choreograph the meeting between their works and viewers. They borrow strategies for display from places where artificial bodies are exhibited and viewed, such as funeral parlors, natural history and wax museums, cabinets of curiosity, and anatomical collections. This attention to encounter and display foreshadows and echoes changes in the modern art world, from a time of opposition to “the popular” toward the current marketing of exhibitions as public spectacles.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction: Figuring it Out

I had an encounter with an embalmed and encoffined corpse. It was a meeting with my grandmother, whose body had recently traversed the boundary between living, breathing person and object-like cadaver. At her funeral I was able to closely examine her prepared body. I knelt next to the casket and carefully inspected the handiwork of the embalmer, which gave my grandmother an artificial appearance that was eerie: yellow-tinted rehydrated flesh, thinly painted eyebrows, glossy lips, and rosy cheeks. I stared at her for a long while, watching and waiting in vain for some small sign of life, a gasp for air or a flutter of an eyelid. Motivated by a macabre curiosity, I forced my fingers between the elbow of her right arm and torso and immediately felt the stiff and cold remains that were visually disguised by the green wool suit my aunt had chosen for her. This act of touching confirmed for me that my grandmother was dead.

I begin with the vivid visual image of my grandmother's body because it illustrates how the handiwork of the embalmer, like the careful articulations of a sculptor who wishes to render a three-dimensional copy of life, can become extremely eerie. A prepared corpse is an object that has passed beyond life. When laid out for display, it

partly confuses the viewer's perception of the otherwise impermeable boundary between that which is living and that which is no longer living. The embalmer's main objective is to blur the boundary between life and death by physically reconstructing—through make-up, clothing and accessories, and hairstyle—the illusion of life onto a person's corporeal remains. In making aesthetic alterations to the deceased body, embalmers prepare and exhibit the dead not so much to reiterate or confirm the physical state of the body as dead but to remind those who come to view and mourn the person that the body they encounter, on display in the funeral parlor, was at one time a living person.<sup>1</sup>

Like the embalmer, three contemporary sculptors—Duane Hanson (1925–1996), Robert Gober (b. 1954), and Ron Mueck (b. 1958)—undertook an artistic practice meant to recreate, in three dimensions, the human body and a human-like presence. Their sculptures are so incredibly life-like that many viewers report experiencing an eerie sensation when encountering the works on display. While each of these artists has a unique set of objectives and maintains a distinctive aesthetic style, they all adhere to a type of artistic practice in which unorthodox materials—plastics and wax—are used to recreate with a great degree of precision the appearance of human flesh. The sculptors likewise simulate corporeal details, including individual strands of hair, painted blemishes, teeth, artificial eyes, and fingernails, which bolster the sculptures' vivid life-likeness.

Sculptures made by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck are particularly compelling because their life-like aesthetic promotes an unsettling oscillation between a human

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the “restorative arts,” a term used by those in the embalming trade to refer to the process of recreating the natural form and color of the living body, see Robert Mayer, *Embalming*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Medical, 2005). For a first-hand account of the embalming arts, the commerce of death, and some aspects of ritualized viewing, see Mary Bradbury, *Representations of Death: A Social Psychological Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1999).

subject, a corporeal presence, and a sculptural object. In order to create this oscillation the sculptors experimented with innovative techniques and materials, alternative strategies for display, and ways of choreographing the viewing of their works of art in order to emulate inside the art gallery the visual rhetorics of display used in funeral parlors, popular museums, cabinets of curiosity, and entertainment venues, where fake bodies and body parts are most frequently showcased.

Hanson, Gober, and Mueck's adaptations of the reconstructive aesthetic, materials, and display techniques used by embalmers, curators, anatomists, and waxwork makers in the construction and exhibition of their work is directly imbricated in a history of figural sculpture. In this study I will use the term figural to refer to sculptures that imitate the physical form and appearance of the human body. The terms figuration or figurative, which are not specific enough for the works under consideration here, have been widely employed by modern and contemporary art historians to refer to works of art that represent a strong connection to the material world, mainly those that employ a non-abstract or mimetic visual language meant to imitate the natural world (plants, animals, and objects) in art.<sup>2</sup>

Figural sculptures can include such objects as polychrome sculptures, multicolored statues from antiquity, the terracotta and painted wood figures of Christian Europe, seventeenth-century Spanish religious figures, finely detailed anatomical models, and waxworks mannequins.<sup>3</sup> Too often these types of sculptures are set aside as cult

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<sup>2</sup> The terms have likewise become synonymous with that which is the antithesis of or that which came before abstract art, a binary that does not motivate this study. In chapter three, I will show how the categories of the figural and the figurative are complicated by the work of Robert Gober.

<sup>3</sup> On multicolored statues from antiquity, see Mark Bradley, "The Importance of Colour on Ancient Marble Sculpture," *Art History* 32, no. 3 (2009): 427-57. On waxworks, see Michelle E. Bloom, *Waxworks: A Cultural Obsession* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). On the history of the wax museum, see Mark Sandberg, *Living Pictures: Missing Persons* (Princeton: University Press, 2003).

objects, scientific props, or tasteless artifacts, because they depart from the classical ideal of monochrome, stone or bronze sculpture that was championed by influential art historians such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), when in fact their role as three-dimensional depictions of real human bodies, their components, and appendages has had a great impact on the way we view, understand, and experience representations of bodies in western visual culture. Furthermore, the venues that display these objects create historical, anthropological, medical, and social narratives about bodies—both as fact and as fiction—that are exhibited for education, entertainment, and “edutainment” (a form of entertainment that is meant to educate and amuse) of a broad and diverse audience. One of the goals of this study is to understand how the fabrication, staging, and display of figural sculpture can inform the way viewers respond to the experience of physically encountering, in an art gallery, a three-dimensional work of art that has the same look and physical presence of a real flesh-and-bones human being.

In the following case study chapters, figural sculptures such as those found in churches, cabinets of curiosity, natural history museums, and wax museums will serve as important points of references for the work of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck. I will draw upon contemporary art history, discourse about display and reception in museum studies, and detailed understandings of both traditional and unconventional techniques for producing sculpture in the round, to uncover a radically conceptual way of thinking about sculpture that mimics the form, contours, textures, and materials (flesh, hair, and fingernails, for example) of a variety of bodies.

Recent exhibitions have sought to reframe contemporary figural sculptures alongside anatomical models, prosthetic devices, mannequins, polychrome religious

figures, dolls, and automatons.<sup>4</sup> My approach builds off of the relationships illuminated by these exhibitions, but is meant to probe beyond visual similarities in order to unravel the technical aspects of fabricating, displaying, and interpreting sculptural objects that are meant to invoke not only the appearance of a human body but also exude a detectible physicality that mimics the presence of another person. I argue that Hanson, Gober, and Mueck strategically compose and construct the physical meeting that takes place between a viewer and their work in order to challenge modern conceptions of the relationship between viewer and sculpture.<sup>5</sup>

This study focuses on four decades of sculptural production, beginning at the end of the 1960s and extending through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Hanson's work dates from 1968 to the early 1980s, Gober's leg sculptures were made between 1989 and 1991, and Mueck produced entire figures and visages from 1997 to 2010. This approximately forty-year span represents a development in the construction, display, and reception of figural sculpture, as represented by three distinct projects. Hanson, Gober, and Mueck's sculptural projects constitute moments within the narrative of contemporary sculptural practice in which artists were concerned with the exploration of representing, through sculpture, performance, and conceptual gesture, human bodies. Hanson, Gober, and Mueck worked in tandem with these sculptural histories and frequently drew from the prolific pluralities of materials, techniques, concepts, and strategies used by their contemporaries for the dissemination and display of works of art. Many of the

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<sup>4</sup> Key exhibitions include *The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present* held at the J. Paul Getty Museum (2008); *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture, 1600–1700*, an international traveling exhibition (2010); and *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to the Now*, held at The Hayward Gallery, London (2000).

<sup>5</sup>In *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Rosalind Krauss traces variable relationships between sculpture and viewer from Surrealism through mid-1960s performance art. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981). In his book *The Sculptural Imagination* Alexander Potts discusses, extensively, the relationship between a viewer and sculpture in art made after 1945.

movements—pop art, minimalism, conceptualism, performance, and varied body art practices—were influential for Hanson, Gober, and Mueck. Particularly motivating for these three artists was the renewed possibility of repositioning audiences of art in relation to objects, situations, and experiences. In adapting these approaches to the production and display of figural sculpture, Hanson, Gober, and Mueck’s projects demonstrate sustained engagement with the work being produced by their contemporaries as much as they seek to recall important sculptural innovations of the past.

### ***Figural Sculpture in Modern Sculptural History***

In the previous section I made reference to figural sculptures that exist outside of the margins of the art world. However, within art there are significant examples of sculptors who, like Hanson, Gober, and Mueck, sought to create three-dimensional works of art that encapsulated the physicality of human bodies. This physicality assumed different forms. For example, Edgar Degas (1834-1917) exhibited *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (Figure 1.1; c.1881), a nearly life-size and extremely life-like sculpture of the young ballerina, Marie Genevieve van Goetham.<sup>6</sup> The original sculpture was made of tinted wax and was only cast into bronze after the artist’s death. Degas used wax for the materials translucency and supple nature, qualities that make it an ideal medium for simulating the look and texture of human flesh. Because Degas modeled with specificity the physiognomy of the real ballerina, who was at the time considered of the lower class,

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Kendall, et al., *Degas and the Little Dancer* (New Haven: Yale University Press; 1998), 15.



viewers interpreted the *Little Dancer* as “ugly,” and “frightful.”<sup>7</sup> What viewers saw as ugly and frightful was a direct result of verisimilitude, the appearance of truthfulness or reality, which produced a physicality that was unidealized and disturbingly close to the real thing. Degas choice to make a costume of silk fabric and twill for his sculpture, as well as the addition of a wig made of horse hair, further contributed to the sculpture’s overall verisimilitude, exacerbating viewers’ unease.

Degas’ unconventional use of wax, a material that was for artists of the time only used in preliminary work, plus the addition of real clothing and hair give the sculpture a life-like quality that provoked the French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans to announce that *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* was “the first truly modern attempt at sculpture,” he had yet seen.<sup>8</sup> A noteworthy comment made by someone who frequently engaged in rich descriptions in his own work. It is difficult to determine to what extent Huysmans interpreted the sculpture as “modern” because of Degas’ techniques, as opposed to his choice to render as a work of art a subject that did not adhere to the classicizing or idealizing aesthetic norms of the late nineteenth century. It is nevertheless noteworthy that Huysmans saw in the *Little Dancer* something innovative at a time when waxworks, wax museums, and cabinets of curiosity were ubiquitous. Degas’ adaptation of the methods and techniques used by these institutions signaled a desire to recreate in sculpture something of the liminality, a palpable perception of a human body and sculptural object simultaneously, that has come to characterize wax mannequins and anatomical models.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 45.

The fierce debates concerning likeness and life-likeness in sculpture of the late nineteenth century were not altogether uncharacteristic. For example, an early prejudice voiced by critics of the work of August Rodin (1840–1917), an artist now considered by many scholars to be the father of modern sculpture, was directed at his sculpture the *Age of Bronze* (Figure 1.2; c.1876), a life-size and (some said) life-like sculpture of a young male nude.<sup>9</sup> Scandal erupted around the figure because of its perceived verisimilitude. The corporeal details suggested by the smooth, dark finish of the bronze were interpreted as *surmoulage* (a direct casting from life), an accusation Rodin worked very hard to deny because it diminished the importance of his technique and served to undermine visual evidence of the artist's hand.<sup>10</sup> However, it is important that Rodin did not deny that the *Age of Bronze* was very life-like (which it is in many ways, much more so than the classicizing work of his contemporaries). However the artist insisted that the life-like effect of the work had been achieved through his artistry rather than by simple mechanical replication. Part of the sculptor's retort was that the exaggerated *contrapposto* pose, with arms held overhead, of the figure was impossible for someone to assume in real life. The physicality of Rodin's *Age of Bronze* should be attributed to a

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<sup>9</sup> In Rodin's work, the "locus of meaning" (Krauss, 28) becomes the surface of the body, which simultaneously expresses the internal (anatomical and muscular) and external (the artist's manipulations and process of making) forces which repeatedly oblige the viewer to "acknowledge the work as a result of a process" (Krauss, 29) rather than an ideal and unified embodiment of the cognitive significance of art as previously proposed by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Also see Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 5, 7, 74–101. For more on Hegel's theories on sculpture as outlined in his lectures (1820–1829) on the philosophy of art and a succinct discussion of the history of sculpture more broadly, see Kerstin Mey, "Sculpture," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, at *Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0468> (accessed June 22, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Rodin spent a large sum of money to defend himself against accusations that he had employed a direct casting method instead of direct modeling to create *Age of Bronze*. For a brief discussion of the incident see Iain Ross et al., *Rodin: A Magnificent Obsession* (London: Merrell; Distributed in the USA and Canada by Rizzoli, 2001), 29.

more general sense of vivid fleshiness, which the artist worked hard at achieving through modeling rather than life casting.

By insisting that critics recognize the artistry as much as the life-likeness in his *Age of Bronze* Rodin pushed the boundaries of acceptable sculptural aesthetics of his time. Likewise, Degas' *Little Dancer* made a significant break from the established classical canon of sculptural aesthetics championed by the eighteenth-century art historian Johann Winckelmann, which favored white monochrome marble, unity of form, firm contours, and simple sublimating beauty.<sup>11</sup> Degas' untraditional use of flesh-colored wax, combined with his handling of his subject in a naturalistic manner, brought into relief the contemporary debates about the use of color in sculpture and its potential to thwart the material and metaphysical "truths" or, aspects of a work of art. Degas' *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* rejected such classicizing preoccupations in favor of an illusionistic representation of a real phenomenon: a dancer in space. This representational quality of the *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* shifted the viewer's focus away from the sculpture's formal qualities to its affect.

Between Degas' *Little Dancer* and Hanson, there are only intermittent examples of sculptors reproducing the human body in fragments or as a whole with a strong degree of naturalism using wax or plastics. Additionally, few sculptors used both illusionistic naturalism and clothing made of fabric and fashion accoutrements—tutu, slippers, handbags, jewelry, and hats—to provide added layers of authenticity to figural sculptures. Notable exceptions are the rather uncanny surrealist *poupeés* made in the 1930s by the German artist Hans Bellmer (1902–1975). A lot of surrealist art, like Bellmer's doll

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<sup>11</sup> Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

sculptures, combined extreme illusionism or naturalism with unnaturalistic fragmentation and assemblages of body parts. These dissected and re-assembled dolls and doll parts (Figure 1.3; 1938), which Bellmer arranged in *tableaux vivants*, do fall into the category of figural sculpture because of their human-shaped parts, flesh-colored surfaces, and real accessories such as shoes and socks. It is important to note these surrealist objects as something of a precedent for Gober's approach. Bellmer's *poupeés*, unlike Degas, Hanson, and Mueck's figures, provided viewers with an edited illusion of the body, most frequently the naked female body.

During the apex of modernism in the 1940s and 1950s, sculptors did use the human body as form for their work, but they became increasingly disinterested in the illusionistic representations of bodies. This is not to say that Modern sculptors did not desire to maintain something of the life-like in their work. Artists such as Henry Moore (1898–1986), Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), and Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975), whose careers and reputations were established in the first half of the twentieth century, pursued the possibility of a new figurative aesthetic that did not employ naturalism or illusionism. Moore, for example, labored diligently to morph the outline of the body into dramatically swelling curves, coarsely worked or elegantly smooth surfaces, and a heavy-handed abstract visual language (Figure 1.4; 1951 and Figure 1.5; 1934). The art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss, when writing about Moore's undulating forms in her influential book *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, argued that “at one stroke, the figure *and* the material can be brought within the same conceptual grasp.”<sup>12</sup> Formal aesthetics took precedence over naturalism and the human form became a point of departure rather than a destination in high modernist sculpture. The body became a way to embody avant-garde

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<sup>12</sup> Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 144.

materialism, assert sculptural innovation, and work through formal language. Yet all of these aims did not undermine the fact that Modern sculpture, in many ways, sought to maintain, preciously through stylization, a vivid sense of the real, of the body as presence or living fleshy entity rather than dead object.

An art historical project that is particularly helpful in thinking about the representation of bodies in sculpture produced during the interwar period in Britain is Anne Wagner's *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture* (2005). She explores the re-creation of the human form in sculpture at a moment in art's history that seemed averse to representational gestures. Wagner's analysis of sculpture made by Moore, Hepworth, and Jacob Epstein (1880–1959) demonstrates the complex tension between body politics—specifically representations of the maternal body—and sculptural innovation, in order to reveal how figural duplication struggled to address formalist concerns in modern sculptural practices, such as material and plastic form, while negotiating the semantics of a system that was more and more coming to favor abstraction over figuration.<sup>13</sup> Wagner's study constitutes an important preface to Hanson, Gober, and Mueck because it directly engages with questions surrounding the representation of the human figure in sculpture at a moment in art's history that was increasingly complicating such endeavors. By doing so, Wagner keeps alive the possibility that figuration was a viable mode of production for British sculptors working in the interwar period. Although the following case studies address bodies of sculpture made after World War II, they will repeatedly demonstrate how Hanson, Gober, and

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<sup>13</sup> Anne M. Wagner, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005). For a discussion of bodies in sculpture at the end of the nineteenth century, see David Getsy's *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

Mueck have continued a tradition of rendering in sculpture the physicality as much as the presence of another human being.

Of the high modernist sculptures that are important to this study, I wish to highlight Giacometti's striding figures (Figure 1.6; May 2009 installation) as yet another important hinge between abstract formalism and figural duplication: modeling the shape, contours, and overall form of the human body with the intention of capturing in sculpture its physical attributes. The materiality of Giacometti's sculptures is dramatically stylized—globs of media have been pinched, squeezed, and pressed into place—which creates a vigorously worked surface as tactile as it is abstract. I argue that Giacometti wanted to give his figures a corporeal presence; he wanted them to appear as approaching and retreating figures in the viewer's frame of vision, to appear and disappear simultaneously. This aspect of Giacometti's project is mirrored in sculptures made by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck, who each build into their works an element of slippage that brings the human body into the viewer's frame of vision as much as it seeks to limit or critique this type of embodiment. However, sculptures made by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck diverge drastically from Giacometti in their extreme verisimilitude, use of illusionism, and engagement with the appearance, as much as the presence, of a real human being.

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In many ways the history of contemporary sculpture has been speckled with moments of intense and diverse explorations of materials, techniques, and forms. Additionally, sculptors working within the last forty years have demonstrated a renewed engagement with the relationship of sculpture to its viewers. Krauss argued in her

influential essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979) that sculpture had entered “a categorical no-man’s-land.”<sup>14</sup> From this new position, sculpture was definable as neither architecture nor landscape, and it morphed into a diverse field of practices, situations, and happenings which promoted an experience based on “encounter:” a physical meeting between viewer and sculpture in which the viewer is moved to physically or mentally respond to the work of art. These practices pushed past a “mere” object, “something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting,” as suggested by the American abstract painter Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967).<sup>15</sup> Dramatic shifts in attitudes towards the production, display, and reception of sculpture meant that many sculptors began to reject the gallery as an institutional frame and sought new and diverse ways of involving audiences as active participants. While many times this new type of audience involvement took shape as a performance or happening, display remained one of the key methods for staging and choreographing the encounter between sculptural object and its viewer.

The second half of the twentieth century was filled with pivotal moments for both the fabrication and display of figural sculpture. In 1969, the last major work produced by Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), *Étant Donnés* (Figure 1.7.A, exterior, and 1.7.B, interior; 1946–1966), a life-size *tableau* of a nude female-like figure lying on a grassy hill, was first unveiled to the public at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.<sup>16</sup> The scene is not openly accessible to its viewers. One must approach a set of heavy wooden doors, installed in-

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<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (1979): 36.

<sup>15</sup> Sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s, the American abstract painter Ad Reinhardt formulated this definition of sculpture. Quoted in Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, 1. Also see Lucy Lippard, “As Painting Is to Sculpture: A Changing Ratio,” in M. Tuchman, ed., *American Sculpture of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), 31.

<sup>16</sup> Michael R. Taylor et al., *Marcel Duchamp: Étant Donnés* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009).

front of the tableau, in which two drilled peepholes serve as ocular framing devices, through which viewers are able to peek at the sculpted body.<sup>17</sup> The doors both frame and mediate the encounter between the viewer and the figure lying within the constructed landscape on the other side of the doors. When viewers approach and look through the peepholes they have a viewing experience in which they may imagine themselves to be physically inside the scene, when in fact they must remain at a distance because of the door. In this study I will use the term disembodied viewing to refer to this type of viewing practice in which the viewer projects themselves onto or into a space that is physically inaccessible to them. When looking through the holes in the door, the scene on the other side appears to be proportional to the viewer's human scale. This type of framing and perceptual shifting also aid in inviting viewers to engage in disembodied viewing, a type of encounter that only happens visually but which promotes a strong sense of physical encounter as well. Disembodied viewing will be particularly pertinent in the discussion of Gober's sculptures, analyzed in Chapter Three of this study.

As with Degas' *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years*, the simulation of flesh was critical to the overall effect of Duchamp's nude female figure in *Étant donnés*. Duchamp experimented with many iterations of the female body form, particularly in pursuit of a material that would be supple and pliable to accommodate the complex curves, while also providing a strong flesh-like appearance. The artist tested cast and textured paraffin wax as well as leather; in the end he modeled the form in parchment (animal skin used in book

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<sup>17</sup> The peephole as an ocular framing device is discussed by the art historian Celeste Brusati in regards to Dutch perspective boxes from the early modern period. In Chapter Five of her book, Brusati outlines the ways in which the perspective box provided an opportunity for disembodied viewing: when the viewer looked through the hole that which was miniature became seemingly life-size. See Celeste Brusati, "Natural Artifice and Material Values in Dutch Still Life," in *Looking at Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered*, ed. Wayne Franits (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1997). It is perhaps also noteworthy to put forth the idea that as much as the peepholes have precedence within the history of art, they also have a particular purchase in visual culture: the peepshow.



binding processes).<sup>18</sup> Duchamp attached large sections of parchment to a substructure made of stacks of lead strips. In its finished form, the figure has an overall appearance that is convincingly flesh-like. Duchamp's *tableau* recast the viewer as an integral part of the mechanics of encounter, albeit holding the viewer at a distance from the scene beyond the door. The pursuit of staging an encounter, buffered or direct, between a sculptural object and its viewer was taken up by other artists after the unveiling of Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*.

Though the work of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck seems to be antagonistic to avant-garde trends in sculpture and sculptural aesthetics of the past fifty years, it in fact approached similar goals from different directions. The minimalist artists, for example, offer an important understanding regarding the encounter between viewer and sculptural object as it was re-imagined in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. Minimalist artists experimented with concepts and techniques for displaying what they termed "specific objects."<sup>19</sup> Robert Morris (b. 1931) and Donald Judd (1928–1994) investigated an encounter between sculptural object and viewer that was determined not just with one's eyes but with one's entire body, which constituted a phenomenological encounter as defined in the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>20</sup> The art historical discourse of the time, formulated by influential art historian Michael Fried, preferred a valorization of the mind when viewing a work of art and encouraged the

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<sup>18</sup> These experiments were documented and published in the exhibition catalog that accompanied the fortieth anniversary of the installation of *Étant Donnés* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. See Melissa S. Meighan, "A Technical Discussion of the Figure in Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*" in Taylor, et al., *Marcel Duchamp: Étant Donnés*, 240-61.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints*, Nova Scotia Series, Source Materials of the Contemporary Arts (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975).

<sup>20</sup> For a reading of minimalist sculpture within a phenomenology framework, see Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, 207–34.

repression of a bodily encounter with sculpture.<sup>21</sup> In his influential essay *Art and Objecthood* (1967) Fried argued against two main issues that he saw as central to the encounter staged by minimalist art: anthropomorphism and theatricality.

For Fried anthropomorphism constituted a palpable threat in minimalist sculpture. He suggested that the “experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly—for example, in somewhat darkened rooms—can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting,” because the minimalist object was much more akin to “the silent presence of another *person*” than just an object in space.<sup>22</sup> As evidence, Fried selected remarks made by artist Tony Smith (1912–1980) regarding the scale of his six-foot cube, *Die* (Figure 1.8; 1962):

Q: Why didn’t you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?

A: I was not making a monument.

Q: Then why didn’t you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?

A: I was not making an object.<sup>23</sup>

Fried concluded that “one way of describing what Smith *was* making might be something like a surrogate person—that is, a kind of statue.”<sup>24</sup> Even Fried’s use of the term “statue” to denote Smith’s sculpture was derogatory because “statue” implies something other than modern art: something encountered in a garden, or on a fountain, but never in an art gallery. The term “statue” served to advance Fried’s contention that what the minimalists were producing was anti-art: something closer to theatre.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* 5 (1967): 148-72; Reprinted in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 155.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Smith, quoted by Robert Morris in the epigraph to his “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” (Fried, 1998, 155-56).

<sup>24</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essay and Reviews*, 156.

Fried expressed his anxiety regarding the relationship of the viewer to minimalist sculpture with the term “theatricality,” which he defined as the way in which minimalist objects attempted to assert a physical presence that had to be negotiated by the beholder. Theatricality for Fried denoted the possibility that the sculpture may recognize the viewer’s presence and thus threaten the otherwise firm distinction between that which is physically present or real (defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as something that is “actually existing as a thing”) as opposed to that which is illusionary (something that does not exist as an actual material object).<sup>25</sup>

For Hanson, Gober, and Mueck, the theatrical, as defined by Fried, is no longer something to be avoided but rather something to be directly engaged. Some figural sculptures *are* anthropomorphic and theatrical, which is what ultimately allows them to function as potent catalysts for the renegotiation of the relationships between art and life, sculpture and viewer, harkening back to Degas’s experimental sculpture, *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (Figure 1.1.) and coinciding with Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*.<sup>26</sup> Duchamp re-introduced figural sculpture for artists such as Hanson, Gober, and Mueck. This reengagement with the figural signaled a realization of Fried’s anxieties; these artists intentionally use anthropomorphism and theatricality as spurs for new explorations of the encounter between sculpture and viewer.

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<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Michael Fried’s use of the term “theatricality” to refer to the work of the minimalist artists see Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, 188.

<sup>26</sup> Direct correlations between the artistic practices of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck and those of the minimalists have not been frequently articulated. One exception is Mathew Weinstein’s discussion of Gober; see Matthew Weinstein, “The House of Fiction,” *Artforum International* 28 (1990): 129-32. Yet it is significant to consider that minimalism most certainly has had both implicit and explicit claims on sculptural ventures since the 1960s. Hanson’s choice to make his figures life-size, his placement of objects in alternate locations (such as the lawn outside his studio), and his deliberate push against modern expressionism parallels the minimalists’ projects in unconventional ways. Likewise, Gober’s figural and figurative work is indebted to a minimalist sensibility of space and aesthetics. Lastly, Mueck’s use of scale and display aesthetic is perhaps the most apparent way in which he is still actively grappling with the effects of minimalism today. See their respective chapters in this manuscript for more.

## ***Body and Performance Art***

As much as this study is couched within the history of sculpture, it is also important to recognize the influence that Body and Performance Art of the mid-century had on Hanson, Gober, and Mueck. The development of figural sculpture was only possible because of the use of the human body—typically the artist’s own body—as medium and object at this pivotal moment in art’s development. Beginning in the 1960s, an increasing number of artists identified their own bodies as fruitful sites of representation. They investigated the body not simply as content but as medium, apparatus, and subject for art. Body Artists believed that the body was a privileged site of power, and they rejected formalist models of artistic production that prescribed little if any involvement of the artist’s own body in art making.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps one of the most well-known Body Artists of the 1960s and 1970s is Carolee Schneemann (b. 1939) whose *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963) and *Interior Scroll* (1975) demarcated a genre of art that used flesh as material. Willoughby Sharp, publisher and co-founder of *Avalanche* magazine, a short-lived (1970–1976) but extremely influential New York-based art magazine, defined the parameters of Body Art in 1970 as limited to “art where the body is ‘the subject and object of the work of art.’”<sup>28</sup> For example, the body was seen by some of these artists as a site for feminist expression and radical opposition to hegemonic systems. As such, body art continuously shuttles between physical presence and symbolic representation, between action and invocation in order to both emphasize

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<sup>27</sup> For further information on the importance of Body Art as a precedent for more contemporary corporal displays, see Ara Osterweil and David Baumflek, “Emergent Bodies: Human, All Too Human, Posthuman,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds: Critical Essays on the Plastinated Cadavers of Gunther Von Hagens*, ed. T. Christine Jesperse, et al. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008): 240-258, 241.

<sup>28</sup> Willoughby Sharp, “Body Art,” in *Avalanche* 5 (Fall, 1970): 14-17, 14.

the corporeality of the body and critique the social, political, and artistic institutions that play upon it.<sup>29</sup> These abbreviated examples of body art practices are here meant to underscore the artist's implication of their bodies in or as the art object or performance, so much so that the artist, in many ways, *becomes* the work of art.

Performance art should also be seen as important to the development of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck's distinct projects and the type of bodily encounters they wish to stage. Chris Burden's (b. 1946) acts of self-inflicted trauma—*Shoot* (1970) or *Transfixed* (1974)—staged encounters with the body and audiences in a visceral way. Other performances such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), which invited the audience to use scissors to cut from her body the clothing she was wearing, also introduced a new, more active relationship between the artists, their work, and the viewer. Later performances such as Valie Export, *Tapp und Tastkino (Pat and Paw Cinema)* (Figure 1.9; 1968), in which the artist choreographed viewers' physical encounter with her own breast in public spaces through the use of a box that was attached to her torso, pushed the question of audience participation to the fore of exploration and artistic meaning-making.

In an early instance, Hanson made a sculpture that looked very much like a self-portrait, (Figure 1.10; 1976) but he refused to identify it as a self-portrait. Instead he referred to the sculpture with the generic title: *Man in Denim Suit*.<sup>30</sup> After Hanson's death in 1997, the sculpture has appeared in exhibition catalogs with the title *Self-Portrait*. Gober's leg fragments (Figure 3.35) were molded directly from the artist's leg,

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<sup>29</sup> Hal Foster, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004) 509.

<sup>30</sup> The sculpture appears with the title *Man in Denim Suit* in Martin Bush, *Sculptures by Duane Hanson*, (Wichita, Kansas: The Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, 1985) 42. The sculpture appears with the title *Self-Portrait* in Duane Hanson et al., *Duane Hanson: Sculptures of the American Dream*, *Sculptures of the American Dream* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007) 99.

but as I will highlight in Chapter Three, he went to great lengths to distance the sculpture from his own body in other ways.

Leading proponents of figuration—including Antony Gormley (b. 1950), Katharina Fritsch (b. 1956), Juan Muñoz (1953–2001), Charles Ray (b. 1953), Kiki Smith (b. 1954), and Maurizio Cattelan (b. 1960)—who engage with representations of the body in sculpture at the end of the twentieth and first decade of the twenty-first centuries serve as important counterpoints for this study. Yet, rarely does the work of these other sculptors manifest the same sustained commitment to the type of figural illusionism practiced by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck. The exhibition *Bodily Spaces: New Obsessions in Figurative Sculpture* (The Albright-Knox Gallery, 2002) was one of two exhibitions that exhibited works by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck together. *Bodily Spaces* also included figurative works by the aforementioned sculptors.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the three artists under examination here, the other works exhibited in *Bodily Spaces* demonstrated a play with the figural by performing exaggerated interventions and aesthetic mutations that kept these objects safely within the category of sculpture, and rarely did viewers mistake them for real people.

I argue that a new chapter in the narrative of figural sculpture can be written that embraces illusionism as much as artistic gesture. Hanson, Gober, and Mueck form a significant movement forward in understanding how sculpture, made to look in some

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<sup>31</sup>An abbreviated list of exhibitions of figural sculpture held between 2000 and 2010 include *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*, Hayward Gallery, London, (2000); *BodySpace*, The Baltimore Museum of Art (2001); *The Body Transformed*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2003); *Bodily Space: New Obsessions in Figurative Sculpture*, Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (2004); *The Uncanny*, Tate Liverpool (2004); *Tate Sculpture: The Human Figure in British Art from Moore to Gormley*, Sheffield's Millennium Galleries, London (2005); *Into Me/Out of Me*, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York (2006); *Strange Bodies: Figurative Works from the Hirshhorn Collection*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2008); *Body in Fragments*, The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas (2009); and *Disembodied*, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, Colorado (2010).

ways like a human body or body part, can promote a unique phenomenological encounter that includes the viewer as an active participant in the function and construction of meaning in a work of art.

## ***The Uncanny***

Sculptures by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck have not only been couched within a historical narrative of modern figurative sculpture, they have also been included in an alternate narrative that sought to chart a productive exploration of the overlap between figural sculptures from outside of the art world as much as within it. This was in part accomplished by the artist Mike Kelley (b. 1954), who mounted *The Uncanny* (Tate Liverpool, 2002), an exhibition that investigated the division between conceptual sculpture and artificial bodies from outside the art world by framing figural sculpture under the psychoanalytic concept, the uncanny, which he borrowed from Sigmund Freud. The uncanny refers to an instance in which something seems both familiar and strange simultaneously. The uncanny operates in sculptures that represent, with extreme verisimilitude, the human body because they can be perceived by viewers as an object, a subject, and a human-like presence all at the same time. The palpable perception of the sculptures as more than just an object results in an uncomfortable slippage, which is closely related to Freud's concept of the uncanny.

It is impossible to discuss Freud's uncanny without recourse to Ernst A. Jentsch's 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" and Freud's 1919 response to Jentsch. Both writers take as their starting point E.T.A Hoffmann's eerie tale "The Sandman" in which an automaton is mistaken for a real woman. In his article, Jentsch was not

interested so much in defining the uncanny, but rather in exploring situations in which the uncanny is most likely to occur; including encounters with automatons and waxworks. Jentsch argued that the uncanny is intimately connected to intellectual uncertainty and an innate desire “for the intellectual mastery of our environment,” which he linked to our primordial mode of survival.<sup>32</sup> In response to Jentsch, Freud argued that the uncanny was within the realm of the frightening and referred to encounters that evoked fear and dread, repulsion and distress. Freud pinpointed the realm of the uncanny as existing at the intersection of what he referred to as the *Heimlich* (homely) and the *Unheimlich* (unhomely or uncanny). Specifically he argued that the species of the frightening—in this case the uncanny—goes back to what was once well known and familiar but was long since repressed, a definition Freud himself borrowed from the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling.<sup>33</sup>

Kelley’s exhibition used psychoanalytic theory as a way to interpret and frame figural sculpture. This type of approach moved towards a postmodern way of thinking about Hanson, Gober, and Mueck’s projects, which stood in contrast to the paradigm upheld by *Bodily Spaces* at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery that sought to couch the three sculptors within a historical, rather than theoretical, narrative. Kelly assembled three-dimensional renditions of the human body from both the art world and popular culture; waxworks, anatomical models, mannequins, dolls, and figural sculptures were all shown together (Figures 1.11.A and 1.11.B). As in *Bodily Spaces*, works by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck were juxtaposed with other sculptures that employ varying degrees of realism and

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<sup>32</sup> Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” *Angelaki: A new journal in philosophy, literature, and the social sciences* 2, no. 1 (1906).

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Pelican Freud Library: Art and Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1919).



mimesis, important concepts that will be further explored in a following section. Kelley's exhibition staged an eerie dreamscape that placed the viewer in a close encounter with surrealist *poupées*, figural sculptures, plastic blow-up dolls, prosthetic limbs, and bodily facsimiles used by pathologists. Kelley interpretation of the uncanny, as demonstrated by the objects in his exhibition, complicated viewers' perception of what is and is not real.<sup>34</sup>

There was an overarching creepiness in *The Uncanny* because of its direct engagement with the hauntingly peculiar slippage between perceptions of the artificial and a tangible encounter with the real. While the uncanny is an important concept for ascribing meaning to the works under consideration in this dissertation, it is only part of the theoretical focus. My story does not always end in death. Rather, I present these contemporary sculptures as cradled between the death-like and the life-like, never quite pinning down an exact location. This slippage—death appearing in life, and vice versa—is fundamental to the concept of the uncanny. Each of the case study chapters will explore the different ways in which the uncanny is manifest in the figures, body fragments, and objects that serve as stand-ins for bodies made by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck.

### ***Is It Real?***

Sculptures made by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck provide an extremely convincing and hauntingly uncanny illusion of the life-like and death-like, two categories that are not

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<sup>34</sup> Mike Kelley, *The Uncanny*, ed. (Köln: Walther König, 2004), 37.

mutually exclusive when considering figural sculpture. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the “life-like” as that which resembles in certain ways “a living original or something in real life.” The “death-like,” is definable as that which resembles death in certain ways, most commonly referring to a body that is still or without animation. Sculptures made by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck exist between the two, sometimes slipping closer to one or the other but never firmly aligned with either. Figures and fragments made by these artists resemble a living original (although a specific referent may not always be identifiable) while remaining inanimate. There are other objects that also promote this type of uncanny slippage, including the artificially preserved body of the Russian politician Vladimir Lenin (1830–1924) that has been on public display in Red Square since the late 1920s.<sup>35</sup>

Audiences frequently interpret sculpture by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck as compelling surrogates for real bodies and body parts. Their strong corporeal presence fuses the figural image and sculptural object, thus promoting a quality or state of being that is bodily.<sup>36</sup> This is especially true of Hanson’s extremely realistic sculptures of housewives, tourists, and laborers (cast directly from live models), which are eerie stand-ins for the people they are meant to represent. This also holds true of some of Gober’s leg sculptures, which the artist cast from his own leg and fashioned to look extremely naturalistic by implanting the leg with individual human hairs and outfitting them in dress shoes purchased at a Brooks Brothers store in New York City. On the other hand, several

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<sup>35</sup> On the preservation of Lenin’s cadaver, see Daniel McLaughlin, “Lenin’s body ‘to be preserved for century,’” *Telegraph.co.uk*, on line edition: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/3326757/Lenins-body-to-be-preserved-for-century.html>. (accessed June 24, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> I am borrowing David Getsy’s definition of corporeality. See David Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 1.

of Gober's legs have strange additions, such as attached candles and embedded drains, which quickly dissolve the illusion of life-likeness and thwart any attempts by the viewer to imagine the leg as real. Mueck likewise plays with the viewer's perception of the real by employing dramatic alterations of scale, from gigantic to miniature, which continuously remind viewers that what they see is not a person turned into sculpture but a sculpture that is meant to mimic the form and presence of a real person, while simultaneously questioning the very nature of such an illusion.

Hanson, Gober, and Mueck draw on traditional uses of verisimilitude—the appearance or semblance of likeness—from outside the art world, and they use illusionism as a visual rhetoric meant to redefine sculpture as something other than a completely lifeless object.<sup>37</sup> Their practices are technically demanding activities that are contingent on advanced skill in imitating the form, contours, and volume of the human body in art, as well as the precise duplication of physical details, such as variegated skin tones, blemishes, fingernails, teeth, and hair. Yet as much as these details give the illusion of life where none exists, the sculptures also maintain a palpable death-like quality: the stiff and motionless artifice bares a striking resemblance to a prepared corpse.

I argue that verisimilitude, illusionism, imitation, and duplication should not be misinterpreted as means in and of themselves.<sup>38</sup> My position runs contrary to the conclusions made by those who have repeatedly cast figural sculpture as the antithesis to modern art and the pariah of avant-garde circles because of its presumed falsity and

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<sup>37</sup> The term “illusionism” has also been used by art historians to discuss works of two dimensions that seek to create the illusion of three-dimensional space. A related term is *trompe l'oeil*. See Susan Siegfried, “Boilly and the Frame-up of *Trompe l'oeil*,” *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 2 (1992): 27-37. Also see, Brusati, “Natural Artifice and Material Values in Dutch Still Life.”

<sup>38</sup> Hal Foster underscores that an “anti-illusionist posture was retained by many artists and critics involved in conceptual, institution-critical, body, performance, site-specific, feminist, and appropriation art.” Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 127.

potential to delude viewers. This was, in the past, especially true when the innovative use of mimesis and realism (two key concepts for this study) by Hanson was repeatedly dismissed as a method to make art quickly and easily digestible for art world outsiders, who are presumably only interested in revel in the artist's skill in reproducing reality.<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Hayt, art critic for *The New York Times*, characterized the appeal of illusion in Hanson's work as that which "displayed the kind of awe-inspiring craftsmanship that novice and pleasure seeking gallery goers could immediately appreciate."<sup>40</sup> Hayt's use of the term "novice" and phrase "pleasure seeking gallery goers" underscores the potential for figural sculpture to make visible the tension between art world *insider* and art world *outsider*.

Both mimesis and realism are deeply wedded to representation, albeit not in the same way. Scholars of art history, literature, anthropology, and cultural studies have identified mimesis as a less truthful or false representation of that which it seeks to duplicate.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, realism is considered by scholars to seek a deeper truth (of social conditions, for example) and strives to be conceptually more accurate in its rendering reality.<sup>42</sup> I contend that mimesis and realism should not be taken as polar opposites, but should be considered as endpoints of an imaginary spectrum along which alterations of truthfulness, falsity, artifice, illusionism, and verisimilitude can be

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<sup>39</sup> Each of the case studies will go into further detail on these responses.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Hayt, "In an Era of Humanoid Art, a Forerunner Finds a Place," *The New York Times*, December 13, 1998, 55.

<sup>41</sup> See Michelle Puetz, "Mimesis," in *Theories of Media*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, et al. (The University of Chicago, 2002); Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> See Linda Nochlin, "The Nature of Realism," in *Realism*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971); Lilian R. Furst, *Realism*, ed. Lilian R Furst, Realism (London and New York: Longman, 1992); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Realism Revisted," in *Self and History: A Tribute to Linda Nochlin*, ed. Aruna D'Souza (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001); Pam Morris, *Realism, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2003).

calibrated in order to produce a unique encounter with a construction of reality: a concrete representation of the world outside the gallery or museum, or a more playful representation of an imagined reality. In the following subsections I will define each concept separately, then introduce a third term that allows for greater complexity when understanding the relationship of mimesis and realism.

## **Mimesis**

The most useful definition of mimesis, for the purposes of this study, is the one given by Plato in the third book of the *Republic* where he refers to the concept to denote the duplication, in another medium, of the appearance or likeness of something that could be experienced external to its representation in art.<sup>43</sup> For Plato, the illusion produced by mimetic duplication was characterized as deceptive, defective, and thus inferior to that which it sought to represent. Plato segregated mimesis into a category all its own, which he termed “aesthetics,” and Aristotle later expanded this category by defining mimesis as the “re-creation of an existing object” that *also* denotes an opportunity to “beautify, improve, and universalize individual qualities” of the object represented.<sup>44</sup> Both Plato and Aristotle point to the deceptive role of the artist in using mimesis as a way to recreate the natural world in art. These early definitions of mimesis are important in

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<sup>43</sup> Plato’s definition of mimesis as the imitation of a person or thing in an inanimate media was echoed by the American classicist Gerald F. Else. For a genealogy of the term “mimesis,” see Gebauer and Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*. See Plato and Allan David Bloom, *The Republic. Translated, with Notes and an Interpretive Essay* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

<sup>44</sup> Gunter Gebauer, “Mimesis,” *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, at *Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0355> (accessed June 21, 2010).

understanding how the craft and technique, critical in constructing mimetic works of art, are perceived by viewers in Hanson, Gober, and Mueck's sculptures.

Philosophers in the twentieth century used the concept of mimesis to signify an ongoing attempt to approximate social realities in art. This definition is particularly applicable in dissecting how Hanson and Gober's engagement with political and social realities of their time is reflected in the type of bodies they chose to represent. The German philologist Erich Auerbach's seminal work on western literary history, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953), is most influential in considering mimesis as a mode of representation capable of depicting social histories and intellectual thought at the time of its production. Auerbach's historical and contextual approach to mimesis is useful in identifying how Hanson, Gober, and Mueck's work function as distinct projects that are historically contingent on the decades in which the sculptures were conceived and produced.<sup>45</sup>

In the later half of the twentieth century, mimesis was recast by the post-structuralist and French philosopher, Jacques Derrida who contended that mimesis has an "inbetween" character that is always already a game, a play of absence and presence, tangible and intangible, truths and non-truths. This back-and-forth between categories is a sort of play in which the viewer delights in art as an illusion, or stand-in for something experienced in the world outside of art.<sup>46</sup>

In the early 1980s, with the emergence of postmodernism, the cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard questioned the stability of reality, semiotics, and symbolic representations that circulated within society—an approach which did not bode well for

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<sup>45</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis; the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Dissemination*. (Chicago: University Press, 1981).

the concept of mimesis. For Baudrillard, the simulacrum—an image without the quality or substance of that which it seeks to represent—overtook the original, which foretold a crisis of representation and an impending implosion of meaning.<sup>47</sup> This implosion of meaning, argued Baudrillard, would allow representation to go beyond that which it sought to represent, leaving behind an “unreal” or fabricated artificiality. As will become evident in each case study, artifice, which is pronounced through a slippage between the real and the not so real, plays a very important role in structuring viewers’ encounter with Hanson, Gober, and Mueck’s sculptures.

Shifting focus from a densely philosophical and theoretical perspective of mimesis, I turn to the work of the art historian E. H. Gombrich who, in his canonical work *Art and Illusion* of 1960, took a psychological approach to mimesis contending that illusion and its variants should not be shunned from art history. All representation starts from somewhere, argued Gombrich: “the familiar will always remain the likely starting point for the rendering of the unfamiliar; an existing representation will always exert its spell over the artist even while he strives to record the truth.”<sup>48</sup> For Gombrich it is only through a process of “matching and making,” in which artists are preoccupied with observing visual precedents, digesting them, and applying them to new works that art is able to move forward.

From these perspectives on mimesis this study will build on Auerbach’s historical approach because it anchors the sculptural projects of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck as historically contingent narratives of figural sculpture that seek to adequately represent a

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<sup>47</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). Also see Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense, Logique Du Sens*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989): 253-65.

<sup>48</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion; a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Bollingen Series, 35, 5. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1956 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 98.

specific social context as much as to critique the modus operandi used in constructing mimetic artifice. As for Gombrich's approach, it is important to consider how Hanson, Gober, and Mueck deploy mimesis, a technically demanding activity contingent on advanced skills in imitation which are employed not so much to deceive viewers but to engage them in an encounter in which they are invited to imagine the sculptures as manifestations of a reality of another human being.

Derrida's concept of play helps to understand the tensions inherent in the work of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck, whose sculptures constant destabilization of the viewer's perceptive facilities initiates an obscure game of tug-of-war that disintegrates the margins between the living and the non-living, the real and the artificial, a human subject and inanimate object.<sup>49</sup> Rather than simply duplicating the familiar, it is precisely through the mimetic strategies they use that Hanson, Gober, and Mueck are able to reposition figural sculpture within the visual frame of the viewer.

## **Realism**

It is difficult to tackle a project on realism because the topic is inherently tangled in discourses that stretch beyond the scope of the fifty-year frame in which this project's artists have been most active. Art historians, including Linda Nochlin, Rebecca Zurier, Naomi Schor, and Gregory Battcock, have detailed the nuances of some of these realisms ranging from the nineteenth-century Realist movement (practices by Gustave Courbet, for example), through early twentieth-century social realisms, to more recent permutations and trends such as photorealism, superrealism, sharp focus realism, and new

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<sup>49</sup> Gebauer, "Mimesis." For more on mimesis, see Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, (Chicago: University Press, 1981).



realism.<sup>50</sup> While it is difficult to tease out a unified definition of realism, this project takes on several authors' frames of realism as a critical project. My approach is in line with that of Nochlin who argues that "realism at its best is a critical practice in terms of both formal language and viewpoint."<sup>51</sup> This is echoed by literary scholar Pam Morris, who argues that "realism almost always involves both claims about the nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it."<sup>52</sup> My stance starts from both Nochlin and Morris's definitions of realism and moves towards a more theoretical approach. Taking a theoretical approach may seem disconnected from issues of realism, as it applies to sculpture, because it seems to contradict the very nature of realism as wedded to some kind of concrete reality that is void of the theoretical.<sup>53</sup>

Traditionally, realism, as it applies to figural sculpture, has been defined as a visual rhetoric that claims to reveal certain truths about people, their experiences, and the quotidian circumstances that afflict them. Realism, in this view, is meant to evoke truthfulness and honesty, and as an idea it has been steeped in virtue. Interpreted as a more democratic form of representation, realism has habitually been charged with reforming or informing society on moral and ethical issues that its supposed adversary,

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<sup>50</sup> On the nineteenth-century Realist movement, see Linda Nochlin, *Realism, Style and Civilization* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). On the social realism of the Ashcan School and representation in early twentieth-century New York, see Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision at the Ashcan School* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006). For more on photorealism, superrealism, and sharp focus realism, see Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law, Part I," *Art in America* 61, no. 5 (1973).; Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law II," *Art in America* 61, no. 6 (1973).; Frank Goodyear, *Contemporary American Realism since 1960* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1981).; and Gregory Battcock, ed., *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975).

<sup>51</sup> Linda Nochlin, *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 202.

<sup>52</sup> Morris, *Realism*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Realism in literary theory has a long history. For a concise reading of some of the debates that have surrounded realism in literature – mainly the use of the term to refer to late nineteenth-century fiction, twentieth-century reactions against literature as a truth-telling device, and more contemporary discussions surrounding realism in literature as a democratic tool, see Morris, *Realism*.

abstraction, does not. The nineteenth-century Realist movement is perhaps the most canonical example because of its relentless approach to representation that attempted, in theory, to avoid idealized alterations.<sup>54</sup> Realism as a truthful rendering, meant to reveal a broader social or political truth, has a place in the work of Hanson and Gober, who seek to use realistic modes of representation to refer to social hierarchies and subcultures. However, Mueck moves away from a specific reality; he turns realism into a visual mode of operation meant to give the viewer an impression of reality.

A viewer, under certain circumstances, may have the tendency to mistake a sculpture of a human body for that of a material, flesh-and-bones, body. Of course, I would argue, art viewers rarely experience a dramatic lapse in their ability to distinguish between the “real” and the artificial, by the very nature of being in an art gallery.<sup>55</sup> As soon as the viewer enters the gallery, he or she may be cognizant that the figures are sculptures on display, no matter how life-like they appear. What is most important is that the viewer’s perceptual faculties will be disrupted by the sculpture’s inherent ability to exist between states of body-ness, objectness, and human-like presence. Viewers are so often attracted to works by Hanson and Mueck, more so than those by Gober, because of their willingness to entertain the realism in the sculptures as a construct of illusion and to marvel at the artifice promoted by the craft and technique deployed by the artist. Viewers who revel in the skillful craftsmanship of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck’s work, and the accuracy with which they aim to duplicate their subjects, will ultimately indulge the

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<sup>54</sup> Linda Nochlin’s seminal work *Realism* explores the nuances of the nineteenth-century Realist movement and its direct confrontation with the visible world couched within the aesthetic and socio-political climate of the time. She treats her subject thematically rather than chronologically, with sections on landscape, the life of the worker, and death. See Nochlin, *Realism*.

<sup>55</sup> Throughout this study the term “real” will be used to refer to objects that in one way or another—form, appearance, physical presence—establishes a direct link to that which the object under study seeks to duplicate or represent. For Hanson, Gober, and Mueck this will be either the human body or objects—sinks, urinals, candles, drains—from the everyday.

fantasy of the sculpture as a real human presence, in one or more ways equivalent to themselves.

The work of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck is frequently couched within a postmodern frame as hyperrealism. Discussions of hyperrealism frame mimesis as a mode of representation which fabricates an artifice, and has a limited ability to take the viewer beyond the mere surface of the art object: a presumed shell disguising a hollow center. Postmodern writers such as Umberto Eco, further argue that the emergence of the hyperreal is based on a demand for the real that in turn promotes the fabrication of the absolutely fake.<sup>56</sup> For both Eco and Baudrillard the phenomenon of the hyperreal is intrinsically linked to a desire for something that is more real than the real itself.

In order to reconstruct a convincing impression of reality, realism is inherently a visual system built on the inclusion—not exclusion—of physical details. Adversaries of realism, especially those who vehemently subscribe to non-representational strategies, frequently accuse realist artists of an inability to successfully distill “from the random plenitude of experience the generalized harmony of plastic relations, as though this was a flaw rather than the *whole point of realist strategy*.”<sup>57</sup> The modernist paradigm that dominated a great deal of artistic practice and interpretation of art in the twentieth century championed reductionism and projects designed to expunge all vestiges of illusionism, leaving only the most basic and most literal qualities such as material and form. In each of the following case studies, I will pay careful attention to the ways in which Hanson, Gober, and Mueck make every attempt to include in their work details that would otherwise be read as superfluous accessories in art. These inclusions will vary according

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<sup>56</sup> Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

<sup>57</sup> Nochlin, “The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law, Part I.” 54.

to the sculptors' individual projects but always remain firmly associated with a desire for the illusion of accuracy.

## Mimetic Realism

Hanson, Gober, and Mueck represent the most well-known and important proponents of “mimetic realism” in sculpture, a term that has been used by cultural studies scholars to refer to “a mode of realism that is based on physically lifelike appearances,” as opposed to “psychological realism that may be fantastic in appearance.”<sup>58</sup> I am appropriating the term to name a practice within figuration of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that results in a productive exploration of the territory between mimesis and realism. Mimetic realism is a blend of seemingly factual information rendered with a seemingly accurate degree of imitation. Viewers perceive the sculptures to be just as tangible and corporeal as a real human body or appendage.<sup>59</sup> These sculptures, in the words of English scholar Kenneth Gross, “occupy the space of bodies, compete with bodies for that space, and share the same light and atmosphere.”<sup>60</sup> Anne Wagner develops the intimate relationship between sculpture and body, contending that “as a

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<sup>58</sup> The cultural historian Anne Cranny-Francois uses the term “mimetic realism” to refer to the life-like quality of Ron Mueck’s sculptures. See Nicole Anderson and Katrina Schlunke, *Cultural Theory in Everyday Practice* (South Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press, 2008), 312.

<sup>59</sup> I am adapting this idea from Amelia Jones’ discussion of the relationship between a viewer’s body and a photographic representation of a body (photographic portrait). I would argue that the perception of the tangible corporeality sensed by a viewer when looking at a photograph of another person is superseded by the actual, physical encounter between a three-dimensional rendition of a body or body fragment and the viewer. It makes it more “real” when it is sculpture in the round. See Amelia Jones, “Body,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 263.

<sup>60</sup> Kenneth Gross, *The Death of the Moving Sculpture*, 17. Gross’ interest is in “statues.” His curiosity is directed towards what he calls the “fantasy of animation,” or a viewer’s desire to have the inanimate body come to life. This is often a complex wish, for its outcome can be both positive and negative and may even involve the petrification of an animate body. The fantasy of animation, for Gross, is also a product of our own desires and fears as they are layered on the bodies of others.

medium, sculpture cannot help but be bodily. Its purpose lies in the establishment of substance, it deals directly in forming, it brings distinct objects into being. For millennia its body has echoed human corporeality...<sup>61</sup> This is useful in thinking about the effect of mimetic realism, which creates a new way of experiencing the relationship that Wagner describes. Unexpected installations of the works—located in the museum lobby, beneath the gallery floor, or tucked into corners—enhance this sense of corporeal presence (Figures 1.12) by simulating the effect of coming across someone in the ubiquitous public spaces of the everyday, outside the art museum or gallery.

Mimetic realist representational strategies—illusionism, verisimilitude, imitation, and duplication—have been burdened with a perceived danger in bringing art too close to life. This fear is tied to assumptions that mimetic realism is no more than a mirroring of everyday reality, which is void of the most important qualities of art: its presumed potential to transcend mundane realities in favor of more permanent, metaphysical truths. Mimetic realism, far from being a mere strategy for duplicating the world outside of art *within* art, is capable of sustaining viewers' interest beyond the illusionism created on the surface of the sculpture.<sup>62</sup>

A viewer, under very specific circumstances—low lighting, unexpected staging, and appropriate context—may have a tendency to mistake a figural sculpture for a real human body or body part, as opposed to a representation or replica. Hanson, Gober, and Mueck invite viewers to respond to their mimetic realist sculptures as if they were real,

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<sup>61</sup> Wagner, *Mother Stone*, 245.

<sup>62</sup> In his discussion of Michael Fried's positing of the minimalist encounter as theatrical, Alexander Potts contends that "what matters is whether, after the immediate intersubjective drama subsides, something continues to fascinate us about the work that may even involve an awareness of the incongruity of our initial response, the latter persisting as a residual background effect while we attend to the work more closely." Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, 188-89.

but rarely is their main objective to fool or deceive the viewer. Of course many would argue, myself included, that in most cases the viewer has no such lapse in their cognitive judgment and that viewers who encounter Hanson, Gober, and Mueck's works are for the most part fully aware of the fact that they are sculptures. However, this certainty does not negate or undermine these sculptures' potential to provide very realistic illusions: the crux of mimetic realism. What is more important than viewers actual knowledge of the sculpture as object is their willingness to embrace and take joy in their understanding of it as artifice. Viewers seek out the subtle surface details, looking closely to discover evidence of the artist's skill in mimicking the textures, materials, and particularities of a real human body. The art historian Steve Edwards describes a similar sort of play in his discussion of the relationship of *trompe l'oeil* painting to cubist collage:

The pleasure of *trompe l'oeil* work – whether it is a painting by an artist or a surface effect produced by a painter or decorator – comes from knowing that what we look at is a deception and willingly suspending the knowledge so as to allow ourselves to be taken in by the illusion.<sup>63</sup>

The fragments in cubist collages, according to Edwards, quote *trompe l'oeil* but have a significant deviation from the effect because they thwart the play of deception. What is first called into question is the construction of the picture, the process of cutting and pasting. There is a similar effect in mimetic realist sculpture.

Although the primary focus of this study is on manifestations of mimetic realism within the art world, the work produced by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck is embedded within a history of representation outside of art. The following sections will briefly revisit the history of polychrome religious statues, wax mannequins and anatomical

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<sup>63</sup> Steve Edwards, "Cubist Collage," in *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, ed. Steve Edwards and Paul Wood, *Art of the 20th Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 2004), 214.

models, and more recent plasticized cadavers, which will lay the foundation for understanding representations of bodies within western visual culture.

## ***Embodiment***

A key characteristic of mimetic realism is embodiment, or the ability of a sculpture to convincingly reproduce an illusion of a human body that the viewer is willing to read as synonymous for the flesh and bones of a material body. The most convincing manifestations of embodiment frequently require the use of unorthodox materials and vividness of color. This has a long-standing tradition. For example, embodiment, the corporeal vesture of the immaterial in the material, can be defined in sculpture by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish polychrome religious statues, which were multimedia (wood, stone, bone, glass, ivory, and plaster) constructions that employed complex sculptural techniques to render a disconcertingly life-like or, in some cases, death-like manifestation of a body. A particularly notable example is *Dead Christ* (Figure 1.13; c.1625–30), sculpted by Gregorio Fernández and painted by an unknown polychromer. Christ's dead body is displayed, limply reclining on a lavishly decorated pillow. Intricate modeling creates the illusion of an underlying skeletal framework, muscular furrows, and soft-tissue textures. Naturalistic coloring further enhances the form by visually duplicating tonal contrasts in the skin—green-gray hues of death with pink-peach hues of life—and highlighting the viscerally carnal effects of wounded flesh. Bark from a cork tree, painted a deep crimson color, was packed into the artificial puncture wounds in Christ's shoulder, chest, hands, knees, and feet to simulate

coagulated blood. The sculpture tempts even the most stubborn of doubting Thomases to press their fingers into Christ's wounds in order to inspect the physicality of his body. Through these visual and physical encounters, the worshipper deepens his or her spiritual experience and is moved to believe in the Paschal mystery.

Issues of embodiment run through the work of all three sculptors highlighted in this study. Hanson used embodiment as a way to vivify his middle- and lower-class American types to an audience, he assumed, would be averse to their presence in the art gallery. A direct relationship has been established between religious polychrome statues and sculptures by Gober and Mueck. For example, art historian Erika Doss argues that as troubling as Gober's legs are, "they also resonate with Gober's faith that the body, even ravaged and destroyed, may also be a source of redemption...[the legs] retain a sensibility as holy relics and ex-votos or corporeal conduits of faith."<sup>64</sup> In the case studies that will follow this introductory chapter, I will explore how this relationship between embodiment and sculptural object materializes and dissipates in individual works.

### ***Spectacular Encounters in Wax and Plastic***

Mimetic realism has its roots in the nineteenth century when bodies made of wax experienced an increased popularity. Two types of wax bodies were particularly prevalent: wax museum mannequins and anatomical models. Although the origins of these trends extend back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the growth of industry, modernization, and urbanization fostered an unprecedented appetite for surrogate bodies that lasted well into the early twentieth century. Wax museums,

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<sup>64</sup> Erika Doss, "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation: Issues of Spirituality in Contemporary American Art," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 129-145, 329-324, 138.



anatomy cabinets of curiosity, and natural history dioramas offered visitors an up-close and personal encounter with the human body vis-à-vis its wax double (dissected or whole). In his work on wax museum mannequins, historian Mark Sandberg underscores the fact that “mannequins provide a particularly fleshy sort of simulation,” one that often left viewers hard-pressed to separate the real from the artificial, the living from the dead.<sup>65</sup>

Intended as visual documents of the material—a facsimile of a historical figure or visual proof of outward symptoms of maladies—wax bodies and body parts provide a visceral encounter that was impossible to duplicate through photographs or two-dimensional renderings. Wax objects became a substitute for the real body and a surrogate for the dead body. In the nineteenth century, these wax mannequins were ubiquitously displayed in a number of visual culture venues throughout Europe. Staged in storefront displays, world’s fair exhibitions, and museum tableaux, artificial bodies made of wax continuously confronted urban dwellers with an unprecedented simulacrum of the real.

Joseph Towne’s wax bust (Figure 1.14; c.1827–79) of the upper portion of a man’s chest, tilted to showcase the inner workings of the chest and function of the thorax, is a strong example of the use of mimetic realism by anatomists of the late nineteenth century to demonstrate the mechanics of life: breathing, for example. Extreme verisimilitude is evoked through the representation of stubble on the man’s face and waxen flesh dappled with blood. The overly exaggerated strain of the neck muscles, obtuse opening of the mouth, and eyes rolled back in their sockets visually underscore the stress involved in the futile attempt to suck in air. A viewer is not hard pressed to

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<sup>65</sup> Sandberg, *Living Pictures: Missing Persons*, 18.

imagine what it must feel like for this man to breathe or, vice versa, to suffocate from the inability to breathe: a clear slippage between the life-like and the death-like. The process of dissection, the act of showing holes in the body, and the implied movement of liquid or gas through the body cavity illustrates how anatomical models were seen as a way to understand the mechanics of the human body. On the other hand, the naturalism and grotesque realism deployed to create an accurate one-to-one duplication of the body makes it difficult to focus on mechanics alone. Aesthetics overpowers didacticism, and the plumbing systems of the body take a backseat to the uncanny three-dimensional waxwork. It is significant to note that the wax model was far more advanced than the science it was meant to inform. Visual duplication exceeded medical technology in both precision and familiarity.

Anatomical wax models were made with the intention of by-passing the effects of death. Unlike embalming, which delays the inevitable—decomposition—wax can duplicate the body, acting as a satisfactory surrogate for the biologically alive. Colored waxes in deep ambers, blood reds, and electric blues are employed to recreate bones, soft tissue organs, muscles, veins, and flesh because they are more stable than the real thing; outside of hospital storage environments they are more resilient and longer lasting when not exposed to extreme temperatures. Models, like those found in anatomical collections such as that at *La Specola* in Florence (Figure 1.15), are wax bodies and body parts meant to simulate the spectacle of dissection. These models are unique because they represent dissection, not as a post-mortem event, but as a theatrical performance of a body that appears to the viewer to be neither completely dead nor alive. They create a still-frame taken when the last breath is released and the transformation from living body to corpse

takes place. It is at this transitory moment that the recently deceased is most accessible to probing eyes and hands. These wax bodies and body parts are not intended to highlight the social lives of bodies, as are more contemporary renditions, but to display bodies *as* bodies, organic machines dissected for visual investigation.

Medical cabinets of curiosity of the nineteenth century, apart from being used as teaching devices for medical students and faculty, became popular attractions among the broader public. For example, Hartkopf's Museum, a corpus of anatomical wax models that traveled throughout Germany in the 1890s, was an exposition that offered wax exhibitions of "racial typologies, death masks, fetuses at various stages of development, and body parts shown in both disease and health."<sup>66</sup> The public's macabre curiosity for gross anatomy was satiated by the visual consumption of naturalistic details. The effect of viewing such exhibitions gave spectators the opportunity to "test the idea of a gathered, normative body and by pedagogical contrast to shore up the normalcy of that body."<sup>67</sup> Hartkopf's Museum, as a traveling theatre of the corporeal with spectacular showings of the grotesque, allowed audiences to look at naturally occurring anomalies as a measure against normativity, a desire to pin down the "normal" functioning body.

The desire to encounter bodies extended to exhibitions of corpses and surrogates made of wax in the window of the Paris morgue. The historian Vanessa Schwartz discusses the use of wax bodies at the Paris Morgue in the late nineteenth century. In a theatrical setting—complete with green velvet curtains—visitors could peer through the window of the morgue and see replicas of the recently deceased; those that had fallen

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>67</sup> Sanberg, *Living Pictures*, 23. Hartkopf's Museum is also mentioned by Allan Richard Pred, who investigates the space created by the traveling wax museum as a site where racial stereotypes are put on public display. See Allan Pred, *Past Is Not Dead: Facts, Fictions, and Enduring Racial Stereotypes* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

victim to heinous crimes or bizarre accidents were particularly popular.<sup>68</sup> Spectacular displays of fake bodies were extremely popular among a public eager to consume the corporeal details offered by what was considered an extremely accurate surrogate. Wax bodies also provided a more sterile and longer lasting viewing period, which real cadavers in advanced stages of decay would deny.

The desire to visually consume the details of the dead body did not die with the decline of anatomical cabinets of curiosity and the dwindling use of wax mannequins in the twentieth century. The German artist or scientist (his exact role is debatable) Gunther von Hagens' elaborate collection of plastinated bodies and body parts traveled the globe as an exhibition he titled *Body Worlds* (Figure 1.16; c.2006). Actual dead bodies displayed by von Hagen are prepared using a patented plastination technique, a process of preservation in which cadavers and cadaver parts are injected with plastics. Not quite art due to their textbook aesthetic—each muscle, vein, bone, and tissue rendered with clinical rather than aesthetic precision—but also not quite science due to von Hagens' strange methods of display in which viewers encounter the plastinates riding bicycles, playing chess, or performing dance moves. Von Hagen's plastinated specimens are uncanny not because they are disturbingly life-like but because they *are* the real thing—cadavers—made to look artificial in order to minimize empathy and put forth a false claim to didacticism. A palpable slippage between the life-like and the death-like locates von Hagens' bodies and body fragments in an object-subject purgatory. Despite the fact that the exhibition has been banned in Europe, staggering attendance statistics have been

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<sup>68</sup> Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-De-Siecle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

recorded at each *Body Worlds* exhibition in the rest of the world: testament to the public's insatiable curiosity and attraction to spectacular displays of the human body.

The success of the exhibition and its popularity among audiences has motivated scholars to take a closer look at von Hagens' practice and the objects he makes.<sup>69</sup> Many of the discussions that surround *Body Worlds* acknowledge the exhibition's popularity but fundamentally conclude that where von Hagens acquires his specimens and what he does with cadavers is a questionable practice. The body is a familiar subject, yet its gruesome appearance with stripped skin, artificially colored veins, and flayed mussels have induced distrust in these object's authority as either biological specimens or works of Art.

Current exhibition trends reflect an increasing interest in bodies that are *extraordinarily* vivid and visceral. Although this study does not hypothesize a direct connection or correlation between *Body Worlds* and mimetic realist sculpture, I do see a productive overlap in their modes of spectacular visual rubrics which create environments that challenge viewers' notions of the natural and the fantastical, the real and the artificial, the animate and the inanimate.

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The following case studies will address use of mimetic realism by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck not as a means of duplicating bodies but as a way to stage a particular type of encounter between viewer and their work. Each of the chapters will serve to contextualize the work of these artists as mimetic realist sculptures made of wax and

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<sup>69</sup> For example, the California Science Center, where the *Body Worlds* exhibition made its debut in 2004, reported 665,000 visitors over the show's 205-day run. Cited in T. Christine Jesperse et al., eds., *The Anatomy of Body Worlds: Critical Essays on the Plastinated Cadavers of Gunther Von Hagens* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 1.

plastic that seek to represent the human body with a vivid life-likeness that promotes a destabilization in the vary nature of what is considered sculpture and what is perceived to be a human body. In the first chapter, I argue that Hanson was a “forerunner” in mimetic realism of the late twentieth century.<sup>70</sup> At the time Hanson first began to make his life-size and life-like sculptures of American types, the art world was not interested in representational strategies. Critics and scholars alike were caught off-guard by Hanson’s mimetic realism, his use of untraditional subjects and methods of display, as well as the popular appeal that accompanied retrospectives of his work. When they were first exhibited, Hanson’s works were seen as “garish” and “mindless,” and too much like waxworks, a form of “low-brow” entertainment far removed from “high” art. Categories such as “high” and “low,” “abstraction” and “figuration,” maintained a firm grip on art produced in the late ‘60s and 1970s, when Hanson made some of his most successful figures. It took thirty years for critics and scholars to reconsider Hanson’s sculptures as important examples of contemporary art. Hanson’s mimetic realist figures staged encounters with viewers that brought the world outside of art inside the art gallery. This was an important move that signaled the potential for sculpture to function as both object and something more closely related to a human body.

Gober continues to work with mimetic realist sculpture as a way to stage encounters between viewers and sculpture that in many ways mimic a human-to-human encounter. Gober’s sculptures form both a bridge and a departure in the narrative of mimetic realism that begins with Hanson and ends with Mueck. Unlike Hanson and

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<sup>70</sup> I am borrowing the term “forerunner” from Elizabeth Hyatt, art critic for the *New York Times*, who argues that thirty years after the debut of his life-like sculptures, Hanson deserves a second look. She identifies Hanson’s work as an important precursor to more contemporary hyperrealist practices, such as Gober’s, Mueck’s, and others. See Hyatt, “In an Era of Humanoid Art, a Forerunner Finds a Place.”

Mueck, Gober never reproduced whole human figures. Instead, his sculptures are objects that evoke the presence of a human body without ever giving it physical shape. Towards the end of the 1980s, his objects finally gave way to body parts—most frequently legs. The second chapter focuses on Gober’s sculpture of everyday things—lightbulbs, sinks, and urinals—as well as body fragments that seek to incite in viewers a longing to encounter another human being.

The third and final case study is devoted to the work of Australian-born, London-based, Ron Mueck, who is a former special effects guru and puppeteer turned sculptor. Mueck adjusts scale, leaves parts of sculptures intentionally incomplete, and chooses bizarre subjects. This case study shows that the trend I am identifying is not a uniquely American conception and also illuminates how mimetic realism has become part of a new museum culture that is designed to attract as broad and diverse an audience as possible. This phenomenon provoked two scholars to compare Mueck’s work to *Body Worlds*. “Emergent Bodies: Human, All Too Human, Posthuman,” an article by Ara Osterweil and David Baumfleck, found a direct correlation between *Body Worlds* and figural sculptures by Mueck. Osterweil and Bamfleck argue that both the dissected cadavers in *Body Worlds* and Mueck’s figures are “equivalently shocking corporeal spectacles” based on “the mix of attraction and repulsion that one experiences at the sight of the dead.”<sup>71</sup> Unlike Body Art that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, Mueck’s practice is synonymous with a new brand of Body Art that is depoliticized and meant to induce spectacular curiosity.

Mueck’s sculptures stage encounters that are interpreted by many viewers as a meeting with another human being. This desire to encounter another human being

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<sup>71</sup> Osterweil and Baumfleck, “Emergent Bodies,” 240.

instead of just a sculptural object is thwarted by the sculptor who is much more interested in creating the encounter than in the empathetic response provoked by it. The majority of discussions about Mueck's sculptures have taken place in the pages of newspapers and popular periodicals, by art critics and viewers. Throughout this chapter these discussions will help to frame the way Mueck's work has been received, interpreted, and debated.

To be a viewer of mimetic realism is to encounter the physicality of the body and the physicality of sculpture simultaneously while never fully pinning down either. The work of Hanson, Gober, and Mueck, calls into questions the presumed stability of the real and the artificial. My task is to grasp the sculptor's efforts in staging this slippage and to reveal the ways in which they summon a visceral aliveness from their sculptures that evokes a pleasurable uncertainty.



## CHAPTER 2

### Duane Hanson Catching Viewers Off-Guard

“Encountering a Hanson...is shocking” wrote the art critic Brian O’Doherty when he encountered the work in the late 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Duane Hanson’s mimetic realist sculptures are unsettling for viewers like O’Doherty because they are suspiciously life-like and disconcertingly corporeal. For example, twenty-first century travelers through the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport have been surprised to encounter Hanson’s sculpture *Vendor with Walkman* (Figure 2.1; 1990) installed in the departures lobby of Terminal Three. The “all-too-real-looking” sculpture portraying a man sitting in a metal folding chair surrounded by miscellaneous things—a plastic bag, cleaning supplies, a model airplane, and a brochure with an image of a beach chair on the cover—has been known to arrest even the most hurried of passers-by.<sup>2</sup> Mimetic realist sculptures, such as *Vender with Walkman*, are shockingly ordinary and unpretentious renditions of people

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<sup>1</sup> O’Doherty’s commented on Hanson’s sculptures in his article “Inside the White Cube” (1976). This article was published in two parts in *Artforum*. The articles were later reprinted in a book, see Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica [Calif.]: Lapis Press, 1986), 50.

<sup>2</sup> The sculpture is displayed as a commemorative gesture to Hanson, who was a life-long resident of the state of Florida. The term “all-too-real-looking” was used in the travel website *Egenica* to describe *Vendor with Walkman*. See <http://www.egencia.ca/daily/enc4105/airports/fortlauderdale.asp>, (accessed June 14, 2010)

Hanson claimed to have encountered in a Floridian suburb where he lived for many years. Over a twenty-five-year period Hanson created a motley crew of everyday people, including housewives, tourists, laborers, and shoppers whom he classified as “familiar lower class and middle-class American types.”<sup>3</sup> Hanson’s sculptures are incredibly detailed and so life-like that viewers have been known to interpret them as people plucked directly from the world outside of art. Although the twenty-year-old *Vendor with Walkman* is now quarantined in a small room to protect it from damage, viewers push their noses to the glass windows, intently looking and listening for signs of life: the slow rise and fall of his chest, a blink of an eye, or tap of his foot. What prompts such close observation is the vivid verisimilitude with which Hanson constructed *Vender with Walkman*, which, in the confrontation between the sculpture and the viewer, disrupts expectations of what does and does not belong in an airport.

When Hanson’s figural works first appeared, the anxiety attached to his use of mimetic realism by elite critics was translated into a duping of the viewer, which allowed the sculptures to be too easily dismissed as objects equivalent to waxworks. To encounter one of Hanson’s people in the course of a day—in the aisle of a supermarket, on the street corner waiting for a bus, or loitering on a park bench—would not be out of the ordinary. However, to encounter them installed in the assumed purified space of the modernist art gallery they became awkward intruders.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Hanson’s mix of realism and mimesis, as a representational strategy, and the apparently literal translation of life (with all its unsightly details) into art was also seen as problematic. The sculptures have been

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<sup>3</sup> Duane Hanson, “Statement,” dated November 12, 1973. Duane Hanson Papers, 1969-2000, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, box no. 1, folder “New York Show 1974.”

<sup>4</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the modernist gallery as a “white cube,” see Brian O’Doherty, “Inside the White Cube, Part II: The Eye and the Spectator,” *Artforum* 14, no. 8 (1976): 26-33.

accused of mere trickery, yet at certain points critics found them serious psychological portraits of the down-trodden.<sup>5</sup>

As I discussed in Chapter One of this study, waxworks have been repeatedly criticized precisely because their main intention is to mimic and entertain, sometimes by duping. Many critics were particularly troubled by Hanson's choice of subjects. Because of these characteristics, Hanson's works were interpreted as awkward intruders in the purified space of the modernist art gallery. Viewers are arrested by Hanson's meticulous craftsmanship and the life-likeness of his sculptures. To achieve the appearance of the life-like Hanson sought alternative production methods that proscribed a direct engagement with material. Instead of carving or modeling his figures, Hanson cast them directly from live models, making every attempt to duplicate specific physiognomic details: furrowed brows, crooks in noses, deeply incised laugh lines, and other facial particularities.<sup>6</sup> Hanson experimented with untraditional materials, such as polyester resins and fiberglass, to imitate the fleshy surface of the human body. He finished the surfaces of his sculptures using polychrome techniques that allowed for the reproduction of blemishes, freckles, and wrinkles with detailed accuracy. Hanson insured the authenticity of each of his mimetic realist figures by dressing them in clothing and accessories purchased from inexpensive department stores and second-hand shops.

When critics first encountered Hanson's sculptures, they represented the human body in excess, providing viewers with an extremely life-like looking figure that was

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<sup>5</sup> Erika Doss represents one of the more salient discussions of Hanson's sculptures. Doss's catalogue essay for a 2004 exhibition of his work positions Hanson as an American artist. See Erika Doss, *Duane Hanson: Portraits from the Heartland*, (Fargo, N.D.: Plains Art Museum, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Scholar Richard T. Gray traces physiognomy in Germany from the late-eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. He defines physiognomics as "the hermeneutic (re-)constitution of the internal character, desires, and dispositions of human beings based on the interpretation of the body as a system of meaningful signs" (xvii). See Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

uncharacteristic for the time. The sculptor did this at a time when other artists were aggressively seeking ways to get away from empathy. Inside the art gallery, Hanson transforms ordinary everyday types into extra-ordinary sculptures that frequently catch gallery-goers off-guard when they are discovered to be inanimate works of art instead of real living people. For a split-second further, viewers may even forgo their own sense of reality in order to entertain Hanson's figures as real human beings instead of inanimate sculptural objects.

This chapter will detail Hanson's mimetic realist project from its inception in the late 1960s through its development in the 1970s. I will detail Hanson's methods of production and recount his experiments with unorthodox materials and methods for displaying his figures. Viewers' responses are critical for understanding the ways Hanson's plastic people function as mimetic realism. A careful look at the ways in which viewers have reacted to encountering a Hanson, either in an art gallery or outside of the art gallery, will dissect the palpable perception of the life-like that exists within each of the sculptures.

### ***Hanson's Early Experiments with Figural Sculpture***

Hanson's innovative mimetic realist figures emerged out of his struggle to make sculpture that mimicked the form and contour of the human body. From the onset of his career Hanson had a good understanding of techniques and materials employed in making three-dimensional works of art: direct carving in stone, bronze casting, and modeling in clay. As he pursued his Masters of Fine Arts at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Hanson used

these techniques to develop a figurative style that was influenced by his teacher, the Swedish sculptor Carl Milles (1875–1955), whose sculptures often mimicked the form and contours of the human body.<sup>7</sup> Sculptures produced by Hanson during his time at Cranbrook reflect his commitment to understanding the spatial particularities of the human body and the young sculptor’s attempts to recreate the body as sculpture in the round.

Fresh out of art school, Hanson styled his work after the generation of high modern sculptors working during the first half of the twentieth century. The objects he produced during this time all used the human body as form, particularly feminine silhouettes that either ballooned into voluminous curves or shrunk into thin lines. A photograph taken of Hanson with his work at a show in Worpswede, Germany (Figure 2.2; 1958) documents some of these early sculptures, which brought the sculptor little success despite a handful of solo exhibitions in the United States and Germany.<sup>8</sup> Hanson displayed the table-top-sized objects on pedestals of varying heights. The arrangement is evidence of an eye attentive to visual diversity and a literal attempt to showcase the shape and rhythmic gestures of the figures—some standing vertically and some reclining horizontally. Hanson later felt that these early works lacked cohesiveness and direction:

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<sup>7</sup> Carl Milles was artist in residence at Cranbrook Academy from 1931 to 1952. Milles admired Greco-Roman sculpture and frequently used the body as subject for his art. Hanson’s other instructors at Cranbrook included Alonzo (Lonnie) Hauser (1909–1988), John Rood (1902–1974), and William McVey (1904–1995). For a discussion of how the work of these sculptors directly impacted Hanson’s work, see Doss, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Hanson was granted a Bachelors of Fine Arts from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1946, and continued his studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, completing his Masters of Fine Arts in 1951. He had solo exhibitions in the following locations from 1950 through the late ‘60s: Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan (1951); Wilton Gallery, Connecticut (1952); Galerie Netzel, Worpswede, Germany (1952); and Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg, Germany (1967).

“I hadn’t resolved what I wanted to do with sculpture...,” he told Liza Kirwin, of the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art, in 1989.<sup>9</sup>

The downfall of Hanson’s figurative work was its lack of a completely non-representational language.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the shape, volume, and contours of the human body, as represented by the sculptures, look as if they had been filtered through a pre-determined dictum of abstraction prescribed by more canonical artists such as Henry Moore and Alberto Giacometti. However, unlike the sculptures made by Moore and Giacometti, Hanson’s smaller-than-life objects exhibited at Worpswede did not promote a particularly noteworthy encounter between the sculptures and their viewer. They neither had the monumental scale or virtuoso aesthetic of Moore’s reclining figures (such as that in Figure 1.4), nor the materiality and dramatic dynamism of Giacometti’s striding figures.

Hanson’s sculptures were clearly not monuments anchored to specific locations, and yet any portability or potential dynamism is thwarted by the sculptor’s use of traditional pedestals that did little to integrate the space of art with the space occupied by the body of the viewer. When compared to Giacometti’s striding figures (Figure 1.6), which seem to easily abandon their non-obtrusive bases in order to simultaneously advance and retreat within the viewer’s frame of vision, Hanson’s works appear static.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Duane Hanson, “Interview with Duane Hanson,” interview by Liza Kirwin, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Davey, Florida, August 23, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Hanson was likewise unsuccessful when he dabbled in abstract painting. Hanson: “I tried the painting, just smearing and dribbling and so on, but couldn’t latch onto that.” Duane Hanson interview, August 23, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> The relationship between sculpture and pedestal was underscored by Rosalind Krauss as a key feature of modern sculpture. In her seminal work, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Krauss argued that work made prior to the emergence of modernist sculpture adhered to a sculptural logic of monumentality. Modernist sculpture signaled a “nomadic” practice that allowed sculpture to “reach downward to absorb the pedestal into itself and away from actual place.” Additionally, Krauss contended that “through the representation of

In contrast to Hanson's objects, the more successful modernist sculptures of the 1950s and '60s maintained a firm commitment to abstraction and used a reductivist language that at times may have suggested the form of the human body but *never* gave it concrete shape. David Smith (1906–1965) (Figure 2.3; 1955–1957), for example, made assemblages of geometric pieces of steel and iron that do momentarily give way to a “caricature” of a human body, yet this chimera quickly dissipates and the sculpture always reasserts its non-representational character.<sup>12</sup> The tension between abstraction and figuration, evident in Smith's sculptures, produced a visual encounter that stands as an important point of reference when considering how and why Hanson traversed a figurative practice, dependent on abstraction, to a strictly figural one that undoubtedly aimed to accurately mimic the form, shape, and volume of the human body in sculpture.

Hanson expressed a dislike for sculpture of the 1950s. He said, “I think some of the worst sculpture ever produced was, in my opinion, done in the '50s...It's supposed to be based on form but there's usually not much form. It's modern but it isn't modern.”<sup>13</sup> Hanson did not specify the particular sculpture or sculptor that he had in mind when he made this remark. I assume that he is referring to sculptors whose work aligned with the abstract expressionist movement and which never mimetically duplicated the *human form* in three-dimensions. Such sculptors may have included Richard Stankiewicz, Seymour Lipton, and Reg Butler. Hanson's comments were made in 1989, and may have also reflected the sculptor's critique of the later generation of post World War II sculptors,

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its own materials or the process of construction, the sculpture depicts its own autonomy” (44). Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (1979): 30-44.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the ways in which sculptures by David Smith give way to a “caricature” of the human body see Alexander Potts, “Personages Imperfect and Persistent,” in *David Smith Personages* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2006): 7-19.

<sup>13</sup> Duane Hanson interview, August 23, 1989.

such as David Smith and Louise Bourgeois. Despite modernist sculpture's lack of resemblance to the body, assemblages of wooden blocks, scraps of steel, and chunks of stone were given titles that suggested a direct connection between the object and a human body: Smith's *Iron Woman* (Figure 2.3) is one example, the work of Louise Bourgeois—*Sleeping Figure* (Figure 2.4; 1950) or *Figure* (Figure 2.5; 1954)—another. Hanson's dislike of modernist sculpture, and his inability to produce successful work at this time, motivated a dramatic break from established sculptural traditions practiced at mid-century and a move towards mimetic realism. There were two additional contributing factors in this move. The first was Hanson's discovery of polyester resin prior to his departure from Germany (where he had been teaching art from 1953–1959) and return to the United States.<sup>14</sup> The second was Hanson's assimilation of significant shifts in artistic production and practice that had been motivated by many American artists, including revisions to the way viewers encountered sculpture and the emergence of a new realist paradigm, referred to as Pop art.

### ***Polyester Resin***

Hanson's work with plastics laid the foundation for Gober and Mueck's later selection of materials. Hanson was introduced to plastics towards the end of his stay in Germany by a German artist who was working in Bremerhaven modeling objects in clay and then covering them in polyester resins. Polyester resin was a completely new media for Hanson, and when he returned to the United States, he applied for and won a grant to

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<sup>14</sup> Hanson taught art in the United States Army Dependent School System: four years in Munich and three years in Bremerhaven, Germany.



experiment with this “space-age” material.<sup>15</sup> The use of plastics in artistic production was not altogether a brand-new phenomenon. Russian sculptor Naum Gabo (1890–1977) had experimented with Perspex (thin sheets of plastic) earlier in the century, motivated by a desire to exploit plastic’s translucent and transparent qualities.<sup>16</sup> Most pertinent to Hanson’s time was the use of fiberglass, latex, and other plastics by the German-American artist Eva Hesse (1936–1970), who employed the materials by pouring, sloshing, and slathering them into shape. The supple tubes, domes, and sheets (Figure 2.6; 1968) that she created were innovative in their visual malleability, subtle plays of transparency and opaqueness, and overall organic qualities.

Plastic as a material for sculpture can create a convincingly life-like copy of the human body which is more believable in its naturalism than is stone, wood, or bronze; its viscous liquidity recreates with precision the flabbiness, folds, and curves typical of many of the bodies that materialize in Hanson’s work. Hanson corresponded with makers of prosthetic arms and legs when choosing the types of plastics he used.<sup>17</sup> This correspondence is noteworthy because it establishes an affiliation between early mimetic realism and artificial body-parts that are designed, in some instances, to have a corporeality that simulates the look and feel of a real human limb.

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<sup>15</sup> Hanson was given two thousand dollars by the Harvard University Trust to carry out trials for alternative uses of polyester resin. See “Artist Here Receives \$2,000 Grant for Experimental Use of Materials,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Tuesday, December 17, 1963. It is important to note that Hanson maintained a long fascination with plastics. There is substantial evidence that he conducted extensive research on silicones, resins, artificial waxes, and fiberglass. The Duane Hanson files at the Archives of American art contain numerous brochures, correspondence, and essays on the topic of “new materials.”

<sup>16</sup> Naum Gabo bent thin sheets of plastic into dramatic arcs and curves. He also attempted to use it as a substitute for fabric to make costumes for performances. For more on Gabo’s use of early plastics, see Martin Hammer, et al., *Constructing Modernity: The Art & Career of Naum Gabo* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 158.

<sup>17</sup> Correspondence between Hanson and Joseph Paderewski, a medical sculptor, dated June 28, 1977. See Duane Hanson Papers, box no. 1, folder “Colleges and Universities 1977.”

Hanson's mimetic realist sculptures provide a similar corporeality. Polyester resins, especially those Hanson experimented with in the early 1970s, were not translucent and often produced a visibly rigid surface. More importantly, the early resins could not accommodate the delicate process of inserting individual hairs on areas of the body such as the head, arms, and legs. Soft and malleable, the scalp and forearms of wax effigies could accept strand-by-strand hair implantation important for life-like accuracy.<sup>18</sup> After many years of using store-bought wigs, which can contribute an undesired artificiality to the work, Hanson began using newer plastics—specifically polyvinyl acetate—that could be penetrated by a needle. Small tufts of real or synthetic hair were inserted into the needle-pricked holes.<sup>19</sup> This technique, Hanson felt, added to the figures' overall credibility.

But the flesh-like quality produced by plastics can ultimately contribute to an eerie manifestation of the death-like. Aftershocks of encountering mimetic realist figures may in some cases produce uncanny reverberations that may evoke fear, dread, repulsion, and distress in viewers who sense an inherent slippage between the life-like and the death-like.<sup>20</sup> While Hanson uses this slippage as a way to shock his viewer into recognition of social realities, Gober and Mueck will intentionally engage the slippage as a way to heighten viewers' awareness of their sculptures as corporeal embodiments.

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<sup>18</sup> Michelle E. Bloom, *Waxworks: A Cultural Obsession* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>19</sup> Duane Hanson. "Statement on my work," undated. Duane Hanson Papers, box #1, folder "Files 1973–1978."

<sup>20</sup> In characterizing an inherent slippage between the life-like and the death-like in Hanson's sculptures, I am calling upon Freud's concept of the uncanny as defined in his essay, "The Uncanny." See Sigmund Freud, et al., *The Uncanny: Essays*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

## ***WHAAM! Pop as motivating influence for Hanson***

The emergence of Pop art signaled an important shift in the art world, from an emphasis on pure abstraction to a deliberate engagement with new forms of realism.<sup>21</sup> This was a significant moment for both Hanson and the development of mimetic realism. Pop's new forms of realism directly appropriated images, visual rhetorics, and mass media techniques from popular culture. In its appropriation of these images and techniques, Pop art put pressure on the stability of *avant-garde* and *kitsch*, two categories that had allowed influential critics and scholars of modernism—mainly Clement Greenberg (1909–1994)—to push aside works of art that had proclivity for a representational visual language.<sup>22</sup>

Greenbergian formalism, as prescribed by the 1939 article and the following year in *Toward a Newer Laocoön* (1940), championed the preservation of an aesthetic experience with works of abstract or high art over what Greenberg characterized as the vicarious experience of low art promoted by the consumer culture of capitalism. Pop art broke down the binary of *high* versus *low* that had frequently segregated the figural from the abstract during modernism. Hanson's mimetic realism, in its appropriation of subject and object from the everyday, reflects a direct engagement with kitsch. Art historian Sara Doris contends that it was Pop's use of ironic nostalgia, coupled with an admitted rejection of notions of originality, that really pushed the movement into postmodernist

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<sup>21</sup> For further discussion on how Pop art came to be seen as a reaction to abstraction, specifically abstract expressionism, see John Sandberg, "Some Traditional Aspects of Pop Art," *Art Journal* 26, no. 3 (1967): 228-245; Christin J. Mamiya, *Pop Art and Consumer Culture: American Super Market* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1992); Cecile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958–1964* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984); and Steven Henry Madoff, ed., *Pop Art: A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," (1939) in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, *Affirmations and refusals, 1950-1956*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

territory, where art was free to assume a variety of guises, abstract, figurative, or other.<sup>23</sup> This opening up of aesthetic possibilities supported the development of mimetic realism which is contingent on a free range of motion: appropriation, figuration, mixed media composition, performance, and so on.

Leo Castelli and Sidney Janis, two highly influential gallery owners of the time, quickly lent their support to the movement and in 1962 oversaw *The New Realists*. Both the title of the show and the range of artists included in it indicated that Janis had the work of the European *Nouveau Realists* in mind, but he also extended their example to include works by now canonical American Pop artists such as Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) and Tom Wesselmann (1931–2004). *The New Realists*, held at Janis' gallery in New York City, formally announced the arrival of a new representational strategy in art: art that had a direct visual connection to the everyday. When he returned from Germany in the early 1960s, Hanson recognized the purchase Pop had and began to recast his artistic practice according to the new paradigm it prescribed.

In his 1989 interview with Liza Kirwin Hanson discussed the influence Pop art had on his work,

Well, I think it [Pop art] made me more aware of my immediate environment, of what was close to me. I decided this art on a pedestal is crazy, you know. I don't want to do that. I want to do something that I have strong feelings about, about the society, about war, about the environment, about all these things...But Pop art opened my eyes to just the American environment and everything around me, and the people. What's more interesting than the people?<sup>24</sup>

Hanson appropriated the subjects for his sculpture directly from the world around him.

He began to experiment with a mimetic visual language that produced a realistic

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<sup>23</sup> Sara Doris, *Pop Art and the Contest over American Culture* (Cambridge: University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Duane Hanson interviewed, August 23, 1989.

rendering of social and political situations he felt were particularly pressing: homelessness, racial tensions, and the violence of the war in Vietnam. Hanson's engagement with these subjects is a precedent for the work of Gober, who sought to use mimetic realism to a similar end.

### **The Bowery in One Inclusive Descriptive System**

Hanson's early mimetic realist figures referred directly to social problems of the late 1960s. The sculptor rendered politically and socially charged subjects, such as vagrancy, in three dimensions with an unabashed physicality that presumed to provide an accurate and concrete representation for art world audiences.<sup>25</sup> *Bowery Derelicts* (Figure 2.7; 1969) simulates a situation one would glimpse while walking down an urban street and momentarily turning to peer down an alleyway or into a secluded area behind a building. The life-size composition consists of three figures, derelicts that appear drunk to the point of unconsciousness, which illustrate Hanson's early techniques for constructing figural sculpture: rough surfaces with monochromatic finish. At this stage Hanson had not refined the techniques necessary for working the surfaces of his fiberglass figures. He later described these early sculptures as "crude" and recalled working hard on their surfaces, using large rasps to rough out the form of the body, then dressing the bodies in starch-saturated clothing which made the fabric cling and look wet.<sup>26</sup> The three figures used for *Bowery Derelicts* looked like mannequins more than they did mimetic realist

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<sup>25</sup> For a definition of realism, I draw upon Linda Nochlin, who in 1973, when Hanson was at the apex of his figural production, defined realism as "a system of values involving close investigation of particulars, a taste for ordinary experience in a specific time, place and social context and an art language that vividly transmits a sense of concreteness." See Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law, Part I," *Art in America* 61, no. 5 (1973), 54.

<sup>26</sup> Duane Hanson interview, August 23, 1989.

sculpture: they lacked corporeal particularities such as skin tone and hair, and although they provided a human-like presence, they were not altogether life-like. To give the sense of added realism, Hanson incorporated everyday items such as clothing, scraps of newspaper, empty bottles, and other debris, which compensated for the figures' lack of verisimilitude by recreating the specifics of a real-life situation.

Pop artists of the time were engaging in artistic practices that were designed to evoke the everyday. George Segal (b. 1934) and Edward Kienholz (1927–1994) are two Pop artists that were particularly influential for Hanson's mimetic realist project. Segal and Kienholz both made large-scale, free-standing, sculptural tableaux of scenes from the world outside of art. Their works employed varying degrees of realism and were frequently composed of materials the artists scavenged and salvaged from the city: sign boards, old trashcans, furniture, housewares, windows, bathroom and kitchen fixtures, suitcases, and other remnants of modern living.

Segal and Kienholz often attempted to simulate the actual presence of a human body in their work. They used life-casting techniques to model body-like sculptures that they then staged within their elaborate tableaux. Yet Segal and Kienholz never sought to capture an accurate likeness of their models, as did Hanson, and their figurative sculptures were always divorced from reality through drastic aesthetic alterations. For example, Segal used plaster-soaked bandages to model his sculptures of people (both nude and clothed), rather than applying the viscous media directly to the skin of his model.<sup>27</sup> This technique produced rough silhouettes that were void of complex textures

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<sup>27</sup> For more on George Segal's use of plaster and the life-casting method, see Brenda Schmammann, "Casting a Glance, Diverting the Gaze: George Segal's Representation of the Female Body," *American Art* 12, no. 3 (1998): 11-29. For general reading of the sculptures of George Segal, see Phyllis Tuchman, *George Segal, Modern Masters Series* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983).

and surface details. Segal's sculptural silhouettes are not mimetic realism. The white plaster casts represent individuals as empty, ghost-like shells that edit out superfluous, corporeal particularities, while such particularities form the crux of mimetic realist works.

Segal staged environments, comprised of the white plaster silhouettes and remnants he collected from the city, that function like theatrical performances. Without an overabundance of details characteristic of Hanson's work, the white plaster figures serve as stand-ins for real bodies set against makeshift backdrops that provide viewers with the impression of a scenario or scene from the world outside of art. Segal's decisively edited compositions serve as visual and physical barricades between the space of the viewer and the imaginary space of the sculpture.

When Hanson's *Bowery Derelicts* is compared to Segal's *Bowery* (Figure 2.8; 1970), the effects of mimetic realism as opposed to a theatrical tableau are made clear. *Bowery Derelicts* sought to lessen the gap between viewer and work of art. Ill-defined boundaries visually and physically signaled the narrowing of this gap: the scattered debris and human-like figures invaded the space of the viewer, blurring the boundary between sculptures in the round and lived experience. Viewers of Hanson's composition were confronted with the unsightly scene and could not help but contemplate the impact of the reality represented. On the other hand, Segal's *Bowery* allowed viewers to remain at a safe distance from the scene. Even though one of Segal's figures was positioned horizontally on the ground, posing a literal stumbling block for the viewer, the sculpture's presence remained unthreatening because of its irrefutable objectness. Viewers instantly recognized the white plaster figures as aestheticized works of sculpture

set against backdrops of decisively chosen remnants. Instead of staging an external encounter between the viewer and the work, like mimetic realism, Segal staged an internal encounter: the man standing in the doorway encounters the man lying on the ground. Viewers did not perform a double-take in front of Segal's theatrical tableau, a distinctly different experience than the shock of encounter produced by Hanson's *Bowery Derelicts*.<sup>28</sup>

Even though it was made nearly a decade after Hanson's *Bowery Derelicts* and Segal's *Bowery*, *Sollie 17* by Edward Kienholz (Figure 2.9.A and 2.9.B; 1979–1980) aids in further understanding how Hanson's mimetic realist compositions functioned as opposed to the Pop art tableaux produced by Segal and Kienholz. I have argued that Hanson's work created an inclusive encounter between sculptural object and viewer, and that Segal's work created an exclusive encounter that positioned the viewer at a safe distance from the action taking place in the theatrical tableau. The work of Kienholz sits someplace in between Hanson's and Segal's. Like Hanson, Kienholz strove to appear as though he did not edit his inclusions of objects from the everyday. His installations were assemblages that frequently include dramatically deformed bodies, sometimes cast from life and at other times assembled from leftover detritus such as television screens, empty glass bottles, stuffed old clothing, hats, wigs, and rags, which filled in the gaps left by Segal's decisive editing by allowing the viewer to peruse multiple layers of signification. On the other hand, Kienholz, like Segal, physically separated the sculptural space from the physical space of the viewer. In *Sollie 17*, this separation materialized in an

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<sup>28</sup> The ideas in this paragraph were motivated by Brechtian theory and its ideas concerning the mixing of high art and popular culture. Bertolt Brecht and John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang Methuen, 1964). See especially "The Popular and the Realistic," 107–224.



unexpected way when the viewer was invited to peer through the space of a semi-opened doorway to see a grouping of three male figures—mimetically cast from life, except for their heads, which are plates of glass with the photographic detail of an individual head—inside a claustrophobic room furnished and filled with artifacts of a man’s life. We, as viewers, are not included in the scene, but rather become uncomfortably aware of our role as voyeur, peeping through the crack between the door and the doorframe. This is a momentary feeling, and we quickly relax in the knowledge that the threshold of the door protects us from the possibility of being discovered as an intruder.<sup>29</sup> In mimetic realism, the viewer is always an intruder on the scene and is frequently invited to take from the act of viewing detailed information of the reality represented, without navigating or interpreting the artist’s aesthetic alterations.

Hanson commented about the work of Segal and Kienholz,

To me they looked arty, although I like all the Pop artists. I think they’re very good artists, all of them. I just think they’re a little—for my tastes, for what I want to do, anyway—a bit arty.<sup>30</sup>

Hanson’s view of Pop art highlights his inclination towards mimetic realism and his rejection of a style that still held something at arm’s length—be it the viewer or the work’s relationship to the everyday. Although Pop used recognizable imagery from popular culture it conformed to established rubrics of modern art that defined works of art as distinctly separate from everyday life. Pop art did this through a process of visible, aesthetic alterations—editing, cropping, and manipulating—and by employing established art world framing devices that promoted a clear partition between the art object and viewers. Hanson’s mimetic realist sculptures sought to traverse the divide in

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<sup>29</sup> For more on Edward Kienholz’ artistic practice see Robert L. Pincus, *On a Scale That Competes with the World: The Art of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Duane Hanson interview, August 23, 1989.

order to promote an initial shock of encounter, a double-take, and finally a more forceful and lasting impression on audiences.

### ***Too close for comfort***

Initially the subject matter for Hanson's mimetic realist sculptures was taken directly from televised news and focused on issues of violence, crime, and death.<sup>31</sup> The 1960s were the first decade in which a percentage of Americans were able to sit on their sofas attentively watching images of domestic and global events on television: growing racial tensions; the ongoing war in Vietnam; and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy. While the addition of the moving picture contributed a more realistic rendering of these events, the televised images of volatile situations were flat and subliminally distant because they were viewed through the television set. Technology made it possible for viewers to control their exposure to these images by tuning out. By translating these events into three-dimensional sculptures, audiences that encountered Hanson's work were placed in uncomfortably close proximity to the situations they were otherwise accustomed to turning off and on at home with the flick of a switch.<sup>32</sup> Mimetic realism, unlike televised images, offered audiences a three-dimensional and close physical encounter with events. If the shock of encountering a Hanson sculpture was so overwhelming for viewers, they

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<sup>31</sup> It was the artist's contention that the calamities of his time were being "treated rather casually" and at times "romanticized" by the mass media's two-dimensional images, which motivated him to transpose these subjects into sculptures in the round. See Duane Hanson, "My Purpose," undated. Duane Hanson Papers, box no. 1, folder "Duane Hanson Papers 1968, 1969, 1975..."

<sup>32</sup> For a more robust discussion of the effects of television on the awareness and social involvement of individuals, see Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* (New York: New Press, 1998).

had no recourse but to physically leave the gallery in order to escape its effect. *Race Riot* (Figure 2.10; 1969), a life-size and life-like sculptural composition of a race riot, is a poignant example of the way Hanson's mimetic realist sculpture confronted audiences with so real-enough an illusion of the violence they saw on television, that at least one viewer took it very seriously. In the front yard of Hanson's studio, which was located next door to his residence in Davey, Florida, Hanson had staged *Race Riot*, a grouping of seven mimetic realist figures (four black men and three white men) aggressively engaged in a physical confrontation. The popular periodical *Newsweek* reported that the "uncompromising and magnified realism" of the sculptural composition was so convincing (and I would add shocking) when staged outdoors, that it startled one of Hanson's neighbors. The neighbor-turned-viewer, ignoring the figures' immobility, phoned the police.<sup>33</sup>

The viewer's response to *Race Riot* was a result of Hanson's choice to stage the work outside, rather than the safer institutional confines of the art gallery or museum. This staging increased the possibility that a neighbor would stumble upon the sculptures, creating an unexpected and spontaneous encounter, which rendered the mimetic realist figures all the more realistic. At the same time, the scenario was one any viewer watching television or reading the newspaper would have been familiar with. The 1960s was a decade that experienced a rash of race riots across the United States, particularly in large cities such as Detroit, Los Angeles, and Chicago. National politics was forced to turn an eye to the unrest that was boiling over. The riots had motivated President Johnson to establish the Kernner Commission, whose findings were released in 1968, the

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<sup>33</sup> David L. Shirey, "Horror Show," *Newsweek*, (November 3, 1969). *Newsweek* was the first, but certainly not the last, to publish accounts of viewers mistaking Hanson's sculptures for real people.

year prior to Hanson's outdoor staging of *Race Riot*. With the media saturated with images of race riots, unrest could have seemed to be around any corner. Even a static, three-dimensional representation of a situation was enough to precipitate a call to the police.

Hanson was certainly not the first to co-opt images of race riots from the popular press. The most famous example of such came from the Pop art icon Andy Warhol (1928–1987). Using a sequence of three images, previously published in *Life* magazine, Warhol's *Red Race Riot* (Figure 2.11; 1963) reconstructs a violent narrative of race in '60s America, as much as it renders that violence unshocking. Repetition of the image and aesthetic alterations, such as the monochrome re-printing in red, plus visible smears and streaks, interrupt the original image and render paralyzed its ability to accurately communicate a shocking reality.<sup>34</sup> As opposed to this two-dimensional aestheticized image, Hanson's *Race Riot* made the artificial seem momentarily indistinguishable from the real, certainly at least to his neighbor, by employing not only the three-dimensionality of sculpture but also extreme verisimilitude. The impact of the mimetic realist sculpture is predicated on the degree to which it is able to interrupt and impeded the viewer's perceptual faculties, including their spatial perception, to the extreme of making the viewer feel compelled to physically respond. Warhol's *Red Race Riot*, although graphically compelling in its rendering, has never incited the same physical response from viewers as Hanson's work.

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<sup>34</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Andy Warhol's *Red Race Riot* (1963), see Anne M. Wagner, "Warhol Paints History, or Race in America," *Representations*, no. 55 (1996): 98-119. For more on Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series, see Paul Alexander, *The Rise of the Warhol Empire and the Race for Andy's Millions* (New York: Villard Books, 1994). Michael G. Kammen discusses the impact of the 1960s on the display and reception of art in Chapter Six of his book, *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture*, (New York: Knopf, 2006): 181–212.

When *Race Riot* was displayed inside the art gallery, it trespassed on the inherent stability of the modernist white cube and the expectations of viewers that went there to experience works of art—presumably in an environment uninhibited by the world outside of its institutional frame. The modernist white cube was a “chamber of esthetics,” wrote the critics and artist Brian O’Doherty, made-up of “the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, [and] the mystique of the experimental laboratory.”<sup>35</sup> In this space, purity of aesthetics, materiality, and abstract concepts were sanctioned over mimetic realism.

In defiance of the mandates of the space of the white cube, Hanson staged mimetic realist compositions, such as *Race Riot* and *Bowery Derelicts*, to shock art world insiders into recognition of the circumstances that were so frequently excluded from modern art. “By plopping populism in the lap of the gallery-going elite of the seventies,” argued the art critic Dan Talley, “Hanson and his work obfuscated the issue of the art world atmosphere.”<sup>36</sup> Hanson’s dramatic depictions of race and vagrancy brought the outside world inside the white cube. *Race Riot* and *Bowery Derelicts* sullied the otherwise sterile space with uncomfortably realistic depictions of social and political tensions of the day, thus deliberately challenging the assumed sanctity, formality, and mystique of the atmosphere in which modern art was typically displayed. On top of the shocking subject matter, additional controversy entered via the debate over whether what Hanson made was actually art, in much the same way they had questioned Duchamp’s readymades. Was Hanson’s work simply a display of the kind found in a diorama or waxwork museum masquerading as art?

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<sup>35</sup> O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1986; Berkeley, Calif.), 14.

<sup>36</sup> Dan R. Talley, “Duane Hanson: In the Flesh,” *Art Papers* 15, no. 2 (1981): 1-3.

Mimetic realism challenged established rubrics of aesthetics and the institutional frame that structured the space in which art was exhibited. As outlined in the previous sections, this critique was initially cast by Hanson as a direct engagement with political and social tensions of the 1960s and was designed to stage encounters between sculptures and viewers that attempted, in the tradition of social realism, to function as a call to social consciousness. “[B]y confronting the viewer with a victim of a crime or an act of violence,” Hanson wrote, “I am seeking to portray this reality of life while rejecting the theory that such tragedies are inevitable.”<sup>37</sup> Although Hanson’s approach diverged from most other sculptors working at the time, he was not alone in his desire to depict violent subjects in art as a way to bring pressing issues to the attention of the art world.

### **Critical Responses Amidst a Climate of Institutional Changes**

Early responses to Hanson’s mimetic realism were not favorable. Newspaper reporters wrote negative reviews, refusing to call what Hanson was exhibiting art. The art critic for *The Miami Herald*, Doris Reno, in a review of *Abortion* (Figure 2.12; 1966), a smaller than life-size sculpture of a pregnant female silhouette covered by a sheet, argued:

This we do not consider a work of art, since we inevitably consider all such objects and such treatment as outside the categories of art. We find the subject objectionable, and continue to wish that such works which merely attempt to express experience in the raw could be referred to by some other name. This, of course, is the newest thing in “Sculpture,” but that doesn’t invalidate our contention that it is non-art.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Duane Hanson, “My Purpose,” undated. Duane Hanson Papers, box 1, folder “Duane Hanson Papers 1968, 1969, 1975...”

<sup>38</sup> Doris Reno, “Taste Marks Sculptors of Florida Annual,” *Miami Herald*, October 30, 1966. Duane Hanson Papers, box 1, folder “Duane Hanson Papers 1968, 1969, 1975...”

Reno's objection to Hanson's work was echoed by many of her colleagues, who accused the sculptor of making work based on "shock value" with little regard for "artistic merit."<sup>39</sup> Reno's response to Hanson's depiction of what would shortly become an extremely hot-topic issue—the landmark decision on abortion by the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* (1973)—is not surprising for its time. That same year, Kienholz's showing of *Back Seat Dodge* (Figure 2.13; 1964), along with other tableaux depicting racial tensions, sexual violence, abortion, and capital punishment, at the Los Angeles County Museum had similarly ignited heated controversy.<sup>40</sup> Works by Kienholz and Hanson were shown side-by-side in the exhibition *Human Concern/Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art* (1969), two years later.

The visceral depiction of current events in a figurative visual language was the primary focus of *Human Concern/Personal Torment* curated by Robert Doty at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In this exhibition *Race Riot* was shown alongside other works of art that, Doty argued, were evidence of artists of the time responding to "the constant state of war, a rising crime rate and the continual desire for violence in entertainment."<sup>41</sup> Although negative reviews described the show as a "rather

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<sup>39</sup> Will Willis, "Corpse Livens Art Festival," *Miami Herald*, Monday, April 10, 1967. Duane Hanson Papers, box 1, folder "Duane Hanson Papers 1968, 1969, 1975..."

<sup>40</sup> Kammen, *Visual Shock*, 189–92.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Doty, *Human Concern/Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art*, ed. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969) exh. cat. "The Grotesque" was defined by the Whitney as "a form of art, with certain common characteristics. First the rejection of reason, its benefits, protection and institutions. Second, immersion in the subconscious and its offspring, such as fear, passion and perversity, which often elicits a strong interest in sex and violence and not infrequently a commingling of the two. Third, a clash of elements, an obsession with opposites which force the co-existence of the beautiful with the repulsive, the sublime with the gross, humor with horror, the organic with the mechanical. Fourth, emphasis on ridicule, surprise and virulence, through caricature, the deformation and distortion of salient characteristics. The grotesque threatens the foundation of existence through the subversion of order and the treacherous reversal of familiar and hostile. Its value and vitality stem from the aberrations of human relationships and acts and therefore form man and his foibles, weakness and irresistible attractions. It is a direct and forceful means of exposing man to man, and man to himself." (Doty, 5-6).

depressing”<sup>42</sup> and “disturbing chamber of horrors,”<sup>43</sup> the exhibition was hailed for its realism, which was deemed a necessary tool for protest. The exhibition was important for the development of mimetic realism because it reflected a renewed commitment to the use of realism in art and a recasting of realism and mimesis as viable modes of communication for contemporary artists. The Whitney Museum of American Art provided the necessary safe haven for *Race Riot* and vouched for its legitimacy as a work of art. But this did little to discharge the impact of critics’ prior assumptions that Hanson’s sculptures were all shock-and-awe—not art.

A letter addressed to Hanson two years after Reno’s review and two years prior to Hanson’s participation in the Whitney exhibition written by the president of the Miami Museum of Modern Art Bernard Davis, addresses concerns raised by the display of Hanson’s early mimetic realism:

At this time I feel it is incumbent upon me to state that the subject of your sculptures, tragedy of death, will be extremely controversial. Most of the people who read the papers about some weird murders, slaughter on the highway, casualties in wars, feel somewhat constrained to see it in actual life, or portrayed in art. People are very squeamish about such things and we gave serious consideration as to what affect your show will have upon our members and public in general. Nevertheless, your selection of such gruesome subjects will create a certain aversion to the subject and its portrayal.

We feel however, that art must portray life no matter how gruesome it may appear. Miami Museum of Modern Art wants to express what is in life, good, bad or repulsive. We know that the majority of people will not be pleased but in the various stages of art from time immemorial there have been efforts to be prudish and non-committal.

On your behalf, as we feel you are an artist, serious and without erroneous tendencies, we feel that no matter how critical the audience may be you are entitled to express yourself and the troublesome times we live in.

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur Bloomfield, “Art Exhibit Captures a Century of Torment,” *San Francisco Examiner*, Monday, January 26, 1970. Duane Hanson Papers, box 1, folder “Duane Hanson Papers 1968, 1969, 1975...”

<sup>43</sup> Shirey, “Horror Show,” *Newsweek*: 107, 1969.



Let this show teach the people a lesson. How they should combat lawlessness, starvation, disease, murder, genocide and the injustice of man's inhumanity to man, and we recognize in you an artist of considerable talent who can withstand any attack, criticism, etc.<sup>44</sup>

Davis' letter enumerates many of the objections Hanson's critics presented—controversial subject matter, use of mimetic realism, and audience aversion—while also gambling that the works were strong enough as art to weather the difficulties their display would ensue. Hanson took these anxieties seriously and began to move away from such visceral compositions as *Bowery Derelicts* and *Race Riot*, which he began to feel communicate their message of social consciousness by “hitting the viewer over the head.”<sup>45</sup> This decisive move signaled a transition in his mimetic realism to sculpture that was less violent, although equally destabilizing to encounter.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Hanson's Decisive Punt***

*Football Players* (Figure 2.14; 1969) stands as the pivotal sculpture within Hanson's mimetic realist oeuvre. Instead of catching viewers off-guard with its visceral depiction of violence, as did *Race Riot*, *Football Players* caught viewers off-guard with its veiled violence. The sculpture of three figures wearing authentic football helmets, tight-cropped

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<sup>44</sup> Bernard Davis, letter to Duane Hanson, dated November 16, 1967. Duane Hanson Papers, box 10, folder “Clippings etc...”

<sup>45</sup> Duane Hanson, “Statement”

<sup>46</sup> Hanson's move away from violent subjects may have also been encouraged by his new dealer Ivan Karp, owner of the O.K. Harris Gallery in New York City, which opened in 1968. At this time Hanson was working and living in Florida, but was considering a move to New York City. Correspondence between the artist and his dealer document the fact that Karp urged Hanson to think about his subjects from a new direction, most likely motivated by the fact that Karp was having difficulty displaying and selling Hanson's large-scale works such as *Race Riot* and *Bowery Derelicts*. See Duane Hanson Papers box 1, folder “Early Letter from Ivan Karp: 1968.”

white pants, long striped socks, and cleats, recreates a moment in a game of football when an offense is launched by two players (red-team) on a player from the opposing team (green). Where *Race Riot* confronted the social tensions between whites and blacks directly, representing a brutal encounter between figures, the same tension is recast as an All-American pastime in *Football Players*. It is important to note that Hanson's sculpture was made just a few years after the state of Florida allowed white and black football players to compete on the same field (1967).<sup>47</sup> By depicting the red team as an integrated team, players #18 and #83 represent a nullification of segregation based on the color of the player's skin in favor of divergence based on the color of their uniforms: red versus green. The tension between the green team and the red team is implied through the action: #69, the central figure in the composition, is set off balance after being forcefully shoved by a charging #18, arching precariously over a crouching #83. Hanson's sculptural composition freeze-frames violence as a way to complicate racial integration.

*Football Players* allows the viewer a defined distance from the subject matter; we become fans in the stands of a game or watching it on television. The competition between colors in *Football Players* mimics the especial vividness of watching a game on a television set, where the "magical telegenic power" of football, to borrow a term from football historian Michael MacCambridge, motivated a dramatic increase in popularity over other sports.<sup>48</sup> Football scholars have argued that the format of the game created an "almost symbiotic" relationship with television which fed its inclusion in an expanding

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<sup>47</sup> On the history of race in football, see Alan Howard Levy, *Tackling Jim Crow: Racial Segregation in Professional Football* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2004), xv.

entertainment culture.<sup>49</sup> The fact that football was so well adapted to the television format was especially appealing for a middle-class American viewer watching the game from their living room sofa. Hanson was very much attracted to the aesthetic qualities of the sport, and saw the potential to take what he was watching on television and translate that into sculpture. He said, “the baseball and football uniforms are colorful, and there is something fascinating about an individual’s physical and psychological vulnerability engaged in the extreme physical activity.”<sup>50</sup>

As much as Hanson’s new type of mimetic realism was appropriate more for popular modes of entertainment than social and political realities, it has been repeatedly interpreted as a response to the mounting tensions of a country divided by war. Curators at the Museum Moderner Kunst (MUMOK) Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna, where the work now resides, argue that *Football Players* is an anti-war statement which emphasizes the polarization of the American people over the war in Vietnam. In 1967, the death toll of American soldiers was steadily increasing and the decline in popularity of President Johnson’s initiatives had ignited protest on college campuses, in the mass media, and by government officials. Although this is a compelling alternative interpretation of *Football Players*, I would argue that the sculpture is much more a reinterpretation of Hanson’s earlier sculptural grouping *Race Riot* in its depiction of racial relations and its representation of conflict. From this perspective, Hanson again used mimetic realism as a form of protest, albeit this time veiled as a popular American pastime. The fabrication and display of *Football Players* marked an important shift in Hanson’s oeuvre that

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, xiv.

<sup>50</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, *Duane Hanson* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 40.

ushered in his most well known mimetic realist sculptures: figures as shoppers, sunbathers, housewives and tourists.

### ***Photorealism: Representations of Suburban Life in America***

The second phase of Hanson's mimetic realism emerged alongside a new generation of painters and sculptures that sought to recreate, with photographic precision, mass-produced objects and scenes from suburban life, without the aesthetic alterations characteristic of Pop art. The photorealist (also known as hyperrealist or superrealist) artists embraced, with full force, representational realism and depicted their subjects with a mimetic accuracy that was made to look like a photographic representation rather than a painted picture. This approach to picture making, imitating a photograph, created a productive confusion between two types of representation: painting and photography. In response to works by the photorealists, art critic Kim Levin contended that their renewed enthusiasm for imitation of the natural world originated because of modernism's attacks on the art object. She argued that when confronted with the threat of total annihilation, art rose from the "ashes of modernism" by disguising itself as life. By "mimicking the world of appearance, art conceal[ed] and protect[ed] itself, forewarned of its own extinction....with artifice it assume[d] the disguise of artlessness, of non art, of literal reality."<sup>51</sup> During the 1970s, Hanson's sculptures became increasingly naturalistic.

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<sup>51</sup> Kim Levin, *Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art from the '70s and '80s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 80.

Hanson chose more prosaic models and represented American types rather than social and political tensions.

Hanson's first work in this new genre was *Supermarket Shopper* (Figure 2.15; 1970), a full-scale sculpture depicting a woman pushing a shopping cart brimming with pre-packaged foods, toilet paper, and a large sack of dog food. The artist described the sculpture in somewhat deprecating terms as an "over-consuming housewife pushing a cart filled with every kind of imaginable item she can buy in a supermarket."<sup>52</sup> It's important that Hanson's comment was so explicitly derogatory because he establishes social distinction between himself and the people he represented. *Supermarket Shopper* is a rather lack-luster version of the American housewife who had ubiquitously appeared in Pop art as an idealized June Cleaver, lifted directly from *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal*.<sup>53</sup> Hanson dressed his full-figured sculpture in an off-the-rack polyester pink button-down blouse, an electric blue mini skirt, and powder blue slippers. A crown made of pink plastic curlers, which have been neatly tucked under a synthetic striped scarf, frames the sculpture's face. To complete the ensemble, Hanson added a pair of nylons with runs, a black patent-leather purse, and a string of yellow plastic beads. Receipts for such items, purchased by Hanson at *Sears* and other popular department stores, are archived among the artist's papers. By purchasing the items for his sculpture, Hanson himself engaged in the activity of shopping that he wished to represent.

In addition to handpicking and purchasing household products and clothing for *Supermarket Shopper*, the artist paid fastidious attention to dermatological details. These anatomical details contribute to the figure's overall life-like appearance by denying the

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<sup>52</sup> Duane Hanson, quoted in Martin Bush, *Sculptures by Duane Hanson*, (Wichita, KS.: The Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, 1985) exh cat., 44.

<sup>53</sup> On Pop art and domesticity, see Chapter Two of Cecile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 50–99.

sculpture a smooth, classical aesthetic, or the perfect skin seen in airbrushed advertisements and the stage makeup worn by television characters. When the art critic Joseph Masheck saw the mimetic realist sculpture, he described it as "...a female wise guy; with curlers and dangling cigarette" who "deserves the life that she's so sure she enjoys."<sup>54</sup> Masheck reads both the physiognomic details and the accessories (cigarette, curlers, and packaged food) as external indicators of *Supermarket Shopper's* internal character. This underscores the effectiveness of Hanson's mimetic realism in producing a convincing representation of a specific American type. The critic's use of the pronoun "she" to refer to the antecedent, *Supermarket Shopper*, and likewise reveals no hesitation to anthropomorphize the sculpture—another key characteristic of mimetic realism.

The anthropomorphic quality of Hanson's mimetic realism became a flash point for critics in the 1970s, who argued that Hanson rendered people into things, "things most minutely and ingeniously counterfeited, but things nonetheless."<sup>55</sup> This argument was likewise embroiled in the opinion that Hanson's sculptures were demeaning and a way to ridicule lower- and middle-class Americans, workers, and the downtrodden<sup>56</sup>—a claim Hanson himself always refuted, stating that his approach was intended to sympathize with his subjects, and not to de-humanize them.<sup>57</sup> More recent scholars such as Erika Doss have sought to redeem Hanson's work as American social realism, a classification the artist supported and one that better reflects his commitment to representing social, political, and economic issues of his time in sculpture.<sup>58</sup> I argue that Hanson's tenacity

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<sup>54</sup> Joseph Masheck, "Verist Sculpture: Hanson and De Andrea," in *Super Realism*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), 201.

<sup>55</sup> John Russell, "Art: Effigies of Humanity," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1978.

<sup>56</sup> Ellen Edwards, "Can You Tell Who's for Real?," *US*, February 7, 1978, 67.

<sup>57</sup> Duane Hanson interview, August 23, 1989.

<sup>58</sup> See Doss, *Duane Hanson*.

for selecting subjects from lower- and middle-class American stereotypes allowed him to capture in sculpture these individuals in the most boring and ordinary moments. When the bodies are exhibited as art, they become portraits of American social types: leaning against walls, slumped lazily in chairs, or milling about doing not much of anything.

“I’m interested in everyday types of things that people do,” Hanson said, “those things that are down to earth, non-elitist.”<sup>59</sup> Here Hanson’s claiming not to be an elitist, a statement that seems intended to refute the idea, implied in his statement about the *Supermarket Shopper*. Hanson’s sculptures provided access to the otherwise private moments of the working classes. Each sculpture broadcasts these moments to an audience eager to consume tidbits from the everyday lives of the lower and middle-classes. “I take ordinary people who come in all shapes and sizes, young and old, and portray life as it really is. That’s what interests me and that’s what I call getting down to the real world.”<sup>60</sup> The “real” world for Hanson existed outside of the white cube gallery. His work represented people as we encounter them on the street, in stores, at work, and at homes, all places outside of the purview of the art world.<sup>61</sup>

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe’s review for *Artforum* of Hanson’s 1974 solo exhibition at the O.K. Harris Gallery addressed the work’s relationships to the banal, the everyday, and the mundane:

...Hansen [sic.] implies a technology that equates art with the everyday and characterizes art making as a tool that can focus attention on the banal, which is taken to be a source of meaning—of, as it were, meaninglessness.

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<sup>59</sup> Varnedoe, *Duane Hanson*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> Coleen Newman, “Parkers Prairie Sculptor Returns Home.” Duane Hanson Papers, box #3 folder “Parkers Prairie, Minn.”

<sup>61</sup> Harold Rosenberg wrote the following in response to a show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York City titled “Sharp-Focus Realism” that included works by Hanson: “Illusionistic art appeals to what the public knows not about art but about things. This ability to brush art aside is the secret of the popularity of illusionism.” Harold Rosenberg, “Reality Again,” in *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: EP. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), 138.

One can see that a person who actually desired to live with the immediate present – its everyday, middlebrow parameters—constantly nearby would want to have one of each.<sup>62</sup>

Some collectors did indeed wish to live with the immediate present, so much so that they were put on a waiting list, paying upward of \$35,000 (in 1970s dollars) for a Hanson sculpture. This was appalling to critics like Robert Hughes, who found collectors' desire to acquire a Hanson work akin to a hunter's desire for a stuffed rhino from the veld.<sup>63</sup>

## **POPular**

I couch Hanson's mimetic realism within broader shifts and dramatic restructurings of the art world and its institutional frame.<sup>64</sup> New museology theory has identified the second half of the twentieth century as a period in which art museums sought restructuring, recasting themselves as forums for discussion instead of morgues for masterpieces or temples devoted to aesthetics.<sup>65</sup> Institutions embarked on many paths including dramatic restructuring to increase audience attendance which is an important revenue generator during this time of rising operating costs, loss of public funding, and stiff competition for corporate sponsorship.<sup>66</sup> My motive for calling attention to this restructuring during Hanson's time will later offer an understanding of the struggles faced by art museums at the end of the century, and the degree to which exhibitions of mimetic realism have been recognized as a large-crowd generating attraction. For example, the first retrospective of

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<sup>62</sup> Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Exhibition Review: Duane Hanson—O.K. Harris Gallery," *Artforum* 12, no. 8 (1974): 74.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Hughes, "Making the Blue-Collar Waxworks," *TIME* (February 20, 1978): 93.

<sup>64</sup> In 1961, *Art in America* put together the symposium, "What Should a Museum Be?" a reflection of a desire to reframe the institution from within.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Duncan Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," *Curator* 14, no. 1 (1971): 11-24.

<sup>66</sup> For more on these issues from a source of the time see Karl Ernest Meyer and Fund Twentieth Century, *The Art Museum: Power, Money, Ethics: A Twentieth Century Fund Report*, (New York: Morrow, 1979).



Hanson's life-like sculpture of the lower- and middle-classes, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1978, recorded some of the highest attendance figures the museum had yet seen.<sup>67</sup>

A motivating factor for the expansion, both physically and philosophically, of the institutions was an ever-increasing public for art. This was a shift that was not only reflected in major institutions but was also echoed in the writing of important artists of the time. For example, in 1958 the artist Allan Kaprow (1927–2006), whose work was influenced by John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, addressed the issue of publics for art in his writings on the blurring of the boundary between art and life.

What has been called the art public is no longer a select group upon whom artists can depend for a stock response, favorable or general. It is now a large diffused mass, soon to be called the public-in-general. Comprising readers of the weeklies, viewers of TV, visitors to world's fairs here and abroad, members of 'culture' clubs, subscribers to mail-order art lessons, charitable organizations, civic improvement committees, political campaigners, schools, and universities—not to mention the boom of new galleries and museums that serve the private collector, the corporation, and the average person—this growing public is involved in art for reasons that are as complicated as they are varied.<sup>68</sup>

Kaprow's inclusiveness of publics for art contrasts significantly with the earlier twentieth-century critics such as Roger Fry (1866–1934). Hanson's work was received in the vein of Kaprow who had expanded the critics' frame. Kaprow had been friends with Kienholz and Segal, and on a handful of occasions corresponded with Hanson encouraging him to continue making his "plastic people."<sup>69</sup> As Gerrit Henry argued,

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<sup>67</sup> The first retrospective of Hanson's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1978 set some of the highest attendance figures for the museum, which had to extend its hours of operation to accommodate the 297,000 visitors to the exhibition. See Bush, *Sculptures by Duane Hanson*, 15. Also see Talley, "Duane Hanson."

<sup>68</sup> Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (1958); (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 54.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from Alan Kaprow to Duane Hanson, undated. Duane Hanson Papers, box 1, folder "DAAD 1974."

“Hanson has reached beyond both fine and popular art to create a truly populist art that thumbs its nose both at estheticized sophisticates and primitives alike, and meets the non-esthete head on.”<sup>70</sup> The “underlying misery of American life”<sup>71</sup> that Hanson worked so hard to portray was interpreted by late-twentieth-century critics as quintessentially American—and populist. This underlying vision was described by Donald Kuspit (1999): “It is a bleak vision of banal lives adrift in a fraudulent utopia—life in America, where depression and isolation are epidemic, along with obesity.”<sup>72</sup>

### **Corpulent not Classical**

Where Kuspit saw social critique in *Supermarket Shopper* as evident in the unflattering rendition of the physique he associated with the American lower classes, Hanson had a different, more aesthetic explanation. Hanson said, “My ideal is to make a sculpture first, nice forms, and the big people, the fat people, have a physical impact to the viewer.”<sup>73</sup> Hanson purposefully chose models with corpulent physiques. Hanson’s sculptural bodies suffer from an accumulation of excess; arms, legs, and abdomens appear inflated and distended. Ill-fitting clothing amplifies the bodies’ mass. Form-fitting skirts and shirts, such as those worn by *Supermarket Shopper*, outline bulges and curves while more

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<sup>70</sup> Gerrit Henry, “Close Encounters with Ourselves,” *ArtNews* 77 (1978): 59.

<sup>71</sup> Donald Kuspit, “Duane Hanson: The Ultimate Realist,” *Art New England* 20, no. 3 (1999): 13.

<sup>72</sup> Kuspit, “Duane Hanson”. Also see, Edward Winters, “Duane Hanson at the Saatchi Gallery,” *Modern Painters* 10 (1997): 92–93. Winters argued that Hanson’s work reflected the American social system of competition as culprit, for favoring the professional classes and leaving “the deprived underclass structurally disadvantaged in life.” It is noteworthy to emphasize that Winters included in his review a comparison between himself and Hanson’s people. He wrote: “It is to recognize that we too are little people for a frozen moment, one in a seemingly infinite string, the middle-aged, flabby, middle-class, dead-end lecturer; the one whose student couldn’t be bothered meeting for his tutorial discussion; the one whose boredom infuses and then stifles almost every thought; who looks from his study window upon the queue of bored tourists; he too is just a Duane Hanson sculpture in the frozen time of God’s warehouse.”

<sup>73</sup> Varnedoe, *Duane Hanson*.

flowing fabric dresses, such as that worn by *Woman Eating* (Figure 2.16; 1971), hide the curves and contours of the body but also over-extend its volumes past their normal parameters.

*Supermarket Shopper* and *Woman Eating* are representations of women in situations of over-consumption. *Supermarket Shopper* has perused the grocery store aisles and stacked its cart with frozen dinners, cookies, canned foods, and Coca-Cola. *Woman Eating* sits alone at a table littered with crumpled napkins, a can of sticky popcorn, and an empty soda bottle while consuming a banana split. The corpulence of Hanson's figures can be compared to the classical choices in the work of the surrealist sculptor John De Andrea (b. 1941), who worked hard to maintain a palpable distance between his sculptures and the world beyond the institutionally defined spaces of the studio and gallery. He did so by working with models that adhered to ideal proportions of beauty, as prescribed by the art world and contemporary 1970s lifestyle magazines, especially favoring female figures that were slender and youthful. *Self Portrait with Sculpture* (Figure 2.17; 1980) demonstrates De Andrea's commitment to what critics of the time came to term "verist" sculpture.<sup>74</sup> In this work, DeAndrea has cast from life himself and his model, a young woman of ideal proportions with hair that falls into soft dark curls above her shoulders. The artist, dressed casually in a long-sleeve t-shirt and jeans, sits on a low stool next to a pedestal upon which his sculpture is seated. In his left hand, DeAndrea holds two paint brushes while a coffee can with additional brushes sits on the floor beside him. The composition provides the strong impression that we are witnessing an artist at work, contemplating his object, and mentally defining a strategy

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<sup>74</sup> For the term "verist," see *The Real and Ideal in Figurative Sculpture*, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1974); and Masheck, "Verist Sculpture: Hanson and De Andrea."

for executing its final surface details: the figure's forearm and legs remain unfinished. Further evidence of De Andrea's process are evidenced by smears of paint and fingerprints left by the artist on the pedestal, which serve as indexical marks for both the artistic process of painting and the environment in which that activity takes place: the studio. Through these subtle details we realize that the impact of De Andrea's sculpture does not depend on mimetic realism. The artist thwarts the illusionary effect, and he defines his task as a painterly activity, more about artistic process than about imitation.

DeAndrea's nude figures disturbed critics who interpreted the sculptures as "bourgeois"<sup>75</sup> depictions of "American middle-class kids."<sup>76</sup> The physique of each figure in DeAndrea's oeuvre adheres to a particular idealistic physique that is in stark contrast to that of Hanson's people. De Andrea's figure conforms to ideals of beauty in such popular venues as movies, television, advertisements, and fashion magazines. Where DeAndrea choose classical and commercial ideals of beauty within institutionally acceptable frames, of the studio and the gallery, Hanson desired to document the non-ideal bodies which were located outside these designated art spaces. A comparison between DeAndrea's *Self Portrait with Sculpture* and Hanson's *Self Portrait with Model* (Figure 2.18; 1979) illustrates the similarities in the artists' techniques and materials and brings to light the difference in subject matter. DeAndrea situates his work in his studio. Hanson constructs a scene with two chairs and a table similar to those found in a diner. Accessories such as a Coke bottle, chrome napkin holder, glass salt and pepper shakers, and an ashtray produce a sense of authenticity for Hanson's tableau. Unlike DeAndrea, who identifies the female figure as his "sculpture," Hanson uses the term "model" to refer

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<sup>75</sup> Masheck, "Verist Sculpture: Hanson and De Andrea," 95.

<sup>76</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Today: From Abstract Expressionism to Superrealism* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1977), 478.

to his companion who, seated across from him, enjoys a chocolate ice-cream sundae while reading an article on dieting.

## **Clothing and Accessories**

The “shock effect” of Hanson’s sculpture should not be restricted to their corporal verisimilitude. In her investigation of Hanson’s work, the cultural and literary historian Naomi Schor argues that what is truly “shocking” and “uncanny” about the figures is not their anatomical verisimilitude but their “vestimentary realism.”<sup>77</sup> For Schor, Hanson’s choice of clothing and accessories are “promoted to radical centrality.”<sup>78</sup> Schor’s point of departure for this argument is taken from Roland Barthes’ reality effect. Schor’s essay is also in concert with the writing of art critics Harold Rosenberg and Joseph Mashek, whose writing on Hanson in the 1970s noted the use of clothing as one of the work’s more convincing illusionary techniques.<sup>79</sup> As Rosenberg states, Hanson’s work “comes closest to fooling the eye, no doubt through the assistance of authentic posture and clothing.”<sup>80</sup> This is especially true for Rosenberg if Hanson’s work is again compared to the nude figure in DeAndrea’s sculpture (Figure 2.17). Masheck also sees the use of clothing and accessories in Hanson as distinguishing his work from that of de Andrea, whose sculptures are “ultimately disappointing” because of their nudity and lack of “any redeeming artistic beauty.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 243.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>79</sup> Rosenberg, “Reality Again.” and Joseph Masheck, “Verist Sculpture.”

<sup>80</sup> Rosenberg, “Reality Again,” 139.

<sup>81</sup> Masheck, “Verist Sculpture,” 207. Masheck argues that “the very nudity of such figures, which one would expect to detach them from social status, actually heightens the evidence of their hairdos, and, to some extent, the subtleties of their posture as well” (207).

Hanson's clad figures, burdened with accessories, retain "particularity" in terms of their class and social status. Historian Nina Felshin confirms the use of clothing as a visual signifier of class. She argues "[a]s a familiar presence in figurative art, clothing has functioned as both formal and iconographical evidence and as a signifier of class and social status."<sup>82</sup> Particularity, argues Masheck, cannot be separated from the "type," so important for Hanson's project. For Masheck, what matters is

the relation of the particular to the type, and the fact that no type is vivid without particularity (since the presence of the unique particulars—or at least of a unique pattern of particulars—is itself a general feature). The particular divorced from the type is grotesque; the type denied particularity is lifeless. Against both idealism and nominalism, realism always keeps its head about the relation of the individual to type or class.<sup>83</sup>

Masheck concludes that Hanson's figures are "...convincingly individual and also representative of some type."<sup>84</sup> The particularity is maintained in the specificity of both anatomical and vestimentary details, but it is the collaboration of the individual parts that ultimately render Hanson's characters convincing examples of types: housewife, laborers, shoppers, and so on. This idea was articulated by art historian and curator Kirk Varnedoe, who argued:

"It is the dialogue between the body and the surrounding elements that really makes a Hanson sculpture, and he is almost exaggeratedly attentive to those relationships. Thus, a seemingly mundane matter such as the kind of beer or soda to be held by a figure is considered in relation to several different concerns: on the one hand, compatibility with an imagined life narrative (what would such a person drink in such a situation?); and on the other, visual aspects as obvious as the color graphics on a particular label and as subtle as the rapport between the proportions of the bottle or can and the body type and posture involved."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Nina Felshin, "Clothing as Subject," *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (1995): 20.

<sup>83</sup> Masheck, "Verist Sculpture," 203.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>85</sup> Varnedoe, *Duane Hanson*, 21–23.

Details for Hanson needed to be close enough to reality to read as authentic, but do not require historical specificity. A letter to Hanson from curator Andrea Miller-Keller from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford, Connecticut highlights questions regarding the conservation of *Sunbather* (Figure 2.19;1971), a sculpture depicting a full-figured model dressed in a polka-dot bikini, laid out on a lounge chair under which a bag stuffed with sweet and salty snacks spills out. Authentic details are a central concern to the curator for the figure's overall illusionary success—a concern that Hanson does not seem to share. The curator writes:

Your work raises interesting conservation problems! Having purchased The Sunbather (1971) last year, we are now addressing the task of keeping her “historically” correct. Currently she reads a ‘78 Day Time TV Magazine, drinks from a Tab can not yet distributed in 1971, and has bathing slippers quite different from the ones she owned when visiting the Atheneum five years ago.

We intend to restore her paraphernalia to “authentic 1971” and to purchase such items in triplicate so that 50–100 years from now she will not represent a compendium of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century artifacts!<sup>86</sup>

Hanson responded that the historical specificity of the items was not of central concern to him as long as the sculpture's overall effect was maintained. Objects needed to be compatible with Hanson's original vision of the *Sunbather* as a particular type, but items such as her swimsuit, magazines, and snacks could be replaced. Hanson further encouraged the replacement of the *Sunbather's* paraphernalia if it “benefits the sculpture by contributing to a better fresher illusionism.”<sup>87</sup>

The question of authentic paraphernalia was also taken up by comparative literary scholar Michelle Bloom, in her writings on waxworks, who argued that Hanson's practice

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<sup>86</sup> Duane Hanson Papers, box 1, folder “National Galleries 1978.”

<sup>87</sup> Kimberly Davenport, “Impossible Liberties: Contemporary Artists on the Life of Their Work over Time,” *Art Journal*: vol. 54, no. 22 (1995).

of acquiring and using “items or whole ensembles of personal clothing” from the people who modeled for his figures, motivated by his desire to convey a sense of “authenticity,” is uncannily close, if not identical, to the practice of popular wax museums.<sup>88</sup>

Traditionally, Hanson’s supporters have worked very hard to dismantle any association of his work with low forms of art—particularly waxworks—and the negative connotations that accompanied what Kirk Varnedoe later called “run-of-the-mill or trivialized realism.”<sup>89</sup> The majority of writers on Hanson deem it imperative to address the relationship between his sculpture and waxworks, but often fall short in the complexity of their discussions. For example, Harold Rosenberg did not classify Hanson’s work as art, but he also did not relegate it to the realm of the wax museum. He argued that Hanson’s work stood somewhere in between, “neither as a sculpture nor as a concept but as a technical feat that seems a step in advance of the waxworks museum.”<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless some critics, such as Jonathan Jones (2003), maintained that Hanson’s sculptures were very much associated with popular forms of entertainment. Jones argued, “Hanson’s polyester resin mannequins make you think of carnival booths, naïve paintings, snapshot photos, wax museums. They’re in a great tradition of art about America seen from below.”<sup>91</sup> Jerry Saltz, of *The Village Voice* said that Hanson’s were best interpreted as “Madame Tussaud’s meets the Mall of America, a spooky group of sleepwalkers caught in a state of suspended animation.”<sup>92</sup> Hanson very much draws on tradition of mimetic figures from outside of the art world, what many would classify as

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<sup>88</sup> Bloom, *Waxworks*, 29.

<sup>89</sup> Varnedoe, *Duane Hanson*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> Rosenberg, “Reality Again,” 138.

<sup>91</sup> Jonathan Jones, “Duane Hanson: Sculptures from Life,” *World of Interiors* 23, no. 1 (2003): 138.

<sup>92</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Mall-American Family,” *The Village Voice* (1999), online edition, [http://www.artnet.com/magazine\\_pre2000/features/saltz/saltz1-15-99.asp](http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/saltz/saltz1-15-99.asp). (accessed on September 12, 2008)



kitsch, but instead of seeing this as a negative element of the work, I argue that a productive relationship can exist between sculpture and popular forms of entertainment. The following section will provide a concrete example of the way in which Hanson's work directly engages one type of popular entertainment: waxworks.

### ***Off-Guard Encounters***

*Museum Guard* (Figure 2.20; 1975) is one of the more salient examples of the way in which Hanson's sculptures destabilize viewers' perceptual facilities. Dressed in a navy blue suit, white shirt and necktie, *Museum Guard* provides a very convincing illusion of a real museum guard, so much so that viewers frequently ignore or dismiss the figure when it is displayed in the corner or along the perimeters of a gallery. The sculpture is mimetic realism: it blends in as if it were an unobtrusive supervisor and a normal part of the ambiance. Authentic clothing and inconspicuous display contribute to a staging that blurs the boundary between the life and art. Yet, this mimetic realist game can only be maintained from a distance, for the sculpture's surface details reveal its artificiality, prompting the viewer to discover that the figure is a "fake."

Consequently, visitors who approach the guard with an inquiry or request for directions are frequently caught off-guard when they discover that it is one of the objects on display. In this fraction of a second, the moment of encounter flips from expected to unexpected. The visitor becomes a viewer, a transformation that can cause them to step back abruptly or release a startled gasp. Viewers then do a double-take to confirm that *Museum Guard* is in fact an inanimate sculptural object, and not a living person.

In contrast, *Housewife* (Figure 2.21; 1970) employs mimetic realism but to a much lesser degree than *Museum Guard*. The sculptural composition reconstructs a scene from a domestic interior in which a woman is slumped lazily in an armchair while smoking a cigarette and reading a magazine. While the use of authentic attire—a pink and green floral house coat, fuzzy slippers, and head full of plastic curlers—provides a particularly convincing visual illusion of the life-like, the woman’s presence in the art gallery, unlike *Museum Guard*, is incongruent. Even viewers who perform a visual double-take will find it disappointing that they can neither smell the aroma of her cigarette, nor hear the monotonous hum of her hairdryer. But the lack of smell and sound is not the main reason she’s incongruent. The woman is incongruent because her type and actions do not belong in an art gallery. *Housewife* could never be misconstrued as anything but fake when displayed in such a setting.

Staging Hanson’s mimetic realist sculptures is similar to staging mannequins in a wax museum. At the Musée Grévin in Paris, visitors frequently marvel at the incredibly life-like mannequins that offer an up-close and personal encounter with politicians, celebrities, and historical figures vis-à-vis their wax doppelgangers. Part of the reason that these encounters are so entertaining is the visitor’s willingness to participate in the illusion and to pretend that the figures are the real thing. On occasion, the curators at the museum will entertain the visitor’s fantasy and stage encounters between them and living actors. For example, a nineteenth-century French can-can dancer, displayed in a corner at the end of a dimly lit stairwell, at first appears to be an inanimate wax mannequin (Figure 2.22; 2006). As one approaches the dancer, she suddenly shuffles her feet, “outing” herself as an in-the-flesh actress. Visitors are startled and, like the encounter described

with Hanson's *Museum Guard*, are moved to physically and sometimes vocally respond. In the wax museum, the split-second encounter catches visitors off-guard when their expectation of the inanimate unexpectedly becomes an encounter with another human being.

*Museum Guard* simultaneously replicates and amends the encounter with the can-can dancer, which allows the sculpture to exist within uncanny territory—the space between mimesis and realism. Within this uncanny region, contended Freud, “the distinction between the imagination and reality is effaced,” and the sculpture “takes over the full function of the thing it symbolizes.”<sup>93</sup> Hanson's mimetic realist sculptures stand in as coordinates along a hypothetical spectrum that runs between mimesis and realism. Mimetic realism does not have a fixed location on this spectrum because it is the slippage, the inaccuracy, and the illusiveness that amounts to the “shocking encounter,” described by Brian O'Doherty.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated how Hanson's mimetic realist figures operate as a series of sculptural experiments that stage encounters between artificial bodies and viewers. Hanson was a “forerunner” in the re-deployment, re-development, and re-definition of three-dimensional mimetic realism in the later half of the twentieth century.<sup>94</sup> Most art historians have previously shied away from the fact that Duane

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<sup>93</sup> Freud, et al., *The Uncanny*, 367.

<sup>94</sup> I am borrowing the term “forerunner” from Elizabeth Hyatt, art critic for *The New York Times*, who argues that after thirty years from the debut of his life-like sculptures, Hanson deserves a second look. She

Hanson's sculptures provide an important historical case study of figural sculpture. Reexamining his work is helpful in understanding one facet of mimetic realism. The following chapter on the work of Robert Gober will demonstrate another approach to mimetic realism, and the representation of the human body in sculpture, to very different ends.

Hanson's work ushered in anxieties regarding the nature of Art, for whom it should be accessible, and the form it should take. These anxieties remained of central concern for the next generations of mimetic realists, Robert Gober, and on to Ron Mueck, although without much acknowledgment from the art world. Hanson's legacy is both embraced and resisted by later realist artists. For instance, like Hanson, both Gober and Mueck work with unorthodox materials (wax and resin), use the body as subject for sculpture, and embrace an illusionary aesthetic. However, despite consistent efforts by current art historians and critics to create a space for mimetic sculpture within contemporary art world rhetoric, those who write about Gober and Mueck hesitate to make associations between their work and Hanson's, a position supported by the artists themselves. The tension between embracing a realist project and resisting associations to Hanson's work opens the possibility to explore how the practice of mimetic sculpture has maintained continuity while simultaneously enduring substantial modifications over a fifty-year period.

During the apex of his artistic production, in a moment when other sculptors were navigating alternative avenues by which to question established traditions and schemata, Hanson deliberately chose subjects that were prosaic, rendered them with meticulous

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identifies Hanson's work as an important precursor to more contemporary hyperrealist practices, such as Gober's, Mueck's, and others. See Elizabeth Hayt, "In an Era of Humanoid Art," *The New York Times*, December 13, 1998.

verisimilitude, and manipulated their display to create an encounter between sculptural object and viewer that was unprecedented in sculpture made after World War II. It took thirty years and a retrospective of Hanson's work for critics to re-open the case to bring him in from the margins of the art world. In his review of the 1999 Whitney Museum retrospective of Hanson's work, *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl said he was more impressed with the work than he ever thought possible:

Hanson's figures really are things, of an elusive sort. 'Sculpture' is not a word that comes easily to mind for them.... I knew that Hanson's lower-class types had to be art objects, because their real-like counterparts do not visit fancy museums, but cops can pop up anywhere at any time, causing an instant, electric apprehension: something's wrong.<sup>95</sup>

Schjeldahl argued that Hanson's work has aged well and at the end of the century, nearly thirty years after it was made, his *sculpture* "appears rock solid—dense with historical and aesthetic logic."<sup>96</sup> In the 1990s the art world experienced a renewed interest in figural realist sculpture when artists used reproductions of bodies as viable modes of artistic communication.<sup>97</sup> Duane Hanson was seen as a forerunner to these new trends, and his art has since rekindled discussions regarding the use of the body as subject and form for three-dimensional realism.<sup>98</sup> Two years prior to the Whitney's 1999 retrospective of Hanson's work, influential art historian Robert Rosenblum, in a 1997 issue of *Artforum*, confirmed Hanson's significance (albeit referring to the figures' kitsch-like qualities) for a younger generation of artists seeking to use reproductions of the human body as viable modes of artistic communication:

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<sup>95</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Stilled Lives: The Gravity of Duane Hanson's Lumpen Americans," *New Yorker* (January 11, 1999): 91.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>97</sup> See Chapter One of this dissertation for a fuller discussion of artists who participated in this trend, responses to their work, and the rejuvenation of figural realism at the end of the twentieth and turn of the twenty-first century—a moment in art's history frequently assumed to be dominated by non-representational strategies and conceptual gestures.

<sup>98</sup> Hayt, "In an Era of Humanoid Art," 35.

Perhaps it's my passion for Spanish polychrome sculpture (with real hair and fake tears) that made me a longtime fan of Hanson's, a love that dared not speak its name in "serious" art circles. And now I find sweet revenge for my minority view. Dusted off and minimally displayed, this tribe of American waxworks uglies suddenly took on a freshly macabre second life. Hanson's role may now be Johnny Appleseed's, with progeny like Charles Ray, Robert Gober, and the Chapman Brothers, whose humanoids are at their best when, like Hanson's, they sport Nikes and synthetic hair.<sup>99</sup>

Gaining an in-depth understanding of mimetic realism vis-à-vis Hanson's sculptural oeuvre has given rise to a more fluid understanding of the relationship between mimesis and realism when it comes to figural sculpture. This study echoes Rosenblum's contention that Hanson is "Johnny Appleseed" for Gober, and more recently for Mueck. My study ventures to speak the name of the "love" Rosenblum felt compelled to conceal until the late 1990s, when artists such as Charles Ray, Robert Gober, Jake and Dinos Chapman, and Ron Mueck nudged discussions among critics and scholars of art back towards figural sculpture.

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Rosenblum, "Top Ten list," *Artforum* 36, no. 7 (March 1997).

## CHAPTER 3

### Robert Gober and the Recently Departed

Robert Gober makes sculptures that look like everyday objects. The objects that Gober renders—light bulbs, sinks, urinals, and other common household items—are so ubiquitous that when we encounter them in the course of a normal day, they seldom, if ever, merit close looking or careful consideration. However, when Gober meticulously duplicates their physical and visual particularities the ordinary is transformed into the *extraordinary* and we reconsider the significance of these things and our relation to them.

Each object was chosen by Gober based on his memories of that thing being used by another human being. Gober reproduced object that have strong associations with bodily functions, which give them both personal and political significance. While Hanson staged sculptures that represented people, who appeared to be inhabitants from the everyday, with the intention of simulating their presence inside the art gallery, Gober uses objects frequently encountered in the everyday to stage encounters between sculptures and viewers that mimic the physical and corporeal effects of meeting another human being. Such is the effect of a work like *Untitled Candle* (Figure 3.1; 1991), an object that initially looks like a candle made of warm colored beeswax on a platform.

After more careful scrutiny, the perceived objectness of the candle competes with the manifestation of something more bodily: a phallus. The body, suggested by *Untitled Candle*, leaves only traces of its existence—a few stray hairs strewn around the candle’s base, for example—that the viewer pieces together as something akin to the corporeal.

Gober has been described as a “handyman of the real.”<sup>1</sup> His commitment to the handmade and promotion of a traditional artistic practice (sketching, modeling, and sculpting) reflected a refusal of an exclusively conceptual process, one whose labor is primarily mental, and whose preoccupations, too, are with ideas, not with aesthetic or material concerns of object making. In minimalist and conceptualist practices (precursor moments that Gober is very much heir to), the sculptor’s commitment to the handmade is not always evident in the work of art. Yet, in Hanson’s sculptures as in Gober’s, and as we will see, in Mueck’s, the made-ness of the object, or its craftsmanship, was central to its corporeal effect.

Commodity sculptures produced by Gober’s contemporaries, such as Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, were informed by and mimicked past Duchampian projects. Koons and Steinbach embraced an established commitment to recognizable artistic gesture and preformed ironic acts of purchase and re-circulation in order to draw a more overt connection between the art object and a commodity. But unlike previous readymade articulations, which were isolated examples of objects that had been purchased or otherwise acquired by the artist, Koons and Steinbach bought things in multiples. They assembled, stacked, and arranged these items in ways that purposefully suppressed their

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen Sherlock, “Half Fairy Tale: Robert Gober in Venice,” *Sculpture Magazine* 20, no. 9 (2001): 44–49, 37.



originality and highlighted multiplicity.<sup>2</sup> This turn away from production towards purchasing, practiced by some sculptors of the 1980s, had been inherited from a previous generation of artists whose work focused on the dematerialization of the art object and an impersonality of execution (the elimination of the artist's hand).

Conceptual art practices that used appropriation as their mode of production proved to be a deliberate subversion of originality.<sup>3</sup> The type of appropriation could at times be referential, alluding to a particular artist's style or form, or it could be an actual copying, as is the case with work by Sherrie Levine (Figure 3.2; *Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp)*, 1991) or the literal reworking as in Mark Bidlo's *Not Robert Rauschenberg: Erased de Kooning Drawing*, (Figure 3.3; 2005). In violation of Modernist laws of originality, truth to material, and art for art's sake, artists who engaged in appropriation, such as Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, pilfered from circulated commodities—sneakers, basketballs, and Hoover vacuum cleaners, for example—only to re-circulate such commodities as art, in a style informed by and mimicking past Duchampian and Pop art projects. Unlike the original predecessors' commitment to recognizable artistic gestures, the newer projects' ironic gesture of purchase and re-circulation destroyed the boundary between "high" and "low," suggesting an equality of status: art is read as a commodity equivalent to those found on store shelves. In addition, works such as Steinbach's

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<sup>2</sup> Scholar Andrew Casey argued that the act of purchasing in bulk reflected a frenetic art market of exchange and distribution that involved a literal purchasing of commodities and buying in quantity. One example of such accumulation is the collection amassed by Charles Saatchi, who was said to purchase whole shows at time. (Andrew Casey, *Sculpture since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), particularly Chapter Eight "Objects and Figures," 229–259.

<sup>3</sup> The Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics defines appropriation as "the conscious use of material (images, for example, in the case of the visual arts, sounds, in the case of music) that derives from a source outside the work." Sartwell, Crispin and Gloria Phares. "Appropriation." In *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly. *Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0028> (accessed September 23, 2010). I am defining appropriation art as a movement that was dominant in the 1980s, but this is in fact a narrow margin, for artists in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century continued to work in an appropriationist fashion. The examples are meant as points of reference for a movement that was neither chronologically or conceptually coherent at all times.

seeming dollar store finds (Figure 3.4; *Ultra Red #2*, 1986) responded to a frenetic art market of exchange and distribution that involved the literal purchasing of commodities and buying in quantity.<sup>4</sup>

For critics and art historians, this type of pastiche practice—involving both the direct imitation of an original and an obvious parody of artistic gesture was at first difficult to condone. Resistance was voiced especially by those who were faithful to the principles of an avant-garde project that included originality and diachronic progressions, as much as distinct breaks from past practices.<sup>5</sup> Art historians and philosophers identified these departures from an avant-garde project as ruptures in the history of modernist art, and pronounced the end or death of modernism and the birth of the post-modernist moment.<sup>6</sup> In many ways this implosion of meaning and rupture of originality left artists such as Gober free to explore a pluralist project that recognized no limitations in its content, materials, process, subject, and form.

Not to be confused with a readymade or purchased commodity, each of Gober's sculptures was carefully handmade and is a result of meticulous craftsmanship and careful selection of materials.<sup>7</sup> Gober's sculptures diverged from readymades not only because they were made by hand but because they employed a transformative aesthetic:

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<sup>4</sup> Casey, *Sculpture since 1945*, Chapter Eight "Objects and Figures."

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the historical specificity of the neo-avant-garde project (also characterized as appropriation art), see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Arthur Coleman Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Helen Molesworth definition of Duchamp's readymades is instructive for this discussion because it underscores the parallels between Gober and Duchamp's aesthetic, as much as it points to the attribute that most separates the two, Duchamp's readymades could have been found in "any average home or store," (Molesworth, 51) they were purchased. What links Gober's handmades to Duchamp's readymades, again using Molesworth's definition of Duchamp's readymades, was the fact that they are "object for cleaning, hanging, storing, drying, preening, and peeing: object whose purpose is to aid in self-presentation, objects that allow homes and office to function." (Molesworth, 51). See Helen Molesworth, "The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (1998): 51–61. For Molesworth on Gober's handmades in contrast to Duchamp's readymades see Helen Molesworth, "Stops and Starts," *October* 92 (2000): 157–162.

he swapped one material for another, making a lightbulb out of wax, for example (Figure 3.5; *Untitled Lightbulb*, 1991), or he adjusted scale, blowing things up to unnatural proportions, such as an over-sized stick of butter (Figure 3.6; *Untitled*, 1993-94). At times he even morphed two or more objects together, such as a Kleenex box pierced by a culvert pipe (Figure 3.7; *Untitled*, 1994-95), which served to further confirm that the objects he made are sculpture, not to be confused with purchased or appropriated things from the everyday. The gesture of remaking ordinary objects by hand allowed Gober to classify them as important artifacts of the everyday. Such an endeavor not only elevated the mundane to the status of art—transforming a lightbulb, a stick of butter, or a Kleenex box—but also served to imbue each of the works with a visual and physical presence that when encountered in an art gallery is difficult for viewers not to respond to

Gober's work is sensitive to the inner workings of representation, and his artistic practice was, at its core, an exercise in the making of meaning. The sculptures that Gober makes are meant to look-like artifacts of the everyday that were meant to evoke memories of familiar people and places. Gober built each sculpture from layers of meaning, which allowed each of his works to hold multiple levels of signification concurrently. In this chapter, I will call attention to the ways in which Gober's sculptures of everyday objects deliberately leave a void that promotes a desire to encounter an absent or recently departed human body.

## ***Empty Houses***

The earliest instance in which Gober seems to have engaged with the idea that sculpture could be a vehicle for staging a bodily encounter was his dollhouses, made between 1977 and 1980, which became metaphors for the human interactions and relationship that so frequently take place inside domestic dwellings. Gober's father had been a carpenter and built their family home in the small town of Wallingford, Connecticut.<sup>8</sup> When the young artist moved to New York City in 1977 to pursue a career as an artist, he adapted his father's trade and began constructing dollhouses with the intention of selling them to make ends meet.<sup>9</sup> The dollhouse became a format through which Gober began to explore themes of longing for people and places. The first dollhouses Gober made very much resembled single-family homes which he may have seen while growing up in the eastern United States. For example, *Half Stone House* (Figure 3.8; 1979–1980) is a miniature version of a two-story domestic dwelling dating from the earlier part of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

The act of appropriating domestic architecture in art was not a new project. Dan Graham's *Homes for America* of the 1960s and Gordon Matta-Clark's demolition projects (Figure 3.9; 1974) were important precursors that used domestic dwellings as

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<sup>8</sup> Prior to settling in New York City, where he has lived for the past thirty years, Gober had attended art school in Rome, Italy—The Tyler School of Art—for one year, 1973 to 1974. He completed a Bachelors of Art at Middlebury College, Vermont in 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Despite his said desire to sell the dollhouses as non-art works as a source of income, evidence does not indicate that Gober ever sold his dollhouses as anything but works of art. Gober made his first dollhouse in 1977, a year after he had moved to New York City for the purpose of pursuing a career as an artist. See Theodora Vischer, ed., *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations 1979–2007* (Basel: Steidl/Schaulager, 2007), 36–38.

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Carley, *The Visual Dictionary of American Domestic Architecture*, A Henry Holt Reference Book (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1994), will help with a more precious identification of the type of architecture Gober sought to recreate in *Half Stone House*.

works of art.<sup>11</sup> What was innovative for the time was Gober's format: by constructing a dollhouse, he elicited a particular type of looking: disembodied viewing. Disembodied viewing has its roots in Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, a work I discussed at length in the first chapter of this dissertation, and refers to viewers ability to imagine themselves physically exploring a space that because of scale they only have have visual access to.

The scholar Susan Stewart in her book *On Longing* contended, "the dollhouse is consumed by the eyes."<sup>12</sup> To consume Gober's dollhouses visually, invites disembodied viewing in which the viewer has the increasing desire to enter the house, walk through its hallways, and explore its rooms. This desire to actually walk around inside the house can not be fulfilled, and the viewer is stuck with disembodied viewing as their only mode of access. Disembodied viewing is contingent on Gober's skill in performing tasks required by carpentry and craft: physical labor and precision of handwork.

For Gober the concept of the handmade extended beyond the production of an object without mechanical processes. The handmade, for Gober, meant the physical processes performed by the hand(s): manual labor. Meaning, for Gober, is an occupation of the hand(s) which perform physical, domestic, hygienic, and artistic tasks. Although hands make infrequent appearances in Gober's iconography, the fruits of their labor—washing, drawing, making, arranging, painting, building, and sculpting—are always present, if not explicitly visible.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ann Wagner has written an article on Gordon Matta-Clark's project that is pertinent to this history. See Anne M. Wagner, "Splitting and Doubling: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Body of Sculpture," *Grey Room*, no. 14 (2004): 27–45.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 62.

<sup>13</sup> In his later work—2004–2005—Gober incorporates yellow plastic gloves (the kind that are typically sold in grocery stores or big box stores for washing dishes or cleaning), a strong reference to disembodied hands. For a discussion of Gober's use of plastic yellow gloves, see Brenda Richardson, *A Robert Gober Lexicon*, (Germany: Steidl, 2005), 52.

In constructing *Half Stone House*, Gober assumed the role of a skilled craftsman by measuring, sawing, nailing, joining, and framing his sculpture. The exterior of the house demonstrates Gober's facility in masonry and carpentry, as evidenced in the small-scale cut-stone veneer and wood siding. Gober's labor is perceived in the intricacy of these details, which detain the viewer's eye with their incredible specificity. As viewers, we visually indulge in Gober's craft: moving our eyes over the smooth and rough textures of *Half Stone House*'s façade. This type of close observation sparks a desire to investigate the miniature further. We peek through the small-scale windows, probing the house's interior spaces in search of signs of life. Eventually our visual curiosity may give way to a physical curiosity, and although our corporeal stature denies us the pleasure of ascending the tiny porch stairs and pulling open the front door, we imagine ourselves doing so.<sup>14</sup> These acts of close observation and disembodied looking are specifically driven by curiosity and a want to encounter the inhabitants of the little house.

We are disappointed when we discover that *Half Stone House* is vacant. Its barren rooms are void of all furnishings that support day-to-day human activities: beds for sleeping, tables for eating, chairs for sitting, sinks for cleaning, toilets for excreting, and light fixtures for seeing. All that remain in the sculpture's little rooms are the backdrops in front of which these human activities take place: wood and vinyl flooring, wallpaper, doors and doorways, windows without shades or drapes. The vacant interiors thwart any chance we, as viewers, may have had of encountering the house's inhabitants.

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<sup>14</sup> My contention that Gober's *Half Stone House* is supported by scholar Susan Stewart's argument that the dollhouse "unlike the single miniature object," is a universe that "cannot be known sensually; it is inaccessible to the languages of the body and thus is the most abstract of all miniature forms." See Stewart, *On Longing*, 63.

## Home

Gober's *Half Stone House* inflicts on viewers a simultaneous sense of desire for contact with another human being and what might best be described as an unresolved creepiness. The viewer's wish to probe the house—to analyze its exterior and penetrate its interior, to search for a human encounter—is a form of longing. It is equivalent to the act of recalling, with feelings of happiness and sadness, a person, place, or event from the past. When viewing an installation or isolated sculpture by Gober, the viewer may consider the phenomenological framework in which he or she exists, how their experiences are perceived, and the kinds of communication they have with others.<sup>15</sup> More than just an architectural structure, Gober's sculpture provokes an exploration of the possible meanings ascribed to the house as a personalized environment and a space of (co)habitation that connotes a place where personal actions and interactions take place.<sup>16</sup>

Domestic architecture becomes a symbol of "home" in Gober's work. With each dollhouse he made, Gober's ideas about what he termed "domestic nondescript," blossomed in complexity and his work began to investigate possible psychological meanings attached to "the house as a symbol."<sup>17</sup> Many of his sculptures raise troubling questions about the concept of "home" and the social conventions that are generated and perpetuated within its purview.

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<sup>15</sup> The application of phenomenology to the physical experience of sculpture, especially through the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has been written about extensively by Alexander Potts. Although Potts uses phenomenology as a key to unlock the mysteries of minimalist works, the act of staging encounters between sculptural objects and viewer is a legacy inherited by Gober. Where the minimalists maintained the integrity of sculpture as object, Gober continuously created sculptures that slip between subject and object. See Alexander Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). Specifically Chapter Six "The Phenomenological Turn," 207-224.

<sup>16</sup> For a lengthy discussion of the theme of "home" as it has been used by contemporary artists, see Gill Perry, "Dream Houses: Installations and the Home," in Gill Perry and Paul Wood, eds., *Themes in Contemporary Art, Art of the 20th Century Series* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Vischer, *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations 1979-2007*, pp. 38, 36.

My interpretation of Gober's representations of home echoes those of other scholars who have termed Gober's sculptures "suburban surrealism"<sup>18</sup> and "domestic dreamscapes."<sup>19</sup> For example, curator Linda Norden equated Gober's work to that of filmmaker David Lynch, emphasizing the common use of nightmarish and dreamlike images which give the sense that "the home is a place where things can go wrong."<sup>20</sup> Gober's dollhouses are simultaneously *canny* (clever, astute, and sly) and *uncanny* (eerie, weird, and creepy) representations of normalcy, where the most mundane is laced with sinister characteristics.

### ***Haunted House***

One of the most sinister works in Gober's early oeuvre is *Burnt House* (Figure 3.10.A.; 1980). Unlike *Half Stone House* that had come before it, *Burnt House* is much more evidently a sculpture, not a child's toy or hobby enthusiast's craft project. The small-scale, two-story, single-family house was modeled after a home occupied by Gober's paternal grandmother. In constructing *Burnt House* Gober once again assumed the functions of a carpenter—duplicating with some degree of accuracy decorative moldings, roof tiles, window frames, and doorways—but carpentry was not the artist's primary role. Gober performed a figurative act of arson on his little house, strategically setting fire to the roof on one of the top-floor rooms. Unlike the more benign *Half Stone House*, the act of arson transformed *Burnt House* into a more complicated artifact.

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<sup>18</sup> Linda Norden, "Robert Gober," *Artforum* 46, no. 4 (2007): 6.

<sup>19</sup> Nanby Spector, "Robert Gober: Homeward-Bound," *Parkett*, no. 27 (1991): 82.

<sup>20</sup> Norden, "Robert Gober."



In *Half Stone House*, the specificity built into each exterior detail—siding, cut-stone, windows, screen, and doors—became a springboard to more complex desires, on the part of the viewer, for a human-to-human encounter. In *Burnt House*, the specificity of the exterior became background noise to the more obvious vestiges of the fire: a large hole in the roof, absence of window panes, and dark black singe patterns. Rather than longing for an encounter with another human being, *Burnt House* threatens to stage an encounter between viewers and something akin to a phantom, ghost, zombie, or poltergeist.

When Gober was asked to provide the source that motivated the making of *Burnt House*, he referred to two narratives, each of which recount traumatic encounters with absent or missing bodies.<sup>21</sup> In the first story, Gober recalls as a young boy coming home from school one day and seeing the house across the street engulfed in flames. The occupant of the home was standing on the lawn outside the house, hysterical because her son was trapped inside. The second story is not a personal narrative but a more public history. On May 25, 1979, six-year-old Etan Patz left his home in lower Manhattan for school and never returned home. His disappearance prompted a nationwide search that has lasted for over three decades and has made Patz one of the most famous missing children in New York City.<sup>22</sup> In both of these narratives, the bodies of young boys are missing—one inside the home engulfed in flames and the other mysteriously vanished—and there are others who desperately seek to find them. Gober became an eyewitness to

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<sup>21</sup> Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Gober on Etan Patz: “On May 25, 1979, Etan Patz disappeared from the face of the earth as he walked to meet his school bus at the corner of West Broadway and Prince St. I didn’t know the family but had seen them almost daily as I lived and worked around the corner. His disappearance sparked a worldwide manhunt and his smiling trustful face was seen on posters and fliers that blanketed our neighborhood for months.” (Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 40).

the events associated with their disappearance, a position he wanted to re-stage for viewers of *Burnt House*.

As in Gober's own experience, the viewer of *Burnt House* was not present at the scene of the crime. They did not see Gober set fire to the little house; they did not hear the crackle of the flames and creaking of the burning wood, nor smell the smoke and ash. Because they arrive after the act of arson was committed, the little house set asunder, and the fire extinguished, viewers become detectives rather than eyewitnesses. Viewers are able to metaphorically assume this role when they pull open the two hinged doors Gober installed at the sight of the burn. When these doors are open, the viewer has full access to two of the home's interior rooms. Unfortunately, these rooms contain nothing more than charred wood floors and patterned wallpaper, which yield minimal interest aside from revealing the fire's point of origin. The real question remains unanswered: Where are the bodies?

The viewer-now-turned-detective is motivated to investigate further and may walk around the side of the house and peer through the tiny windows, located to the left side of the porch; following this path, the detective will eventually stumble upon the remnants of bodies. These remnants are images of bodies, not in-the-flesh bodies or figural sculptures. Through the windows we discover that both the upstairs and downstairs rooms, visible through the little windows, are lined with wallpaper (Figure 3.10.B.; detail). The wallpaper in the downstairs room is a repeating image of a U-Haul trailer attached to a car bumper.<sup>23</sup> The image presents the possibility that inhabitants of the house vacated it prior to the fire. On the other hand, the wallpaper in the upstairs

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<sup>23</sup> A photograph corresponding to the illustrated image is repeated by Gober in the artist book that accompanied his installation at the 2001 Venice Biennale; repetition, as we shall see, is not an uncommon practice for Gober.

room tells a different story. Here we find a repeating image of a figure wearing dark pants and a light blue shirt pacing back and forth. The figure is leaning forward, his or her arms dangling limply away from the torso, as if in a trance or sleepwalking. The viewer ponders if this is the former occupant of the house—an indication, perhaps, that not everyone left prior to the fire.

Although the viewer does not encounter a three-dimensional rendition of a human body, as they do in the work of Hanson, the presence of a human body in *Burnt House* is nevertheless palpable. The spaces normally occupied by bodies and belongings have been emptied by the artist, and what remains are disembodied representations marked on the walls like ghostly traces. Through these images, we come to realize that at some point in time the house was not vacant and that it may now be haunted by its former occupants.<sup>24</sup> In this early iteration of bodies as images, wallpaper serves to further complicate the viewer's desire to encounter another human being, by obscuring the relationship between two-dimensional images of bodies and real bodies (those of the former inhabitants), and the viewer is left with the possibilities of accepting or rejecting these flat images as plausible surrogates for bodies in the flesh.

### ***Absent Bodies and Surrogate Persons***

Gober carefully staged encounters between viewers and objects that evoke the human body to illuminate how representational styles and rhetorics of display structure and

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<sup>24</sup> Francesca Miglietti argued that Gober works not with the presence of real bodies, but with the traces left by bodies; these traces act as clues which the viewer is encouraged to interpret as the “clues that a presence has passed this way.” Francesca Alfano Miglietti, *Extreme Bodies: The Use and Abuse of the Body in Art* (Italy: Skira Editore S.p.A, 2003), 182.

shape our experiences with art. A defining moment in Gober's practice was his first full-scale installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1989 (Figure 3.11.A.). This installation underscores how each encounter staged by Gober reflected sensitivity to the contingencies associated with display, such as spatial and architectural constraints and audience responses. Conventional methods prescribed by a modernist aesthetic for displaying contemporary sculpture as an object segregated on its own in a sterilized room with white walls and spot lighting, fail to accommodate the complex physical and psychological encounters Gober's installations elicit.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, Gober assumed the role of curator and designed installations that rejected a concentration on autonomous objects in favor of a consideration of environments that contained groupings of objects and images.<sup>26</sup> This strategy of display highlights relationships between various elements in the room, including the physical space, real bodies in that space (viewers and gallery guards), and Gober's art. This section traces the relationship between these elements, looking at the different ways Gober sought to choreograph full-scale installations that mimic the types of encounters staged in his dollhouses.

For the installation at the Paula Cooper Gallery, Gober constructed two three-sided, makeshift rooms that were slightly offset but facing each other. By creating the sub-rooms, Gober walled his environments off from the rest of the gallery and was thus

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<sup>25</sup> For a deeper consideration of how installation artists affected institutional understandings of display see Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999). For a further discussion of the intersection of display and representation see Emma Barker, ed., *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>26</sup> For a re-installation of this exhibition in 2009 at the Art Institute of Chicago, Gober employed craftspeople to install his wallpaper, but he was in diligent observation and direction of these installations the whole time. To watch a short video of the installation of Gober's work at the Art Institute of Chicago, see the Art Institute of Chicago, *The Art Institute of Chicago Installations: Robert Gober, 2009*. <http://www.youtube.com/user/ArtInstituteChicago#play/all/uploads-all/1/VNegeZb9VPk>. Gober also assumed the role of curator for the exhibition "Robert Gober: Meat Wagon" at the Menial Collection in 2005–2006. In 2010 Gober curated a show of the work of American scene painter Charles Burchfield, "Heat Waves in the Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield."

able to control their spatial dimensions and lighting. To delineate the rooms further, Gober covered their walls with hand-silkscreened wallpaper. The wallpapers transformed the public space of the art gallery into a quasi sort of domestic interior space which was previously represented in miniature scale with the dollhouses. Hanging the wallpaper served to efface the sterility of the modernist gallery's white walls, meant to melt into obscurity, and re-incorporated them as a defining feature of the sculptural installation.

The wallpaper motifs installed at the Paula Cooper Gallery (1989) visually represented bodies and body parts. The wallpaper in the first room had a black background with crude, chalk-like drawings of male and female genitalia (Figure 3.11.B.; detail). The drawings subjected viewers to awkward sexual encounters if they came to close to the wall. This awkward encounter with a body fragment was reiterated in the sculptural objects Gober placed in the room: drains (Figure 3.12; 1989) and a paper sack filled with donuts (Figure 3.13; 1989)—whose shapes and functions were simultaneously read as familiar objects appropriated from the everyday and as stand-ins for sexual orifices.<sup>27</sup>

## **Domestic Violence**

The second room at the Paula Cooper Gallery had wallpaper with a yellow background and alternating images of a hanging black man and a sleeping white man (Figure 3.14; 1989). The image of the lynched black man was found by Gober's assistant in the picture

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<sup>27</sup> Gober said that he was inspired to create the images based on the story "Heat" by Joyce Carol Oates, which the artist described as "a story about murder, maybe sexual violence, adolescence, innocence, and guilt." Robert Gober, quoted in Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 240.

collection of the New York Public Library. The image of the sleeping white man was clipped from a full-page ad in the *New York Times* for sheets on sale at Bloomingdale's (Figure 3.15; c. 1989).<sup>28</sup> Because they were reproduced in recurring sequence, the visceral image of the lynching and the banal image of the man sleeping tended to blur into a repetitive pattern, until they were viewed up-close. When the images are considered as a pair, instead of a pattern, the wallpaper communicates a subtle narrative about racism, sexism, and violence in American history. The images do so through a series of open-ended metaphors. For example, the use of an advertisement for sheets, when juxtaposed with the violent image of a lynching, gives rise to a symbiotic relationship between objects and metaphors. This may open the potential for the sheets that cover the man, while he sleeps, to stand as visual metaphors for Ku Klux Klan robes.

In surrounding the viewer in this narrative, the installation attempted to implicate the viewer as an eyewitness or detective, to a history of lynching, a crime with a direct association to fire, as was the case in *Burnt House*. Hanson's *Race Riot* (1968) had staged a similar type of encounter, although with life-size and very life-like figures. In Gober's installation there are no actual figural sculptures, just figurative representations of figures that slip between layers of representation, osculating from a man sleeping perhaps even dreaming of the lynching, to a more charged social and political narrative that recounts traumatic racial tensions.

The *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* wallpaper served as a backdrop for other sculptural elements: eight sacks of cat litter and a full-scale wedding dress (mounted on a wire frame) (Figure 3.20 and figures 3.16-3.17; 1989-2009). The installation staged a

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<sup>28</sup> For more on the images used by Gober, see Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women and the Mob* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 216.

historical narrative about racial tensions, in which the wedding dress became a third bodily presence. The artist said that the wedding dress is reminiscent of the one his mother wore on her wedding day; the long-sleeve, off-the-shoulder, creamy satin vestment is an artifact of an era long since past.<sup>29</sup> The vintage style, color, and fabric may move viewers to consider the signification of the dress as both an autonomous signifier of purity, virginity, and hope, as much as a conventional sign of entrapment, traditional restraint, and cooperation within a system of social normativity. The dress itself is empty, displayed on a wire armature, much like a relic in a show of Jacqueline Kennedy's dresses at the Metropolitan Museum would be. The critic Nina Felshin argued that "clothing, more than any other object or possession, is closely identified with the body of the absent wearer." The empty wedding dress "acts as a surrogate" that suggests the presence of a bride.<sup>30</sup> My perspective on Gober's dress was influenced by a visitor with whom I spoke at the Art Institute of Chicago (July 15, 2010), who suggested to me that the dress surely represented the bride "scared stiff"—a symbol of wedding jitters that also made a morbid reference to the fate of the lynched man depicted on the wallpaper. Does the bride "belong" to the white sleeping man? Or could it be that she was involved with the black man, historically a crime punishable by death?

Subtle layers of meaning are always present in Gober's work. Gober's appropriation of mundane things and reinterpretation of them as something uncanny is most poignant in his cat litter sacks (Figure 3.17; 1989). This everyday throw-away item

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<sup>29</sup> Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 234.

<sup>30</sup> Felshin documents the use of clothing and costumes in contemporary art. She not only sees clothing as a symbol of its possessor, but also a signifier of loss. Felshin historically contextualizes the use of empty clothing for artists responding to the AIDS crisis in the late '80s and early '90s: "In the context of the AIDS crisis, which has had a devastating impact on the art world, it is hard not to read this art of empty clothes as a literalization of loss or a memento mori, a reminder of death." (20) See Nina Felshin, "Clothing as Subject," *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (1995): 20-29.

gets re-made and elevated from its status as something that functions to “absorb shit” (as another visitor to the Art Institute of Chicago termed it, during a tour I gave of Gober’s installation in the summer of 2009) to an art object. The cat litter, in a metaphorical sense, retains its routine function in Gober’s installation: as something that will clean up liquids. The red band that wraps around the top half of the bag can be interpreted as a visual suggestion that the bags will soak up the blood that will drip from the body of the lynched man. A pinwheel printed on top of this band simultaneously serves as a brand logo and as reference to something that twists in the wind. Likewise, in Gober’s choice of material we find yet another layer of meaning. Gober’s bags of cat litter are made from plaster, a material that absorbs liquid in order to take a more concrete shape.

In Gober’s work, double-speak, or the appropriation of images from popular culture only to re-interpret them by juxtaposing them with other images or meanings, is commonplace. For example, Gober commissioned a replica of the wedding dress to fit his body and in 1992 he had a picture taken of himself in the dress, donning a wig and veil, and holding a bouquet of flowers. He then montaged the lettering from a *Saks Fifth Avenue* advertisement for bridal wear on top of his image and re-printed the montage as if it were a page in the *New York Times* with the headline: “Vatican Condones Discrimination Against Homosexuals” (Figure 3.18; *Untitled*, 1992). The dress—more than a symbol of heterosexual union—becomes a way to call attention to the issue of gay marriage.

The wallpaper images and the dress are read by viewers to have a particularly corporeal type of presence. It is, however, also a presence that is always mediated by the format— by a drawn image or by a dress without a body—which renders the physical



body present only through its absence. Gober's wallpaper images frequently reference the body, and the narratives Gober writes to accompany them reinforce the bodily. They are narratives about history framed through encounters with bodies. For instance, the wall text, written by Gober to accompany the 2009 installation, read as follows:

The painful imagery depicted on the wallpaper in this 1989 installation was meant as a reminder of fact—the ugly and unforgettable reality of the United States' history. By putting this image onto endlessly repeating wallpaper, I made an attempt to say, metaphorically, that this was not an isolated event and that in many ways it has become our background.

The sculpture of the empty wedding dress is a vase waiting to be filled. It represents the supposed white purity that often triggered or justified the violence depicted on the walls. It also represents a vessel that is ready to be filled with all of the optimistic hopes and dreams of marriage. And to many Americans—Gay Americans (an estimated 10 percent of our population)—it is a reminder of equality denied.<sup>31</sup>

Gober's interpretation of his installation, as characterized in the text above, underscores the fluidity of his mimetic realist project, and the way in which objects, images, and bodies continuously move through multiple layers of signification.

At times, however, this mapping takes place unintentionally. One such case of unintentional slippage between the real and the artificial occurred when the *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* wallpaper was installed, without the wedding dress and cat litter, at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Figure 3.19; installation view) for the 1990 group exhibition, *Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective*. The incident occurred when an African-American guard, who was assigned to guard Gober's

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<sup>31</sup> Gober was seen as an important artist for the Chicago area. The installation at the Art Institute was slated to open in the spring after the election of 2008, when the country elected its first African-American president. In the fall, prior to the election, Gober voiced his concern about the images used in *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* to curator of contemporary art James Rondeau, in a handwritten letter in which he asked if the installation would still be appropriate if Barack Obama was not elected president of the United States. Twenty years after its first construction at the Paula Cooper gallery, the installation had a re-invigorated meaning.

installation, expressed his hesitation in defending the work against vandalism because he found it difficult to relate to its content. The guard additionally expressed anxiety as he found himself, as a black man, unintentionally implicated in the drama of the event depicted by the wallpaper. The following is an excerpt read by Ned Rifkin (who was, at the time, the Smithsonian Institution's undersecretary for art) from the guard's comments during a roundtable discussion dedicated to the issue:

Look, you have to understand our point of view. I understand that somebody meant something else by it. But the bottom line for me is that I'm standing here having to protect it from vandalism when I can't even begin to understand how I can relate to it—and I've actually become part of the installation itself in a funny way.<sup>32</sup>

The artist responded to the guard's comment by admitting he did not realize that the guards at the Hirshhorn would "be almost exclusively black." He expressed remorse at his lack of forethought and said he "would have been more sensitive to it, because they *do* become part of the installation."<sup>33</sup> When the wallpaper was grouped with the wedding dress and cat litter sacks, the wedding dress, like the images on the walls, became a body present through its physical absence. The dress as an empty shell, served as a placeholder for the absent body. But the guard at the Hirshhorn became a real body wrapped in Gober's historical narrative. The unintentional participation of the guard is in large part due to race and the fact that he is required to stand in the room, in front of the wallpaper, for an extended period of time. When the work was re-installed at the Art Institute of Chicago (where the majority of the guards are also African-American) in 2009, the artist and the curator, James Rondeau, were more cautious. Prior to the installation's unveiling, museum staff held seminars with the guards to make certain that the wallpaper

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Gober, "Hanging Man—Sleeping Man. A Conversation between Teresa Bush, Robert Gober, and Ned Rifkin," *Parkett*, no. 27 (1991): 93.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

would not be misinterpreted. The guards received training on the installation as it was interpreted by Gober. Additionally, influential members of the African-American community in Chicago were asked their opinion of the work. The foresight was effective in quelling potential anxieties, but the experience of the guards at the Hirshhorn is telling, as it shows the potent effect of the absent black body in the work, and the desire of some viewers to find a body to fill that gap: a type of encounter that is inherent in the work and remains outside the mediations of the institution in which it is installed.

### ***Replacements for Bodies***

Encountering a sculpture or entering an installation by Gober produces the eerie feeling of stumbling into a deeply personal and yet perplexingly foreign narrative. His works have been described by scholar and curator Richard Flood as “autobiography and social history.”<sup>34</sup> We have seen how Gober used the viewer’s desire to encounter bodies as a frame for narratives of social histories in his dollhouses and full-scale installations. These narratives are likewise mapped onto individual sculptures of objects such as *Untitled (Lightbulb)* (Figure 3.5), a single lightbulb hanging from a cord attached to the ceiling, that was displayed alongside the *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* wallpaper at the Hirshhorn (1990). Gober was one of a group of artists, which included Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who used everyday objects—clocks, lightbulbs, candy, empty beds—as symbols of personal narratives about the life and death of gay men affected by the AIDS epidemic in New York City in the late 1980s.

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Flood, et al., *Robert Gober: Sculpture + Drawing*, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 9.

Other artists working in the late 1980s were also using everyday objects as stand-ins for absent human bodies or as metaphors for life and death. Gonzalez-Torres, whom Gober has cited as influential for his work, used lightbulbs as a way to highlight the cycle of life. He made strings of lights (Figure 3.20; *Untitled (Last Light)*, 1993) as symbols of celebration, placing them in contexts that would remind viewers of the “pleasures of a summer garden party, the joy of a holiday celebration, or the romance of a nightclub dance floor.”<sup>35</sup> Yet the bulbs also served to highlight the brevity of life and the eternal presence and possibility of loss, as each bulb eventually burns out. The artist stipulated that each burnt-out bulb be replaced with a new one. Thus the cycle of light and darkness begins again, and the bulbs have the potential to become metaphors for death and renewal.

Gober and Gonzalez-Torres represent a movement in art when artists were appropriating formal references—post-minimalist forms and display, conceptual art practices, and pop-like materials—to create an art that shows evidence of AIDS mourning. In the late 1980s, the AIDS crisis became an increasingly important theme in Gober’s work. Gober interviewed the activist collective Gran Fury, he wrote about losing his partner in 1989, he interviewed then-congressman John Conyers about a hate-crime bill, and he made work that evoked the experience of someone sick, someone dying, and someone infected. The lightbulb became an emblem of mortality in this repertoire.

*Untitled (Lightbulb)* was a collaboration between Gober and the postmodern artist Sherrie Levine, who wished to make their own variation on this theme. Gober and

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<sup>35</sup> James E. Rondeau, “Untitled (Last Light), 1993, by Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 25, no. 1 (1999): 84.

Levine's lightbulb may be a symbol of an "idea," and the work thus makes a tongue-in-cheek nod to conceptual art practices, where the main objective is the pursuit of an idea over a literal interpretation or form as the finished product. Unlike Gonzales-Torres, however, and in an added twist, Gober and Levine neither used a real lightbulb nor did they make a direct copy of the object. Instead, the artists made a handmade replica of the bulb, and substituted opaque wax for the customary translucent glass of the everyday lightbulb. As is the case across his oeuvre, Gober's lightbulb substituted one material for another in order to recode the everyday as art. The soft opaque wax of the bulb replaced the expected fragile translucent glass. The wax furthermore associates the bulb with its own history, as it evokes the wax candles used for illumination prior to the invention of the electric bulb. Even when placed in a modern context where it might bring light to a space, the wax lightbulb presented new contradictions. Electricity cannot make this bulb emit light, and the heat from such an energy source would simply melt the wax, rendering it all the more useless. By making manifest the contradictions inherent in a waxen lightbulb, Gober's work also highlights the nature of real lightbulbs as extremely fragile and ephemeral objects, in the same vein as the cycle of life represented by Gonzales-Torres.

Levine and Gober's lightbulb, unlike Gonzales-Torres strings of lights, is solitary. It is a single source of fictive illumination dangling from a cord that one might associate with the light in a closet, a garage, or a basement stairwell. These are the odd spaces of one's home; they are not so much places to inhabit, as they are places to shove unsightly clutter and belongings one would rather tuck away than display. When we encounter the bulb, dangling from the ceiling, we call to mind the act of peering into these more

isolated locations in search of something, only to discover in their dimly lit corners things we might have forgotten we had, or things that we purposefully sought to hide. These multiple interpretations underscore the inner workings of Gober's brand of mimetic realism. Things simultaneously hold multiple meanings, possible interpretations, and slippages in physical states.

### **Sinks and Urinals**

Although I have focused my discussion of *Untitled (Lightbulb)* on the sculpture's more formal or sculptural attributes, it should also be read in concert with Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Last Light)* as an art object that shed light on what, in the late 1980s, was considered an unsightly disease, AIDS.<sup>36</sup> The light bulb came to stand in for bodies that were gone or absent, burned out or dimmed because of the virus. The lightbulb was not the first object in Gober's oeuvre that referred to the dimming (dying) or dead (burned out) bodies. In the early 1980s, Gober produced an extensive series of sinks in a variety of shapes: small and large basins double and single. From the beginning, Gober referred to the sinks as representations of the bodies of young gay men who had suddenly fallen ill and were dying from AIDS. As Gober explained it, the sinks held personal value. They were based on actual sinks and memories of sinks from the sculptor's life:

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<sup>36</sup>AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) first appeared on the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's radar in 1981, when five gay men in Los Angeles were reported as having a rare form of cancer. The disease, coined by the mass media as GRID (the Gay Related Immune Deficiency), spread quickly and by the time then President Ronald Reagan declared AIDS a serious epidemic, it had already claimed 20,000 lives in the United States alone. Currently recognized as a pandemic, AIDS has rapidly become a global concern that excludes no demographic. Gober actively participated in AIDS awareness campaigns; he published narratives about surviving the epidemic while witnessing the death of close friends. See Robert Gober, "Cumulus from America," *Parkett (Zurich)*, no. 19 (1989): 169-171.

the sinks in his grandparents' house, the sink his mother would stand at in his childhood kitchen, the sink his father would use in the basement of his childhood home, or the sink the artist had in a tenement on Spring Street in New York from 1978 to 1982.<sup>37</sup> Gober recalls having a dream about sinks:

I don't remember what came first, the sinks or the dream. But I remember having a dream in which I found a room in my home that I had never known existed. It was full of daylight streaming in through open windows and there were white porcelain sinks hung on all of the walls with their taps open full and water running. The sinks I ended up making differed from the dream. There was no water and no daylight. The promise that the dream implied was confounded, counterbalanced by the real life nightmare of day-to-day life in New York.<sup>38</sup>

“What do you do when you stand in front of a sink?” asked Gober rhetorically. “You clean yourself,” supposedly—a false promise, according to the sculptor, who personally witnessed the death of those closest to him from an infectious disease that could not be scrubbed or washed away in front of a sink. More than a personal experience for Gober, death—in the form of the AIDS virus—had taken over New York City in the late 1980s. Unlike the sinks that appeared in Gober's dream, however, the sink sculptures did not function. They lacked plumbing—taps and pipes—and no water ran into their basins. Initially scholars read the sinks as representations of dysfunctional bodies and interpreted the dry plumbing fixtures as sexualized objects of frustrated desires.<sup>39</sup> While I agree that the series of sink sculptures allowed Gober to explore the formal properties of the object and its relation to bodily experience, I see the sinks more importantly as visceral representations of the human body.

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<sup>37</sup> Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 54, 66.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>39</sup> For more on Gober's sinks as representations of desire see Hal Foster, “An Art of Missing Parts,” *October* 92 (2000):128-156. Also see Elizabeth Anne Dungan, “Discourse of Dis-Ease: Medical Imaging and Contemporary Art” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003).

At this time, the artist was working on a series of paintings, *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1982–1983) in which images of water were interspersed with images of body parts: chests and legs. In many ways these paintings have become the dictionary for Gober’s visual lexicon, a place to which he consistently returns in search of more visual information. Most significantly, the single board onto which Gober would paint layers of images, painting then re-painting, became the foundation for his first sink sculpture (Figure 3.21; *The Small Sink*, 1983). The sculpture seemed a one-off; it was not until a year later that Gober returned to the idea of the sink and began an extended exploration of the sink as an artistic form. The sculptor played with sinks from a variety of angles; exaggerating their dimensions, bending them into corners, minimizing their details, even splicing two or more together. Some of the sinks remained untitled, while others Gober referred to in their titles by using human emotions: *The Silent Sink* (Figure 3.22; 1984), *The Sad Sink* (Figure 3.22; 1985), *The Silly Sink* (Figure 3.23; 1985), *The Scary Sink* (Figure 3.24; 1985), *The Subconscious Sink* (Figure 3.25; 1985), and *The Split-up Conflicted Sink* (Figure 3.26; 1985). These titles gave the sinks anthropomorphic qualities and invited viewers to look for evidence of sadness, silliness, scariness, and confusion in an otherwise inanimate object.

Not only did the sculptures’ titles refer to human characteristics, but also the forms themselves were intended to be corporeal. Writing for *Sculpture* magazine, critic and scholar George Howell highlighted Gober’s comments about the bodily qualities of the sinks, their “backsplashes were like shoulders, the fixture holes like nipples, and ‘the



hole in the bottom of the sink like the hole in the bottom of us.”<sup>40</sup> The bodily features of the sinks, as described by Gober, are not always easy to read. For example, *Double Sink* (Figure 3.27; 1984), which is visually relatively close to a real sink (appropriate proportions, shape, and finish), may translate as two bodies. The curves of the sink’s backsplash could imply two strong shoulders. The double sets of tap-holes are suggestive of nipples. The sculptor’s installations of the sinks can also be seen as encounters. As objects staged to evoke a human dynamism, they are nearly animated, and thereby they structure and shape viewers’ reactions to the sinks as more than just readymades, or non-encounter objects.

Initially the sinks were made whole, and included basins, tap-holes, and drains; these works also remained *Untitled*. But as the series developed Gober mutated and dissected the sink, omitting, chopping, splicing, and elongating its physical features. The deformed sinks and sink parts took on the more descriptive titles mentioned above: silent, sad, silly, scary, and conflicted. Gober admitted that he was never good at developing titles for his sculptures but understood that “a great title can add an immediate unseen dimension to a work.”<sup>41</sup> This importance assigned to titling signals a clear departure from most minimalist practice of using “untitled.” The titles help viewers to associate the inanimate with the animate, reinforcing the sink’s implied anthropomorphism. The viewer may also identify a sense of whimsy in the fact that Gober has given a physical form to a human emotion. Despite the human-like evocations produced by the sink sculptures, it is important to remember that Gober’s sinks are not direct representations of

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<sup>40</sup> Comments made by Robert Gober to George Howell at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden press preview, March 2000. George Howell, “The Two Sides of Robert Gober,” *Sculpture* 20, no. 5 (2001): 41-45, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Gober, quoted in Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 94.

bodies, like Duane Hanson's and Ron Mueck's figures. Rather, the sinks are representations of the human body staged to promote an encounter between sculpture and viewer that shapes an alternative reaction to art, as much as it does bodily encounter.

When installed at the Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, in the summer of 1986 (Figure 3.28; installation at Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles), sink parts were hung from the ceiling and in the corners, as well as on the wall. Gober's installation choices echoed those of Robert Morris, who over twenty years prior had displayed series of large-scale plywood polyhedrons, painted gray, with the purpose of exploring the physical relationship between the viewer and the sculptural object (Figure 3.29; 1964). Morris' writings focused intensely on staging encounters with sculpture and took into consideration the interplay of three-dimensional shape, situation (the space and lighting of the gallery), and viewer.<sup>42</sup> Morris' use of the gallery as a stage for his simple, not too big and not too small, sculptures is evidence of a "more phenomenological perspective on sculpture" and a greater concern with how a person might visually interpret and physically contend with the sculptural object.<sup>43</sup> Gober used the sinks to establish a discourse of display by hanging them from all different angles and in unexpected spaces of the gallery, which challenged the relationship between viewer and sculpture.

In the mid-1980s, a new form appeared in Gober's visual repertoire: a urinal (Figure 3.30; *Urinal*, 1984). At first the urinal felt like an anomaly to the artist, but he admitted that it was a "logical variation" on the motif of the sink.<sup>44</sup> Shortly after the

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<sup>42</sup> See Morris "Notes on Sculpture" reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 222–223.

<sup>43</sup> Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 224.

<sup>44</sup> The urinal is a receptacle for the body's waste: a container-like form, which collects and discards the unsightly. Sinks, on the other hand (in theory) are more hygienic than urinals: places to clean, wash, and cleanse the body of things that defile it. Urinals thus are loaded with associations of excrement and connotations of contamination, when compared to the assumed cleanliness offered by a sink.

urinal's sculptural inception in his oeuvre, Gober experienced immense anxiety about the form. First, the sculptor saw the urinal as burdened with "sexual and social connotations," which for undisclosed reasons did not appeal to Gober at this time. Second, the urinal was "too loaded as an image and came with too much baggage," especially because the early '80s witnessed the dawn of Appropriation art and "all that people saw in the work," according to Gober, "was its reference to Duchamp."<sup>45</sup> The sculptor hung his urinals in rows, transforming the space of the gallery. More than an evocation of a readymade, Gober's urinals staged a bodily encounter with their viewer. If the sinks evoked the presence of human bodies in the gallery, the urinal took the implications of the bodily one step further. The urinal sculptures referenced a male body. Unlike their predecessors, the sinks that are commonly used by both men and women, urinals are only located in the men's restroom in the United States and are traditionally never used by women. To take the urinal out of the men's restroom and place it in the gallery is to move it from a single-gendered space to a presumed multi-gendered space. This had been done by Duchamp when he presented *Fountain* at the Society of Independent Artist's non-juried exhibition in 1917 (Figure 3.31; 1917).<sup>46</sup> American art historian Wanda Corn investigated the effects of displacement—moving the urinal from a gendered space to a more mixed-gendered space—on the object and more specifically on potential female viewers. She contends that Duchamp's *Fountain* was:

[a]n object whose identity is not at all obvious at first glance, certainly not to female viewers, for whom this piece of equipment is hardly a matter of everyday life.

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<sup>45</sup> Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 70.

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed account of the events that transpired and a deeper reading of the Alfred Stieglitz photograph of *Fountain*, please see Chapter One "Américanisme," in Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999): 43–91. In this chapter, Corn argues that Duchamp's gesture was not only significant as a conceptual work of art, but also represented a new direction for art away from painting—a wholly American art that was distinct and independent of European avant-garde practices.

Indeed, the fame of *Fountain* has given woman intimate knowledge of urinals, acquainting us with an artifact that is as foreign to our sex as a speculum is to men.<sup>47</sup>

I agree with Corn that for women, encountering a urinal is a rare and at times an awkward occurrence. But to say that the object is completely “foreign to our sex” is not altogether truthful. These were not important invocations for Duchamp, whose *Fountain* became the catalyst for a decade of debates regarding the nature of art objects, their relationship to non-art objects, and the institutional frameworks that give them value and meaning.<sup>48</sup> For Gober, on the other hand, the experience of encountering a urinal in the art gallery is intimately entrenched in the viewer’s (both men’s and women’s) experience of encountering the toilet outside the art gallery, and the social associations that object is capable of calling to mind.

In his discussion of Duchamp’s *Fountain* and Gober’s *Urinals*, Hal Foster proposes that what each artist does is bring the bathroom to the gallery:

In effect Duchamp brought the bathroom to the museum, with a provocation (beyond scandal) that was both epistemological (What counts as art?) and institutional (Who determines it?), while Gober brings the museum to the bathroom (if one urinal signals a public toilet, three confirm it), with this additional provocation: suddenly these different spaces seem strangely congruent, for both mix the public and the private in uneasy ways.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Corn, *The Great American Thing*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Notable art historians have gravitated to the readymade as an object steeped in intricate associations to structural linguistics. For more on the relationship between the readymade and structural linguistics, see Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985), Helen Molesworth takes an alternative perspective on the readymades in her essay, “The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades.” Molesworth focuses on the photographic representations of the readymades taken in Duchamp’s studio, which was also his home. Looking closely at these photographs, Molesworth argues that the space of work (the studio) and leisure (the home) commingled, thus rendering the readymades anti-work and humorous. “They [the readymades] resist the rationalization of domestic and work spaces, first by refusing the distinction between them and second by offering disruption and laughter, physical expenditure in the name of humor, rather than work. Their antifunctionality is not solely about their stymied use and exchange value as commodities but has a more literal component. They are antifunctional as in antiwork: they resist their intended, mandated, standardized use. Similarly the readymades resist the working subject, offering instead the involuntary, distracted subject of play.” Molesworth, “The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades,” 58.

<sup>49</sup> Foster, “An Art of Missing Parts,” 144.

Duchamp and Gober accomplish acts of institutional critique but to very different ends. Viewing works of art in an art gallery is both a private experience and a collective experience. The public bathroom, like the art gallery, is inherently controlled by social contingencies of appropriate conduct and comportment. In re-making urinals as sculpture and staging the objects in their original configurations, Gober transforms the space of the gallery, highlighting the inherent tensions that exist in that space.

In an article for New York's *Village Voice*, Gary Indiana argued that the fundamental difference between the urinals of Duchamp and those of Gober was the handmade quality of the latter. A deliberate attempt was made by the sculptor to build the urinals from scratch, a dramatic divergence from Duchamp's readymades purchased as-is off the shelf of a store.<sup>50</sup> Each urinal sculpture was made of wood, wire lath, plaster, and enamel paint rather than the object's customary material of porcelain. Making the object by hand allowed Gober to explore the form intimately, physically recreating its dimensions, and gathering knowledge of its design that Duchamp, in purchasing the object, never attained:

These urinals have been touched, worked up, painted, if you will, lovingly by hand, in other words thought about as forms invented for males to piss in. The readymade urinal only talks about art, the art system, art values; Gober's urinals tell you about pissing, standing next to other people pissing, about cocks and having one in a disposal situation, and about being watched while you piss. Which is so much more basic than modern art.<sup>51</sup>

Indiana reads Gober's work through a homosocial frame: the scenario of being in a men's room with other men, exposing parts of the body in a seemingly semi-public place. With

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<sup>50</sup> Maureen Sherlock argues that "Gober demarks the body and its movements of touch...It is the body as site and sight of longing for what Merleau-Ponty called the chiasm of the touching-touched. Handwork signifies both the person of the maker as the source of meaning and the object as a form of mediation or social life: it fends off the mere repetition of the self, in favor of the irreducible uniqueness of the other. This other comes by my life through the marks of sweat, aging, or repairs, and adheres to substances like wood, but not plastic." Maureen Sherlock, "Arcadian Elegy," *Arts Magazine* 64, no.1 (1989): 44-49, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Gary Indiana, "A Torture Garden," *Village Voice*, October 27, 1989, 105.

the recognition that the urinal, presented as art object, is not only about the “art system” but also about the primal act of releasing bodily fluids, Indiana highlights the disembodied nature of the urinal as an object used, abused, and activated by the body—specifically a male body.

It was Duchamp’s deliberate intention to render his readymade dysfunctional by turning it upside down, placing it on a pedestal, and displaying it in an art gallery. The dysfunctionality isolated *Fountain* from the plethora of mass-produced urinals, which simultaneously defamiliarized it and positioned it for viewing within the institutional frame of the art gallery or museum. For Gober the significance of the urinal was inextricable from the viewer’s familiarity with the toilet, a clear departure from Duchamp’s project: to increase the urinal’s exhibition value and arrest any potential use value. Instead of isolating a single urinal on a pedestal, Gober opted for the reverse of Duchamp’s staging. Gober hung his sculptures in a familiar arrangement, low on the wall and installed in rows of two or three (Figures 3.32 and 3.33; *Pair of Urinals*, 1987 and *Three Urinals*, 1988). The installation technique allowed the connection between the urinals and the men’s restroom to remain intact.

Gober’s urinals are simultaneously a staged encounter with gender and a staged encounter with sexuality. Writing for *ArtForum*, Matthew Weinstein argues that *Urinal* is a “homosexual object.” He contends that it evoked a recollection of a functioning urinal, located in the men’s room, and the act of using the facilities, complete with “stain, smell, situation, and pink disinfectant crystals,” which Weinstein asserted is an encounter more easily recalled by male viewers.<sup>52</sup> But both Indiana and Weinstein failed to mention that Gober’s urinals are not to be used. In no way does Gober invite the viewer

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<sup>52</sup> Matthew Weinstein, “The House of Fiction,” *Artforum International* 28 (1990): 129–130.

to “piss” in the work of art, emphasized by the sculptor’s deliberate making of the object instead of purchasing a urinal, and the exclusion of plumbing and important accoutrements: pipes, a handle for flushing, even a smelly pink urinal cake. So if the gallerygoer—who can be male or female—wants to imagine “standing next to other people pissing,” he or she has to mentally fill in the voids intentionally left by the artist. Although the form is familiar, its staging, its handmade quality, and its lack of functional accessories always already render it a work of art. That being said, the fact that Gober’s installation of the urinals led the viewer down these mental pathways of imagining bodily encounters and bodily experience, underscores an encounter with bodies as much as it denies an actual, physical encounter with a body.<sup>53</sup>

Thirty years after Gober’s initial construction and installation of the urinals, the bodily encounters evoked still hold cultural purchase. One has only to recall the Larry Craig scandal of the summer of 2007, in which a Republican senator was caught in an airport men’s room using “gay codes”: a series of toe taps and hand gestures, identified by police as a way to elicit sexual encounters.<sup>54</sup> The association between gay culture and men’s room activities provided all that the media needed to convict Craig of attempting to elicit a sexual encounter.

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<sup>53</sup>Other scholars, such as Martha Buskirk, have read Gober’s urinals as indicative of a gay subculture: “When the urinals were shown, in groups, lined up in a row, their presentation on white gallery walls closely approximated actual urinals typical arrangement when positioned for use. In relation to the context established by Gober’s other work, this suggestion of community of male bodies was understood as a reference to gay identity and more obliquely, to the deepening AIDS crisis of the 1980s.” Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT press, 2003), 62–63.

<sup>54</sup>Lewd conduct: Report of Sgt. Dave Karsnia #4211, Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport Police Department. ([http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/ssi/craig\\_police\\_report\\_082807.pdf](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/ssi/craig_police_report_082807.pdf)) (June 12, 2007). *The Washington Post*. Retrieved on January 26, 2009.

## ***Legs and Legacies***

Until the late 1980s, the human body had been articulated in Gober's work only through its absence or invisible presence. Images of bodies depicted on wallpaper, sculptures of empty clothing, and the sterile urinals and sinks, all rendered representations bodily-ness without ever becoming bodies. In 1989 this changed, when Gober began to make mimetic realist sculptures of disembodied male legs (Figure 3.35; c.1989–1990). The dismembered limbs were extremely realistic: made from flesh-colored beeswax, implanted with human hair (purchased from a wig supply store), and dressed in a dark or light trouser, cotton sock, and leather shoe. Gober exhibited the leg sculptures butted-up against the gallery wall, resting in the perpendicular space where the wall meets the floor. In this position the legs became an extension of an ambiguous and obtuse surface—the gallery wall—that neither accounted for their presence nor gave the sculpture the semblance of a complete form, a whole human body.

The simple technique of displaying the wax legs, positioned against the floorboard of the gallery wall, distracted the viewer from the representational quality of the illusion by promoting viewer participation. Viewers may have imagined tripping over the leg as they walk around the space. Some may have wondered if the whole installation was a joke and that the leg belonged to someone on the other side of the wall. The legs promoted an uneasy tension between the world of the everyday and the art world. Any perceived normality, or more specifically banality, that the initial encounter with the legs may have had was quickly thwarted. The viewer is left, as in other sculptures by Gober, with an unsettling feeling of abnormality and strangeness.



Isolated body parts and body fragments are ubiquitous in our society.

Advertisements for commercial goods such as jewelry, clothing, shoes, and accessories often include disembodied models displaying fingers, hands, torsos, legs, and feet. Additionally, images of amputations, disfigurements, and dismemberments due to explosions, accidents, and other unnatural disasters make frequent appearances on television, the internet, popular films, covers of periodicals, and the front pages of newspapers.<sup>55</sup> Viewers call on these ubiquitous encounters with body parts when they stumble upon Gober's legs.

Despite their fragmented corporeality, it is virtually impossible for the viewer to deny the strong verisimilitude of the appendages. The artist and his assistants took great care in creating this effect. First, Gober had the lower portion of his leg cast in plaster, a self-casting technique that was not employed by Hanson and is not deployed by Mueck. The mold was then recast in bleached beeswax, and human hairs were delicately implanted using a special tool crafted in Gober's studio. Artifacts of the real—pants leg, sock, and shoe—were added to the sculpture to further strength the authenticity of its illusion. At first Gober used one of his own shoes for the sculpture but says he was disturbed by the idea of the shoe being misinterpreted as a “fetish.” Instead he bought (at Brooks Brothers in New York, a traditional bastion of tastefully conservative business attire) shoes similar to his own and had a studio assistant, Daphne Fitzpatrick, wear the shoes around the city before putting them on the sculptures.<sup>56</sup> Fitzpatrick's use of the shoes, and the subsequent wear patterns on the soles, increased the validity of the

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<sup>55</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum and Paula Gerson, “Body-Part Reliquaries and Body Parts in the Middle Ages,” *Gesta* 36, no. 1 (1997): 3–7. In this article authors Bynum and Gerson reframe a study of body-part reliquaries from the Middle Ages within a “sensibility of the 1990s,” which they argue have “unquestionably heightened our awareness of fragmented bodies” (3).

<sup>56</sup> Richardson, *A Robert Gober Lexicon*, 19.

object—like Hanson shopping at Sears or borrowing clothes from his models. The shoes underscored the sculpture as an artifact of the everyday by prioritizing authenticity over simulation.

When asked by interviewers to recall where the sculptures of the leg had come from, Gober revisited two very different scenarios: one was a story told by his mother, a surgical nurse, who was an eyewitness during the amputation of a man's leg; the other was a plane ride from Bern during which Gober observed a portion of the leg of a man who was seated several rows in front of him.<sup>57</sup> These stories helped Gober recast his personal experiences as encounters with body fragments, both as imagined through the story told by his mother and as a chance encounter with the man's leg on the plane. They document a focused kind of looking preformed on an isolated fragment: the section between the knee and the ankle of the lower extremity. Each incident situates the viewer as a curious observer, witness to a medical procedure or active voyeur, whose encounter with the limb induced a reaction to its sudden appearance and separation—visual or physical—from the rest of the body. Likewise, when installed in the gallery, the legs become an unexpected intrusion simultaneously humorous and macabre. What disturbs the viewer most about the legs is not their overall composition of trouser, sock and shoe, but the *trompe l'oeil* effect felt in those few inches where the hem of the pant and the top of the sock separate: the visible strip of hairy flesh.

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<sup>57</sup> Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 255. Elizabeth Dungan, in her dissertation, sees these narratives as instructive points of departure because of the visual encounter they stage. She locates this type of looking within the medical arena and demonstrates how this type of looking has had an “extended relationship with the theater” (262). See Chapter Five in Dungan, “Discourse of Dis-Ease: Medical Imaging and Contemporary Art.”

Gober's use of beeswax also contributed a more authentic flesh-like appearance. Wax, argues art historian Roberta Panzanelli, is "the ultimate simulacrum of flesh."<sup>58</sup> It is a medium that "welcomes refined modeling techniques, meticulous sculpting, and naturalistic coloring in the service of potent visual illusionism."<sup>59</sup> The sight of flesh-colored wax induces recognition of the inherent similarities and differences of the sculptural material to soft tissue: warm versus cold, solid versus supple, fragility versus stability, (and most importantly) life versus death. We have previously seen how these effects were also explored in *Untitled (Lightbulb)*. Art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman describes the visceral nature of the relationship between the human body, flesh, and wax in the following passage:

Wax "moves": it warms up in my hand, it assumes the temperature of my body, and at the moment becomes capable of involuting before the detail of my fingers, taking my prints, transforming softly, as though biologically, from one form to another. Thus this vegetal material that bees have "digested" in their bodies and in a sense rendered organic, this material nestled against my flesh, becomes *like flesh*... This is its subtlety, but also its sovereign *power*: everything in it—plasticity, instability, fragility, sensitivity to heat, and so on—suggests the feeling or fantasy of flesh.<sup>60</sup>

It is vital that Gober's legs have a flesh-like appearance, for once a body has lost its flesh is also loses its corporeality.<sup>61</sup> When we encounter a leg made by Gober, the visceral sensation of the material draws us closer, and we interpret the wax as a simulacrum of flesh.

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<sup>58</sup> Roberta Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2008), 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> George Didi-Huberman, "Wax Flesh, Vicious Circles," in *Encyclopedia Anatomica* (London: Taschen, 2004), 65.

<sup>61</sup> Caroline W. Bynum and Paula Gerson discuss the importance of flesh to body-part reliquaries in the Middle Ages and how the loss of flesh simultaneous signaled a loss of "corporeal structure" and a transformation to "bones or dust" (4). Bynum and Gerson, "Body-Part Reliquaries."

A transformative substance, beeswax more than any other sculptural material (wood, stone, metals, or clay) has long been associated with metamorphosis: capable of becoming form and then liquefying into substance. Its material properties have been both a blessing and a curse for waxworks.<sup>62</sup> An organic, soft, and elastic material, wax is vulnerable to a number of potential dangers, most significantly heat or fire. The fear that bodies made of wax will fall victim to the effects of fire is a trope that has been repeated many times in Hollywood films. This threat of melting is an important concept for Gober, who desires to consistently hold in tension the life-like with the death-like, and artifice with illusion.

Mimetic realism requires a transformation of materiality. Instead of exploring new materials capable of emulating flesh, as Hanson did, Gober used wax to cast his legs. Gober's leg sculptures engage with the more sensual quality of wax, testified to by Didi-Huberman, who sees the substance as not only mimicking the effects of skin, but also capable of embodying those effects in order to become *like* flesh. The use of beeswax to simulate human flesh is deeply indebted to the traditional use of this material by anatomists and sculptors to reproduce, with verisimilar accuracy, the forms, contours and inner workings of the human body. In his use of this material Gober engages with histories of figural duplication outside the art world. He deliberately draws on established techniques for staging encounters between object and viewer that mimic those constructed in wax museums, natural history dioramas, and anatomical cabinets of curiosity. These are venues that create historical, anthropological, medical, and social

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<sup>62</sup> General recipes for wax can include both synthetic and non-synthetic materials. There are four identifiable families of wax. The first is beeswax, an organic, expensive, material. The next three families of wax include stearin, paraffin, and a mix, which may include a combination of materials such as beeswax, fat, and resins. Sylvie Colinart, "Chemistry of Wax Sculptures: Recipes and Diseases," in *Conference on wax images in art history* (The J. Paul Getty Center for Research: 2005).

narratives about bodies that are exhibited to a more general public than that of the art museum or gallery.

When viewed in person, Gober's wax legs are extremely pale in color.<sup>63</sup> While the artist's use of material couches his sculptures in a tradition of wax mannequins and anatomical models, Gober breaks with convention and uses bleached wax. This type of material is made by bleaching older yellow wax to produce a whiter-colored wax without actually removing the wax's natural colorants.<sup>64</sup> Using the paler version of wax gives Gober's limbs an "embalmed sheen"<sup>65</sup> which threatens their life-like effect and makes them seem more like the appendages of the deceased or like prosthetic objects.<sup>66</sup> Prosthetics are meant to be surrogates for missing parts and are engineered to work as an adequate substitute—this can refer to the limb's design, look, feel, and function—for a real appendage.<sup>67</sup> Yet to encounter an artificial limb is disconcerting. If the limb is in use, an uncomfortable feeling may arise from the fact that the user has an auxiliary body part, an inorganic object attached to the body where something has been detached. Such artificial appendages and their relationship to both fragmented bodies and normative bodies underscore the unsettling nature of Gober's fragmented leg sculptures.

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<sup>63</sup> The use of color in figurative sculpture is one of the ways the inanimate seems to come to life. Scholars have discussed the use of color for religious effigies. See Roberta Panzanelli, et al., *The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present*, (Los Angeles: Getty Publication, 2008).

<sup>64</sup> Bleached wax is often used by candle-makers but not necessarily recommend for artists because of the hazardous chemicals the bleaching process leaves in the material.

<sup>65</sup> Mark Sandberg, *Living Pictures: Missing Persons* (Princeton: University Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>66</sup> Writing about Gober's legs for *Arts Magazine*, artist Richard Kalina argues that the legs reference death more than life. He suggests that the limbs resembled prosthetic device (something that was never living) more than an amputated appendage (something that was previously living). Richard Kalina, "Real Dead," *Arts Magazine* 66 (1991): 48-53.

<sup>67</sup> For more on the history of prosthetics from a cultural perspective, see Katherine Ott, et al., *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

## Parts and (W)holes

*Untitled* (Figures 3.36; 1991–1993)—a sculpture of the lower half of a man’s body wearing white underpants, socks, and gym shoes, with drains perforating his legs—may in fact come closer to the single legs produced before it. When *Untitled* is compared to the wax model dissection of the upper portion of a man’s chest (discussed in Chapter one (Figure 1.14), meant to show the function of the thorax, visual similarities may not be apparent but the process of dissection, or the act of showing holes in the body, and the implied movement of liquid or gas through the body cavity are implied in both the sculpture and the model. Gober recycles the drain from previous installations—the 1989 installation of his work at the Paula Cooper Gallery, discussed earlier in this chapter—and incorporates it into his leg sculpture. The significance of the drain for Gober has been discussed by scholars as an object of desire, loss and longing, trauma, and implied cleanliness.<sup>68</sup> The drain offers a referent to the plumbing systems of the body: the flow of fluids and gasses that pass through a network of tubes before exiting the body through one of its orifices. Helen Molesworth argues that in this *Untitled*, “the liminality of the drain marks the simultaneous pleasure and anxiety offered by the bodily orifices, the drains of the body,” a visual trope that was used in the installation of wallpaper in 1989 and has been continuously recycled in Gober’s oeuvre.<sup>69</sup> Openings, or holes in the body, can also be signs of illness. The drains can be read as pustules or sores rendering the sculpture more about disease than about health. Although they are only select fragments of the body, the legs offer Gober’s viewer the opportunity to thinking with, through, and

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<sup>68</sup> See Foster, “An Art of Missing Parts,” David Joselit, “Poetics of the Drain,” *Art in America* 85, no.12 (1997): 64-71. Also see Molesworth, “Stops and Starts.”

<sup>69</sup> Molesworth, “Stops and Starts,” 160.

about the body as body, not body as evoked by object (sink or urinal). In front of Gober's sculpture, the viewer is asked to consider their own body: intact, mutated, healthy, or diseased

A third set of sculptures in Gober's leg series does the opposite of the legs with the drains. Instead of threatening to evacuate something from the body into the negative void of the orifice or pustules, *Untitled* (Figure 3.37; 1991) extends the body beyond its natural boundaries. This sculpture represented a body fragment and object simultaneously. A symbiotic relationship between the wax leg and the candle is established: the wax leg solidifies into a candle and the candle melts into a wax leg. *Untitled (Leg with Candle)* uses wax as a substitute for flesh, then highlights that use by also rendering a candle, thus produced a scenario in which the leg and the candle become formal equivalents. The body becomes an extension of the candle as much as the candle is an extension of the body. As such, *Untitled (Leg with Candle)* maintains a set of inherent contradictions because it is an object that is capable of both generating and destroying itself simultaneously, Gober brings this tension to a pinnacle in *Untitled Candle* (Figure 3.1). Both of these sculptures engage the candle as a symbol of the ephemerality of the body, which harkens back to the lightbulb.<sup>70</sup> With *Untitled Candle*, the body is evoked, but its form is evacuated, allowing the candle to function like the urinals and the sinks as object activated or completed by the viewer's bodily encounter with it. The materiality of the sculpture's bodily elements—flesh and hair—disrupt the object's objectness and render it a transformative object.

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<sup>70</sup> In her dissertation, Dungan discusses Gober's use of the candle as a symbol of desire and as stand-in for the body. See Dungan, "Discourse of Dis-Ease: Medical Imaging and Contemporary Art," 275–277.

For Gober, who grew up Catholic and uses iconography prevalent in the Catholic Church in his work, candles as symbols of light represent the presence of God. Candles can also symbolize the disembodiment of the worshipper, who offers a lit candle as a symbolic offering to God, a substitute for the worshipper's physical presence, as the candle continues to burn long after the worshipper has left the sanctuary. As such, lit candles embody prayers, used for mourning the dead and interceding with the saints for their eternal rest. The use of Catholic symbolism in Gober's work underscores the sculptor's interest in the way objects can come to symbolize the human body and the relationship of that body to life and death, mortality and immortality, loss and remembrance.<sup>71</sup>

On the opposite end of such a metaphysical reading of the corporeal presence of Gober's candles, Gober's *Untitled* (Figure 3.37) evoked an ironic response from an unsuspecting viewer. When it was installed at the Whitney Museum in New York, Gober recalls a security guard spying a small child bent over the candle in the leg. When the guard approached, he realized that the child was quietly singing "Happy Birthday" to the candle.<sup>72</sup> The child was interacting with the sculpture in a way that engaged his or her own memory, a marking of bodily aging and growth over time.

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<sup>71</sup> For more on Gober's use of Catholic symbols and iconography see Erika Doss, "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation: Issues of Spirituality in Contemporary American Art," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 129-146.

<sup>72</sup> Vischer, *Robert Gober*, 284.



## ***Dioramas of contemporary human beings***

In Gober's later works, the leg sculptures were installed in groups against elaborate wallpaper backgrounds, alongside sinks and other sculptures of ubiquitous objects. These full-scale rooms became diorama-like and staged palpable encounters between viewers and Gober's sculptures. In an interview with scholar and curator Richard Flood, Gober said that what he wanted was to create "dioramas about human beings."<sup>73</sup> The motivation for the diorama, according to Gober, came from a visit he made to the Natural History Museum in Bern, Switzerland. Typically found in natural history museums, dioramas are re-constructed environments that purport to provide a visual and physical encounter with a specific location or historical event. The original nineteenth-century dioramas were designed to "transport spectators in time and place through the illusion of realistic representation."<sup>74</sup> The diorama, as rhetoric of display, offers viewers a synthetic experience: voyeurism as a form of virtual travel.<sup>75</sup> This experience promises to provide information about the "original," but in most cases does not accurately reveal itself as a synthetic retelling of that event, carefully crafted and choreographed according to a predetermined narrative. Dioramas are events re-told through the institutions which assemble and display them.<sup>76</sup> For Gober the diorama offers the opportunity to transport

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<sup>73</sup> Interview by Richard Flood with Robert Gober. In Flood, et al., *Robert Gober: Sculpture + Drawing*, 121.

<sup>74</sup> Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-De-Siecle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 149. For additional reading on nineteenth-century spectacles and vision see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>75</sup> Mark Sanberg offers a discussion of voyeurism as virtual travel in regards to wax museum tableaux. Sanberg argues that the success of nineteenth-century diorama were contingent on viewers' visual participation, not physical access to the scene depicted. See Sandberg, *Living Pictures: Missing Persons*.

<sup>76</sup> Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936," *Social Text* 11 (1984-1985): 20-64.

viewers from the art gallery into an environment where the essence of bodies seems to linger, even if those bodies rarely physically displayed.<sup>77</sup>

For a solo exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 1991, Gober staged a full-scale diorama about contemporary human beings. The elaborate installation included hand-painted wallpaper as a backdrop for four sculptures (Figure 3.38; installation view). The sculptures were canny re-creations that included two disembodied pairs of legs, a butt printed with a musical score, and an oversized cigar complete with gold label. The staged environment at the Jeu de Paume thwarts viewers' understanding of the art gallery as a sterile space for ritualized viewing. As customary with many of his installations, Gober lined the walls of the gallery with wallpaper: an image of a New England forest, a reproduction of a watercolor found in a book in the New York Public Library flipped both vertically and horizontally, with the effect of creating a series of undulating lines, repetitive colors, and textures that read more like an abstract pattern than an autumn forest landscape. The wallpaper image brings nature inside the space of the gallery through artificial representation. The hand-painted wallpaper is akin to an aquarium background, sold by the roll and used to create a pleasurable artifice of an exotic location or natural habitat. Against this backdrop, Gober strategically placed three sculptures of disembodied legs: two pairs of male legs and one buttocks printed with a musical score. All three sculptures were made of pale flesh-colored wax. The legs, like the single leg series, were impregnated with dark synthetic hairs. The first pair of legs was dressed in dark trousers, grey cotton socks, and black dress shoes. Gober cut three square holes in the trousers through which erect candles protruded. The second pair of legs wore white

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<sup>77</sup> Hal Foster highlights the fact that in Gober's hands, "the scene of the diorama has changed: neither public history nor grand nature, the backdrop of these memories is at once private and unnatural, homey and *unheimlich*." Foster, "An Art of Missing Parts," 130.

underpants, gym socks, and grimy tennis shoes. Instead of protrusions (the candles), Gober perforated the hairy legs with circular drains. The sculptor interpreted the two leg sculptures and buttocks as a “trio of emotions:” pleasure (the buttocks), disaster (the pair of legs with the drains), and resuscitation (the pair of legs with the candles).<sup>78</sup> The legs were exhibited by Gober against the wallpapered surfaces, resting in the perpendicular space where the wall meets the floor. Previous installations of the legs had taken a similar position; the critical difference at the Jeu de Paume was the addition of the discombobulated artificial forest scene. When Gober lined the walls of the gallery with wallpaper, he dislodged the established relationship between foreground and background. Staging the legs in the perpendicular space between the floor and the wall extended the scene and encroached on traditional representational boundaries that divide sculpture from picture, the two-dimensional from the three-dimensional. Alternative strategies of display—an altered diorama—such as those used by Gober at the Jeu de Paume seek to recontextualize works of art in the world of the everyday, or in other words the world outside the institutional frame determined by the art museum or gallery.

## ***Conclusion***

Robert Gober’s work, as a second case study, offers a bridge between the art of Duane Hanson and Ron Mueck. Like Hanson and Mueck, Gober is motivated to produce sculptures that use mimetic realism to construct a human-to-human encounter between object and viewer: most specifically, encounters with objects that evoke a bodily

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<sup>78</sup> Flood, et al., *Robert Gober: Sculpture + Drawing*, 125.

*presence* or, in Gober's case, also a bodily *absence*. Gober's sculptures are "windows onto the ordinary activities of a person's life."<sup>79</sup> He explores human existence on a gritty level, shining light into dusty, dark corners to reveal encoded meanings in physical spaces and remote psychological locations. Gober's sculptures stage encounter with missing bodies, bodies that we long to encounter but for one reason or another—disease, kid napping, a traumatic accident, or murder—are just beyond our reach.

As much as Gober provides a bridge between Duane Hanson and Ron Mueck, he also represents a strategic departure from a project centered purely on figural sculpture. Gober never gives the viewer a full body, as is expected with Hanson and Mueck's sculptures; instead, he makes and remakes disembodied fragments (legs and torsos) and objects (furniture, sinks, and urinals) that remind the viewer of bodies. The sculptor deliberately chooses domestic objects that are familiar to his viewers, with the sole purpose of twisting or morphing the recognizable into something unfamiliar and strange. Mimesis—remaking everyday objects as sculpture—is a tool that Gober uses to explore the multiple layers of signification that relate to the body. Gober remakes objects on which the body, in one way or another, leaves its mark or trace. Gober's art is polysemic—capable of holding multiple meanings simultaneously—and although he uses mimesis as a tool to maintain a familiarity of his objects for the viewer, the inherent relationship between the sign and the referent is disturbed and the sculptor produces slippages that allow his objects to hold all kinds of contradictions and meanings simultaneously.

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<sup>79</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, "Robert Gober: Installation and Sculpture," in *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations 1979-2007*, Theodora Vischer (Basel: Steidl/Schaulager, 2007): 16-32, 19.

As much as Hanson and Mueck offer us mediations upon the close relationship of sculpture and the human body, where the viewer becomes an active participant in the economy of the real and the imaginary, so, too, does Gober. The mimetic effect is different when the legs are compared to Hanson's or Mueck's life-like figures. The previous chapter on Hanson's work and this chapter on Gober's has proven that sculptures of bodies, body parts, and everyday objects that are closely related to bodies produce the illusion that an everyday object (such as a sink) or a direct representation of a body can stand-in as a convincing surrogate for the presence of another human being. Sculptures of objects that mimic the presence of another human being are a type of mimetic realism that can simultaneously assume a form that is both recognizable to viewers as something from the world outside of art, and also be something extraordinarily complex and conceptual—i.e., arty. In the following chapter I will bring to light the ways in which sculptures made by Mueck engage with the legacies of Hanson's and Gober's projects in order to stage encounters with viewers that are designed to promote human empathy, as much as they are constructed to remind viewers that there is actually nothing to empathize with: the figures are not actual human beings but sculptural objects.

## CHAPTER 4

### Ron Mueck: Constructed Corporeality

“The lifelike,” said British art critic Adrian Searle, “is always so deathlike.”<sup>1</sup>

My first encounter with *Dead Dad* (Figure 4.1; 1996) occurred shortly after I had attended my grandmother’s funeral. I traveled to see a retrospective of Ron Mueck’s work at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, where the smaller-than-life-size sculpture had been laid out for display on a low plinth in the middle of a nearly empty gallery. Mueck claimed to have intended *Dead Dad* to look like his father’s corpse. I had therefore anticipated that my encounter with the work would be uncannily reminiscent of the moment I had encountered my grandmother’s embalmed and encoffined body. As I had done at the funeral, I approached the sculpture slowly and knelt beside it. I was aware from my research that many viewers had had a visceral encounter that often resulted in an empathic response to *Dead Dad*. However, on actually viewing the work I was nevertheless taken aback by the perception of a very palpable slippage between the embodiment of a real corpse and the more literal physicality of the three-foot-long

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Searle, “Inside the Mind of an Insane Collector,” *The Guardian*, February 24, 2004.

sculpture as a fabricated object. *Dead Dad* presents viewers with a paradox, a tension between what is bodily and what is sculptural, what is alive and what is dead, what is the work of the artist and what is the work of the embalmer.

The experience of encountering *Dead Dad* and the recognition of the palpable slippage between corpse and sculptural object points to the much larger aspect of Mueck's work which ties it to the type of mimetic realism that this study has charted in the work of Hanson and Gober. As the previous case studies have shown, sculptures of bodies, body parts, or objects that are closely related to the human body stage encounters that promote the illusion that a sculpture is a plausible surrogate for the physical presence of another human being, dead or alive. Mueck's work likewise establishes a strong relationship with the human body, so much so that viewers frequently look for a way to relate to the sculptures as if they were real human beings. Viewers' desire to establish this type of human-to-human connection with Mueck's figures underscores the potency with which the sculptures' illusion articulates vivid characteristics of the life-like. A human-to-human encounter was also sought by viewers of Gober's work, yet now instead of an image on wallpaper, a sink, or a urinal as stand-ins for a missing body, Mueck provides an object that looks in many ways human. Mueck's sculptures of people recall those made by Hanson, two decades earlier. However, unlike Hanson's true to life-sized social types, each of Mueck's people are more ambiguous when it comes to identifying particularities of social types and they include strong visual evidence of sculptural alteration—scale, fragmentation, or bizarre choice of subject. This denies the figures a wholly unified corporeality, present in many of Hanson's mimetic realist sculpture, by keeping them firmly rooted in their objectness.

Despite these alterations, viewers of Mueck's work have repeatedly reported a strong desire to encounter *someone* else, instead of *something*, in the gallery. This type of encounter frequently calls to viewers' minds personal experiences: the death of their own parents, a birth of a child, or the awkwardness of adolescence. This act of reminiscing, or remembering, is predicated on the individual viewer's willingness to project human feelings and emotions onto the sculptures, regardless of their firm awareness that the figure is without a doubt an object and not a human subject. Viewers' responses are a very important part of understanding the conceptual aspects of Mueck's mimetic realism. In this chapter I will show how the desire to project human feelings and emotions onto an inanimate sculpture motivate an empathetic response from viewers. This empathetic response defines a type of encounter with sculpture that in many ways parallels a meeting with another person.

Mueck's work has been a far-reaching success amongst museum-going publics; a slew of newspaper reviews, both positive and negative, in the British, Australian, and American press and a handful of catalog entries that have been written about Mueck's work testify to the wide appeal of encountering his mimetic realist figures. Yet this success has had a contrary effect: its popularity has dissuaded scholars from approaching the work with the academic rigor it deserves. To date, there has been no substantial account of Mueck's oeuvre as it stands within the tradition of conceptual sculpture produced after 1945. To address this gap, this chapter will situate Mueck's work within an art historical framework that seeks to interpret the effect of the figures as much as to dissect the technical methods employed to achieve such effect. The first half of my analysis will provide an in-depth account of Mueck's processes for making sculpture, the



material he uses, and the sculptural alterations that buttress the human-to-human-like encounter staged by his work. Many of his fabrication techniques were developed by the sculptor during his career as a puppeteer and special effects expert. The second half of the chapter will present the debates that circulated, in newspapers and popular periodicals, alongside retrospectives of Mueck's work and solo exhibitions. These debates touched on important themes that inherently arise with the fabrication, display, and interpretation of mimetic realism, such as the intersection of materiality (the material, plastics, used to make the sculpture) and simulation (a term I will engage more fully in the sections that follow, but which I am borrowing from the French theorist Jean Baudrillard).<sup>2</sup> I will explore the debates and the themes they addressed more thoroughly in order to provide an in-depth understanding of one of the more important tensions in Mueck's mimetic realist sculpture: the slippage between high art and spectacle. In large part this slippage revolves around the technical fabrication (both of the object and its display) as much as the overall effect the work invites.

A review of primary source documents—newspaper and journal articles, interviews, and exhibition catalogs—has revealed a serious re-examination by critics, curators, and viewers of the binary between “high art” and “low art” articulated in 1939 by the art critic Clement Greenberg in his essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*.<sup>3</sup> In this article Greenberg devised the framework he later relied upon in his interpretation of modern works of art. Greenberg drew a decisive boundary between avant-garde culture and that

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<sup>2</sup> Primary source see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). For secondary source see Kellner, Douglas. “Baudrillard, Jean.” In *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly. *Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0064> (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

which was produced with the intention of satiating the desire of the masses for leisure and entertainment: kitsch.<sup>4</sup> Greenberg's binary is useful for this study, because it provides vocabulary that is useful in understanding the popularity of Mueck's work amongst untraditional museum-going publics. Yet, this study seeks to put pressure on the divisions drawn by Greenberg in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, in search of the more nuanced relationship between untraditional audiences and contemporary art that Mueck's sculptures promote.

In chapter two of this study, I discussed the ways in which art museums began restructuring themselves in unprecedented ways during Hanson's period; desiring to expand both physically, through building expansions and new construction projects, and philosophically, in envisioning themselves as institutions open to more diverse publics. These efforts paralleled changes in public funding for art exhibitions, the rise of corporate sponsorship, and a shift towards a more result-oriented policy among many major institutions.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, these restructuring efforts were designed to increase the museum's audience base which has, in the last decade of the twentieth century, produced some of the highest attendance statistics yet recorded. For example, in December of 2009 the *Art Newspaper* reported that despite an economic downturn, admissions at major art museums have held steady and in most cases demonstrated a "clear-cut increase."<sup>6</sup> In the spring of 2008, *The New York Times* ran a series of articles dedicated to museums

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 11–14.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the paradigm shifts that affected the art museum see Hilde S. Hein. *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000). Also see Gail Anderson. *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*. (Walnut Creek, Alta Mira Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Goldstein. "Museum attendance rises as the economy tumbles." *The Art Newspaper*, December 2009, issue # 208: published online at: <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Museum-attendance-rises-as-the-economy-tumbles/19840>. Candice Jackson. "Museums see rise in attendance." *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2010: published online at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704479404575087943590687492.html>

addressing such topics as collecting, displaying, and directorships. These articles recounted an overarching commitment, by many major institutions, to reestablish themselves as important constituents within contemporary culture that has an ever expanding cultural and entertainment industry: movie theatres, theme parks, shopping centers, and other leisure promoting destinations. Mueck's work has been couched among these broader institutional objectives, and the popularity of the encounter that his work stages with viewers has become one of the ways that institutions, such as the Brooklyn Museum of Art, have sought to attract more patrons. Retrospectives of Mueck's sculptures have been marketed as blockbuster events, attracting crowds that would normally not be interested in art based on its formal qualities or historical significance.<sup>7</sup> What people are interested in is the virtuoso detailing that goes into each of Mueck's sculptures and the vividness with which they construct the illusion of real people with a palpable human-like presence. I contend that Mueck's sculptures have been seen by major art museums as fruitful territory for blockbuster exhibitions because of the initial mass appeal *Dead Dad* motivated when it was first exhibited as part of the 1997 exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Charles Saatchi Collection*. This much-discussed exhibition included art by young British artists (who were known as the YBAs) that explored the intersection between mass media images, realism, art, and the everyday.<sup>8</sup> Provocative works included in the exhibition became catalysis for fierce debates regarding public funding for the arts. Mueck's *Dead Dad*, was later interpreted

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the history of the blockbuster exhibition and its cultural significance see Emma Barker, ed., *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press in association with The Open University, 1999), 127–44. Also see Michael G. Kammen, *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture*, *History of Art Controversies in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 258-73.

<sup>8</sup> For more on The Young British Artists, see the exhibition catalog Saatchi Collection, et al., *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

as the still center of *Sensation*, but the wave of publicity that accompanied the show has bolstered his success ever since.

### ***From Muppets to Sculpture: How Mueck Made the Magical Believable***

The human-to-human encounter staged by Mueck's sculptures, which has been so admired by viewers of his work, could not have been conceived without the sculptor's training in puppetry and special effects. Prior to his debut as a Young British Artist and his rapid success in the art world in the late 1990s Mueck had a prosperous twenty-year career as a model-maker and puppeteer working in advertising, children's television, and film. Each project that Mueck worked on during this time required him to fabricate and animate puppets that could convincingly perform a role akin to that of a real-life actor. For example, in the mid-1980s Mueck worked for the celebrated, puppeteer Jim Henson (1936–1990) on the film *Labyrinth* (1986) in which human actors and fantastical creatures performed side-by-side—the fantastical creatures, in reality, being extremely life-like puppets.<sup>9</sup> In a documentary film about the making of the movie, Henson explained that the most important goal in fabricating the puppets for *Labyrinth* was to make each creature as magical and believable as possible.<sup>10</sup> His vision, for one of these

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<sup>9</sup> Ron Mueck designed puppets for the film *Photographing Fairies* (1987) and *Labyrinth* (1986). He also worked on British children's television. Although many have said that Mueck also designed puppets for *Sesame Street*, Susanna Greeves, Ron Mueck's current project manager, has dismissed this claim as false. For a complete listing of the artist's work as a model-maker and puppeteer, see "Ron Mueck" on the Internet Movie Database website, at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0610967/>.

<sup>10</sup> Jim Henson, "The Making of Labyrinth," (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment., 1986), film.

creatures was realized by Mueck and fellow puppeteer and animatronics expert, Rob Mills, as a nearly five-foot-tall puppet named Ludo (Figure 4.2).

Ludo required Mueck and Mills to experiment with a wide range of plastics—resins, silicones, latex, and fiberglass—to fashion the puppet’s leather-like facial skin, horns, hands, and feet. Soft synthetic fibers covered the puppet’s body and gave Ludo a realistic-looking fur. The puppet’s face was mechanized using a series of motorized components that replicated the function of muscles in a real human face. The movements of these components were coordinated by puppeteers using remote-controlled radio devices to simulate facial expressions, allowing Ludo to appear happy, sad, and forlorn. Animating Ludo’s face was especially important for making the creature believable to the film’s audience, since he only spoke broken English and relied heavily on nonverbal communication to interact with the main character of *Labyrinth*, Sarah (played by Jennifer Connelly). When asked what it was like to work with Ludo and the other puppets in the film, Connelly said:

In the beginning it was hard because, I don’t know, it’s just strange thinking about the fact that you are talking to a puppet. It completely wears away and you just completely forget that they are puppets. And that they aren’t just some kind of creature or something which are real because they are so real. The puppeteers make them so life-like and you can really learn to relate to them.<sup>11</sup>

Connelly’s comments speak to the effect of Mueck and Mill’s efforts in the fabrication of *Labyrinth*’s puppets that not only appear to come to life on screen but also on the film set.<sup>12</sup> Connelly’s perception of the life-like was carefully orchestrated by Mueck and Mills, promoting a rather sly deception that allowed the actress to perform along side the

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<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Connelly in Henson, “The Making of Labyrinth.”

<sup>12</sup> For more on the ways puppets can simulate the performance of a live actor, see Jennifer C. Garlen and Anissa M. Graham, *Kermit Culture: Critical Perspectives on Jim Henson’s Muppets* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2009), 92.

puppet as if he were human. As Connelly worked more closely with the puppet Ludo, her interactions with him became synonymous with those she would have with another living actor.

Because of his work with Henson, Mueck developed a unique sensitivity for the technical processes required for re-creating human-like characteristics and emotions in puppets. A key feature of Mueck's sculptures is his use of composite materials that can simulate the look, texture, and feel of human flesh—materials he first worked with as a puppeteer. Although some of these materials were also employed by Duane Hanson to create his mimetic figures, their level of technical execution was lower. When viewed at close range, Hanson's sculptures unlike Mueck's are always discovered to be phony stand-ins for the people they attempt to represent.

The extreme believability of Mueck's people is due to his technique which was informed by his work with the puppeteer Henson. In order to give each of his muppets (a word Henson coined that combines 'marionette' and 'puppet') a unique personality Henson made their bodies out of foam-rubber covered with fabric. This allowed for greater flexibility and a wider range of motion, as opposed to the traditional wooden figures used by ventriloquists.<sup>13</sup> Flexible puppets also permitted the puppeteer to mimic with greater subtlety human movements and gestures.<sup>14</sup>

Mueck's use of softer, more pliable, plastics, silicones, and resins give his figures a unique tactility that enhances the viewers' perception of the flesh-like. The perception

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<sup>13</sup> The use of plastics instead of wood to make toys, more generally, was commented upon by Roland Barthes who characterized plastics as a "graceless material, the product of chemistry, not of nature" with a "gross and hygienic" appearance that destroyed "the humanity of touch." Mueck's plastic sculptures actually give the viewer a strong sense of humanity, despite the fact that they rarely reveal the artist's hand. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 54.

<sup>14</sup> For more on Jim Henson's career and Muppets see John B. Padgett, "Jim Henson," The University of Mississippi Department of English, [http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/henson\\_jim/index.html](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/henson_jim/index.html).

of the flesh-like motivates a strong desire in the viewer to reach out and touch Mueck's people in order to check for signs of life: the warmth of the skin, the suppleness of flesh, or the coarse texture of body hair. In the gallery the viewer is denied the physical satisfaction of touch, but this does not diminish the viewer's capacity to imagine that to touch a sculpture by Mueck would be like touching another person.

To date, none of Mueck's sculptures, unlike his puppets, have been animated using mechanical devices.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, each figure provides a visual illusion that viewers interpret as the possibility of life or the potential for movement. Mueck accomplishes the illusion of possible animation by using some of the same materials he experimented with in making such puppets as Ludo. *Two Women* (4.3; 2005, installation view), illustrates Mueck's application of the techniques employed in the construction of Ludo, and the palpable sense of animation that his figures tend to incite. The small scale sculpture represents two old ladies, literally "little old ladies," who are fabricated from flexible silicones and resins. These materials simulate the appearance of furrowed brows, facial expressions, and subtly calibrated postures that suggest that the women may be chitchatting about the viewers, who lean in to look more closely at them. Making the jump from a creature like Ludo to a sculpture such as *Two Women*, required Mueck to refine skills in recreating the human-like as much as the life-like.

After working with Henson, Mueck's career shifted to advertising, where he made models to promote items such as air fresheners, toilet paper, spirits, and peanut butter. In this capacity he continued to hone his understanding of new materials, including resins,

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<sup>15</sup> Other of Mueck's contemporaries, such as Paul McCarthy (b. 1945), for instance, have used animatronic technologies to bring their sculptures to life. Animatronics designer Jon Dawe talks about his experience in helping McCarthy to animate *Bush and Pig* in season 5 (2009) of *Art:21* episode "transformation," *PBS*. Also see Yves Amu Klein, "Living Sculpture: The Art and Science of Creating Robotic Life," *Leonardo* 31, no. 5 (1998): 393–396.

silicones, and fiberglass, which furthered his exploration into the process of creating the illusion of the human-like. Building on his earlier training in puppetry, Mueck's work in advertising gave him the opportunity to replicate, with mimetic accuracy, the human body as a whole or in parts, rather than fabricating imaginary creatures.<sup>16</sup> This work pushed Mueck toward his further success at replicating the human form in his artistic oeuvre. Of his work as a model-maker in advertising, Mueck has said that he was dissatisfied with the idea that many of his models were made for the purpose of creating a life-like illusion that was good enough to photograph, but not necessarily to be seen outside of the image: "Everything I was doing was geared toward that final flat image, the piece of print...I wanted to make something that a photograph wouldn't do justice to."<sup>17</sup> When viewers encounter a sculpture such as *Two Women*, there is a strong sensation that the figures are something other than an inanimate object: despite their scale, they seem to be alive. This effect is created through Mueck's duplication of specific anatomical details such as wrinkled flesh, moles, strands of gray hair, and pierced earlobes (Figure 4.3.B.; detail). These details can be captured in photographic images, but it is the unity of these details, coupled with the size, posture, and placement of the two figures in space that give the "little old ladies" a convincing life-likeness and strong corporeal presence. These effects are impossible to adequately capture within a photographic image.

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<sup>16</sup> Saatchi, *Sensation*, 203.

<sup>17</sup> Ann Landi, "Ron Mueck: Beyond the Movies," *Sculpture Review* 58, no. 3 (2009): 24–31, 26.



## A Puppet Who Wanted To Be a Real Boy

The first work Mueck marketed as a “work of art” in a commercial gallery was a very naturalistic representation of a small boy. Mueck titled the sculpture after the storybook puppet who wanted to become a “real boy,” *Pinocchio* (Figure 4.4; 1996).<sup>18</sup> The sculpture was initially shown alongside a painting by Mueck’s mother-in-law, the Portuguese-born British painter Paula Rego (Figure 4.5; 1995), whose work has been characterized as magical realism because it centers on themes of fantasy and dark humor.<sup>19</sup> Rego had encouraged Mueck to move from advertising into the art world and had introduced him to Charles Saatchi, who would later become instrumental in helping make *Dead Dad* a success.

Mueck’s interest in the character of Pinocchio should not be attributed to Rego alone. The story of Pinocchio serves to highlight the tension between the object and subject that is inherent in Mueck’s sculpture. To blur the boundary between sculpted body and real body Mueck made *Pinocchio* human-size with very life-like looking features which make the sculpture look less like the long-nosed wooden puppet—made famous by Walt Disney’s 1940 animated movie—and more like an actual human child.

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<sup>18</sup> There exists a body of literature on the topic of toys becoming living things instead of inanimate objects. See Lois R. Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Also see Susan Honeyman, “Manufactured Agency and the Playthings Who Dream It for Us,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2006): 109–131. <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed August 3, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Based on my research, *Pinocchio* was exhibited alongside one of Rego’s paintings in *Spellbound: Art and Film*, held at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1996. However, there is no mention of Mueck or his sculpture in the catalog that accompanied the exhibition. Subsequent catalogs on Mueck’s work list *Spellbound* among the artist’s group exhibitions. See Robert Rosenblum. *Ron Mueck*. (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2006). A figure that looks very much like Mueck’s *Pinocchio* appears in Rego’s pastel *The Blue Fairy Whispers to Pinocchio* (Figure 4.5, 1995), see Paula Rego and Gallery Tate, *Paula Rego* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1997). For more on the paintings by Rego that were included in *Spellbound: Art and Film* see the exhibition catalog Philip Dodd et al., *Spellbound* (London: British Film Institute [and] Hayward Gallery, 1996).

Standing approximately thirty-three inches tall, *Pinocchio* has a slender stature and slightly rounded belly. The sculpture is dressed in only a pair of white underpants. Unlike Hanson, who covered his figures with an excess of clothing and accessories, Mueck's sculptures are frequently made to showcase the framework of the human body and are either naked or wear little to hide their physiques. Prior to fabricating *Pinocchio*, Mueck did not work from a live model in creating the sculpture. Instead he carefully studied anatomy textbooks in order to duplicate the body of a small boy with mimetic accuracy. Mueck worked anatomical detailing into and onto every external surface, defining as much as mimicking the organic soft and hard textures of the boy's body. Undulations in the surface of the sculpture give viewers the sensation that beneath the epidermis-like covering exist muscular tissues, skeletal framework, and a nervous system. The posture of the sculptural figure further pronounces Mueck's delineation of individual muscles of the back and neck: trapezius, deltoid, rhomboids, and rotator cuff. A skeletal framework is suggested with the more subtle modeling of a ribcage that frames the sculpture's belly. Flushed cheeks and pinkish lips, folds of skin that break softly over kneecaps, brittle and opaque toenails all give the viewer the illusion of encountering *Pinocchio* as a physical body, not a lifeless puppet.

Perhaps the most life-like aspect of *Pinocchio*, however, is his big blue eyes. The sculpture's anatomical framework and dermatological detailing are convincing, but set behind a tight curl of dark brown hair, the sculpture's eyes capture the viewer's gaze. As the sculpture presumes the power to look back, to gaze at viewers, it threatens viewers, who themselves wish to be the active agent, the one who is able to gaze. The threat of the sculpture gazing at the viewer is tempered by the artist who directed *Pinocchio's* gaze

sideways. In his work on psychological responses to art, David Freedberg argues that a corporal sculpture's eyes, especially those of polychrome sculptures, are "...the ultimate measure of living presence."<sup>20</sup> As Freedberg suggests, the close attention given by the artist to the eyes gives an image or sculpture a life-like awareness which becomes an increasingly significant element in constructing a convincing simulation of corporeal presence. The effect of *Two Women* likewise is contingent on the two little old ladies' perceived agency in looking back at those who look at them.

### ***Sculptural Alterations***

Mueck wants to achieve presence through objecthood.<sup>21</sup> With this statement, I wish to evoke Michael Fried's comments on the work of Robert Morris (b. 1931) and to underscore how Mueck's mimetic realism draws upon a minimalist history to stage an encounter that is uncannily like Fried's description of the viewer's encounter with literalist works as described in the article "Art and Objecthood" (1967):

The beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation *as subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another *person*; the experience of coming upon a literalist object unexpectedly—for example, in somewhat darkened rooms—can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way.<sup>22</sup>

A remark made by curator Susana Greeves confirms that experiencing Mueck's mimetic realist sculptures are disquieting in much the same way that Fried found the minimalist

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<sup>20</sup> David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 242–244.

<sup>21</sup> This is a claim previously made by Michael Fried of the work of Robert Morris. In his article *Art and Objecthood* (1967), Fried contends: "Morris wants to achieve presence through objecthood, which requires a certain largeness of scale, rather than through size alone." Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (1967). Reprinted in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 154.

<sup>22</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 155.

objects disquieting. She said “locking up a dark gallery full of them [Mueck’s sculptures]” was “downright eerie.”<sup>23</sup> This effect is a result of Mueck’s creation of figures that operate in a space of liminality, sometimes materializing as human-like subject and other times dissolving into sculptural objects. This liminality is emphasized through a series of deliberate alterations. The most important of these alterations is scale.

Scale in Mueck’s sculpture functions as a way to choreograph optical encounters between the figures and their onlookers. *Wild Man* (Figure 4.6.A and 4.6.B; 2005), for example, is over nine feet tall. The sculpture’s gigantic stature dwarfs even the tallest of viewers who gather around its legs to admire Mueck’s skill in verisimilitude. Curious viewers lean in closer, look harder, and even compare the sculpture’s parts to their own bodies. Photographs taken by viewers during these encounters, a cross-section of which can be found on the photo sharing website flickr.com, record the specific portions of the sculpture that detained their eye: a detail of *Wild Man*’s feet (Figure 4.6.C; 2010), for example, documents carefully crafted toenails, including nail beds, cuticles, and white half-moon shaped lunulas. Like *Pinocchio*, *Wild Man*’s artificial body becomes a landscape filled with tangible muscle tone, visible vertebrae, wrinkled skin, moles, blemishes, and hair.

Mueck’s *Wild Man* stages a factual encounter with anatomical details, a fanciful encounter with an imaginary giant, and a true-life encounter with a ‘real’ work of art. Many of Mueck’s sculptures are predicated on whimsy and are designed to transport viewers from the space of the art gallery to an imaginary place where the sculptures

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<sup>23</sup> Susanna Greeves, “Ron Mueck - a Redefinition of Realism,” in *Ron Mueck*, ed. Heiner Bastin (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005): 26-41, 29.

“Lilliputian or Brobdingnagian” scale seems more appropriate.<sup>24</sup> These variations of scale engage viewers’ imaginations, inviting them to embrace a child-like fantasy, such as that of Alice as she shrinks and extends, drinking potions and eating cake before the porthole to the magical world of Wonderland.<sup>25</sup> As whimsical as the viewers’ encounter with *Wild Man* may be, there is also an awkwardness of viewing that is palpably registered by the sculpture. *Wild Man* appears to cringe and recoil as viewers come uncomfortably close to investigate a swath of hairy thigh, the protruding knuckles of a tightly clinched hand, or the more intimate parts of the male anatomy that, for viewers of average height, are left uncovered at eye level.

In contrast to the gigantic that magnifies details, the miniature is sometimes used in Mueck’s work to de-magnify details causing viewers to physically bend over the pedestal if they wish to investigate the sculpture’s intricately constructed illusion. When the viewer leans in closer their interaction with Mueck’s work becomes more intimate and focused, editing out the space of the gallery and other gallery-goers. These more intimate encounters are not always intended to be just between the figure and the viewer, but sometimes, as in *Mother and Child* (Figure 4.7.A; 2001-2003) or *Spooning Couple* (Figure 4.8.A; 2005), they become an encounter between the figures themselves, *as well as* with viewers.

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<sup>24</sup>Lilliput and Brobdingnag are fictional lands created by Irish author Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) in his novel *Gulliver’s Travels*. Lilliput is an island inhabited by very tiny people who are no more than six inches in height. Brobdingnag on the other hand is inhabited by giants. Ron Mueck’s dealer, Anthony D’Offay, characterizes his use of scale as inviting “speculation about the nature of reality as much as the Lilliputian or Brobdingnain dimensions.” Press release for a show of Mueck’s work at the Anthony D’Offay gallery in the fall of 2000. On-line at “press release: Ron Mueck,” <http://www.doffay.com>

<sup>25</sup> The idea of the fanciful, the imaginary, and the playful were themes I casually discussed with Anthony d’Offay when I meet him during the installation of the Mueck exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, Texas, on June 22, 2007.

In *Mother and Child*, Mueck's study of anatomy takes a particularly visceral form in the sculpture's representation of the postpartum moment in which the first non-verbal communication between a mother and her newborn takes place. Still in the birthing posture, the mother's body is rigid and she clenches her hands while shifting her weight towards her lower extremities. Her legs are spread wide, and her knees are folded and angle away from her body. The baby's umbilical cord curves its way from the mother's swollen and exposed vagina to the newborn perched on top of her stomach. Because of its small size, viewers may desire to get closer to *Mother and Child* (as if Mueck brought the sculpture physically towards the viewer). As they step towards the pedestal and lean over it, their intrusive optical meanderings become less inhibited; they gaze between the mother's legs, over her child and stomach, and around her breasts and crimson nipples.

Viewers that encounter *Mother and Child* are voyeurs to a uniquely private moment. The sculpture replicates the viewer's act of looking, by likewise staging an internal visual encounter between a Mother and her child. Tilting her head up and forward to see what has grown in her belly for nine months, the mother encounters her baby for the first time. The infant's actual physical form is now present, as opposed to its embodiment in the mother's imagination. The mother initiates a look; the baby struggles to reciprocate through half-open eyelids although its eyes are not yet able to focus. Perhaps an involuntary display of emotion, the mother's face lacks over-dramatization, as if to express an anti-climactic crescendo to nine months of anticipation. This is deceptive neutrality, for she, like the viewer, stares curiously and contemplatively at the baby resting on her deflated stomach, and both mother and viewer ponder the infant's crown of dark hair, wrinkled forehead, and shriveled visage.

In *Mother and Child* the act of looking, performed by the sculptural figures, and the viewer, is central to the underlying impact of the sculpture's life-like illusionism and the staging of an encounter between two human beings that many of Mueck's works represent. In opposition, *Spooning Couple* (Figure 4.8.A) brings attention to the act of not looking, or purposeful visual avoidance. The miniature scale of *Spooning Couple* keeps the encounter between the two figures intimate, while also underscoring the position of the viewer as an intrusive voyeur. Freelance writer Judy Pomeranze reads sculptures such as *Mother and Child* and *Spooning Couple* as "...almost painfully realistic and brutally honest in their depiction of the physical human condition." The honesty of the depiction Pomeranze argued, promotes a tension between "...the desire to look but not look, the desire to understand tempered by a vague fear that you don't really want to know what's going on here."<sup>26</sup> I agree with Pomeranze and would add that the tensions she identifies—the desire to look but not to look, the desire to understand but not to know—is a result of the sculpture's extreme verisimilitude. This points to the liminality, which I described at the beginning of this section, which produces the sculpture's ability to construct and deconstruct the illusion of life simultaneously. Sculptures such as *Mother and Child* and *Spooning Couple* are perceivable by the viewer as both sculptural objects and human bodies.

Critics who have reviewed Mueck's work frequently recognize the importance of liminality in Mueck's mimetic realist figures. Michael O'Sullivan, writing for *The Washington Post*, brings together Mueck's use of scale, his simulation of the life-like, and viewers' response to it. He writes, "by turning up or down the magnification, as it were, in some cases a little, in some cases a lot, Mueck holds up fun-house mirrors to all

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<sup>26</sup> Judy Pomeranze. "Reflections on Realism." *Élan*. October, 2002, 31-32.

of us and the queer meat-sacks we live and die in.”<sup>27</sup> O’Sullivan’s use of the term “fun-house mirrors” associates Mueck’s work with entertainment spectacle while also underscoring the sculptures’ potential to communicate more serious issues of mortality, life, death, and corporeal physicality. These are associations also made by Rex Weil, of *The Wall Street Journal*, in his review of Mueck’s work in 2002. Weil argued, “what makes [Mueck] different is his wacky scale and deadpan sense of humor. He startles us anew with the plain fact of mortality.”<sup>28</sup> Mueck’s work does evoke spectacular forms of entertainment but there is also an underlying seriousness to the sculptures as works of art. Yet, on the other hand, some critics have misread or overlooked the nuance with which Mueck’s work moves between spectacular forms of entertainment and serious issue of mortality. Some critics have dismissed the sculptures as “perfectly boring” and “sentimental” kitsch.<sup>29</sup> This misreading is a result of the critics’ interpretation of the relationship of scale and verisimilitude in Mueck’s work as amounting to no more than spectacular illusionism, without recognizing that illusionism is one of the ways Mueck’s figures remain suspended in a liminal state: not quite sculptural object, not quite human body.<sup>30</sup>

Scale is sometimes coupled with a more overt deconstruction of illusionism in Mueck’s mimetic realist sculpture: fragmentation. *Untitled (Head of a Baby)* (Figure 4.9.A; 2003) is a very large sculpture that uses fragmentation to both construct and deconstruct a three-dimensional representation of an infant’s head. Viewers come up very close to the sculpture’s surface and peer, intently, at its simulated skin: soft-peach hues,

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<sup>27</sup> Michael O’Sullivan. “Impressive Bodies of Work.” *The Washington Post Weekend*. July, 26 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Rex Weil. “Untitled.” *The Wall Street Journal*. September 24, 2002, D8.

<sup>29</sup> Adrian Searle, “Ron Mueck,” *The Guardian*, Wed. March 26, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> This may in part be due to the use of scale as a way to critique kitsch by other artists such as Jeff Koons (b. 1955) and his oversized balloon animal sculptures.



blushed cheeks, and fleshy features. From the front, the sculpture functions in a similar manner to *Wild Man* in its magnification of specific corporeal detailing, although the isolation of the face, as opposed to the whole body, draws the eye towards the artist's skill in applying pigments in layers so as to produce subtle undulations in the surface that mimic variations in skin tone, mild eczema, and redness. *Untitled (Head of a Baby)* optimizes a range of possible vantage points, each capable of revealing to viewers drastically different visual information. While the front of the sculpture gives the illusion of a child's head, the back dismantles this illusion and reveals Mueck's fabrication technique. When viewers walk around to the back of the sculpture they are able to look inside the cavernous interior of *Untitled (Head of a Baby)*, which has evidence of Mueck's process (Figure 4.9.B): scrimms soaked in fiberglass, plastered artificial hairs, and wooden and metal supports necessary to sustain the weight of the gigantic head. The choice to leave the back of the sculpture open reflects Mueck's decision to play the magician who pulls back the curtain and reveals the illusion to be only a construct staged by the front of the sculpture. The simultaneous construction and de-construction of illusion is one of the ways Mueck's sculptures critique the human-to-human encounter sought by many viewers.

The use of the fragment in Mueck's sculptures has been identified by the critic Michael Amy as a tension between "likeness" and "lifelikeness."<sup>31</sup> I established in chapter one that the life-like refers to that which resembles "a living original," as much as the appearance of being alive, or the potential for life.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, likeness is more closely related to visual similarity. Edward Leffingwell writes: "The main thing

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Amy, "Ron Mueck at the Brooklyn Museum," *Art in America* 95, no. 1, April 2007.

<sup>32</sup> On the life-like see Chapter One of this study.

about Mueck's work, however, is its subtle yet overwhelming lifelikeness, which is startlingly sufficient to suggest to the viewer that this object is an eerily accurate simulacrum of the human substance, body and soul."<sup>33</sup> I agree that Mueck's works do maintain an eerie life-likeness that resembles, with a great degree of accuracy, the look, texture, and feel of the human body. However, viewers may not always accept this life-likeness as a "sufficient" simulacrum. What is attractive is the liminality that the tension between the life-like and lifelikeness produces. Viewers revel in Mueck's craftsmanship, his technique, and subtle ways in which the sculpture moves in and out of a state of life-likeness and objectness.

Many critics sense an inherent danger that Mueck's mimetic realism will collapse into sheer spectacle. Jerry Saltz of New York's *The Village Voice* concluded that Mueck's sculptures were not art, specifically challenging the sculptor's use of verisimilitude, which Saltz interpreted as "wowie-zowieness" or a form of sheer visual indulgence.<sup>34</sup> Yet these very same qualities, for some critics, bespoke the artistic excellence of Mueck's work. *Newsweek's* Peter Plagens read details, such as a stray strand of hair that is stuck to the Mother's lip in *Mother and Child*, as some of the more compelling compositional elements and for Plagens a sure testament of artistic production. He wrote: "staying alone in a room making stuff is still the core of being an artist a century ago, 30 years ago, now...[g]etting right a human detail like that new mother's errant strand of hair is always its peak."<sup>35</sup> Opinions presented by Saltz and Plagens highlight the tension between technique for the purpose of spectacle and

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<sup>33</sup> Edward Leffingwell, "Ron Mueck at James Cohan," *Art in America* 89, no. 1, November 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Jerry Saltz, "Life Like" *The Village Voice*, June 12, 2001. Consulted on-line at <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/saltz/saltz6-6-01.asp>

<sup>35</sup> Peter Plagens, "Arts Extra: Less is Mueck," *Newsweek Web Exclusive*, Arts and Entertainment, May 24, 2001.

technique for the purpose of art. This tension, should not however be interpreted as a tired old binary, art versus not art, but should rather serve to highlight how Mueck's figures defy categorization, deconstruct binaries, and move fluidly between spectacle, illusion, art, and human body. A closer discussion of the mechanics of Mueck's process will further reveal the thoughtful and careful planning and execution that takes place inside the artist's studio and how process is the scaffolding that buttresses the impact of the liminal encounter I am referring to.

### ***Process and Materials***

Mueck's technical process is time-consuming and requires great skill in mechanical processes as well as in-depth knowledge of non-traditional materials (Figure 4.10; 2005). The sculptor prefers to work alone and only employs studio assistants for figures that are large in scale or those that are produced in multiples.<sup>36</sup> Assistants are helpful in physically demanding or labor intensive tasks, such as removing some of the larger pieces from their fiberglass molds or the implantation of individual strands of synthetic hairs (Figure 4.11; 2005). Each of Mueck's sculptures begins with careful and methodical studies of the human body. Mueck favors the use of images, and although he has worked from living models on occasion—a method by which he says he is able to derive more

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<sup>36</sup> When I spoke with Ron Mueck at the Modern art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, (June 22, 2007) he mentioned to me that he uses assistances sparingly. Mueck's process is also detailed in Robert Rosenblum. Ron Mueck (Paris, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, 2006).

information<sup>37</sup>—the majority of his sculptures were conceived from images in anatomical textbooks. After his initial idea, Mueck builds a series of plaster maquettes, favoring a hard dental plaster because it produces a more detailed imprint. Using these maquettes, he experiments with the figure's correct position and pose. Once the artist has come to a decision about the pose, he sketches a series of drawings to determine scale. Mueck may make several drawings before the appropriate size, for the type of effect desired, is determined.

Once the pose and scale have been determined Mueck creates a model of the figure in clay. This is when surface details, such as goose bumps, fine lines, and wrinkles are added. Larger sculptures require the construction of a wire mesh armature wrapped in plaster-soaked strips before the clay can be applied and manipulated. Once completed, the clay model is covered with shellac to help it retain moisture. A coat of silicone is then applied to the clay model in order to make a mold; using silicone helps the artist retain the fine details on the clay original such as pores and dimples. Layers of fiberglass are then placed on top of the mold to support the delicate and flexible silicone layers. The clay is then scraped from the interior of the silicone mold and the mold is washed clean of any residue. Once the inside of the mold has been cleaned, Mueck then begins to build the dermis of his figure by painting a pigment-impregnated “gel-coat” onto the interior of the silicone mold. This layer is critical because it will give the illusion of skin tone and color. In order to hone the appropriate amount and shade of pigment, Mueck often performs a series of tests, checking for the desired color effect (Figure 4.12). The substances inside the molds are then left to cure. If the sculptures are successfully pried

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah Tanguy, “The Progress *Big Man* A Conversation with Ron Mueck,” *Sculpture Magazine* 22, no. 6, July/August 2003.

free without breaking, they then undergo final stages of sanding and polishing in preparation for the application of more delicate surface details. Seams or flashing produced by the mold are polished away and fine lines, veins, and other blemishes are applied with paint by the artist's hand.

Mueck's figures are very much dependent on modern materials for their successful illusion, as the artist requires safe-to-handle high quality adhesives and flexible polymers, materials not available prior to the 1990s. In an email interview I conducted with Evan Penny, a realist figural artist (Figure 4.13; *Ali*, 1984), he explained that "materials and technologies have changed quite a bit over the past 20 years. The high grade platinum cured silicones have become much more user friendly and represent a real advancement in relatively non toxic, durable, color fast and easy to work materials both for molding and for final product." According to Penny, the film industry and the advent of digital technologies "have 'raised the bar' for what we will accept as a believable illusion." Contemporary silicones, for example, now allow for "greater control of color, translucency and also permit very lifelike implantation of hair."<sup>38</sup> As elaborated in the previous chapter on Duane Hanson, subtleties of surface aesthetics, when viewed up-close, can make or break the illusion of a living person. This renders material an important part of the artist's success, and with mimetic realism, such success turns on advancements in contemporary materials and techniques. These materials and techniques in turn are critical to viewers' interpretations when the works are examined in person: whether or not the illusion "becomes" a human presence in the gallery depends on Mueck's use of materials that give a flesh-like appearance and rendering of delicate details—goose bumps, moles, veins, and hair—that read as real. Lighting and other

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<sup>38</sup> Evan Penny, email correspondence with Monica Huerta, 29 September 2007.

display conditions contribute to the overall success of the sculptures. New materials, together with technique, help Mueck imbue his figures with life-like qualities and provide an illusion so convincing that the viewer's senses hesitate in dismissing his works as artificial surrogates.

One example of viewers' senses trumping materiality and constructedness is the rumor among gallerygoers that *Dead Dad's* thin and sparse leg hairs were the artist's own, transplanted onto the small cadaver of his father (this rumor was later dispelled by Susanna Greeves, who has worked as Mueck's publicist, who assures that she knows of no sculpture of Mueck's that includes human hair).<sup>39</sup> Such a rumor points to the viewer's desire for a human-to-human encounter and their interpretation of Mueck's use of verisimilitude as life-likeness, rather than likeness. This encounter was in some ways more tangible in Goyer's *Untitled Candle* (Figure 3.1) which did include human hair, scattered sparsely around its base. The rumors of the life-like are also strikingly reminiscent of the rumors that circulated around Hanson's mimetic realist sculpture, when viewers called the police to report the works as intruders or sleeping visitors in the art gallery.

When asked by viewers about his process, Mueck continuously underscores the fragility of his work, the laboriousness of its production, and the exactitude necessary to create successful illusions. In such statements, Mueck reinvests his role as artist with the notion of fine craftsmanship. This is supported visually in catalogs of Mueck's work, which devote a large portion of their pages to images from the artist's studio. His "craft" is taken so far as to be put in scientific terms. Mueck tells Brooklyn Museum visitor Krisopher, "Getting the scale of the hair and the skin translucency can be a headache,

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<sup>39</sup> Susanna Greeves, Docent Training Session, Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, June 22, 2007.

requiring lots of tests and experimenting...and testing and experimenting...”<sup>40</sup> Giving his process a scientific twist—“testing” and “experimenting”—Mueck produces works that invite his viewers to imagine, for even the briefest moment, that what they see before them could indeed be flesh and not resin. Imagining the flesh-like promotes yet another slippage between the illusion of the life-like and the recognition that the sculpture is an object.

### ***Special Affect?***

Mueck exhibited *Boy*, a sixteen-foot high sculpture of a young boy at the 49th Venice Biennale *Aperto: Plateau of Humankind* held in 2001. The Director of the Biennale, Harald Szeeman, called *Boy* “the sphinx of the exhibition” (Figure 4.14).<sup>41</sup> Echoing the split receptions of Mueck’s verisimilitude discussed earlier, responses to Mueck’s *Boy* were mixed. Some found the larger-than-life sculpture amazing in its life-likeness, but some saw little substance behind it. Susan Vogel for the *New York Times* called the “giant crouching boy...[a] bit of a one-liner, it resembles a giant film prop...”<sup>42</sup> Vogel’s comment foreshadowed Mueck’s reception in the United States and the difficulties he would face as critics who distrusted his works’ realist qualities dwelt on the works’ “prop” qualities.

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<sup>40</sup> Between November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006, visitors to the Brooklyn Museum web site were invited to submit questions for Ron Mueck. Questions and answers appear at: [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/ron\\_mueck/qa.php](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/ron_mueck/qa.php)

<sup>41</sup> Sutton, Polly, “49th Biennale: Ron Mueck’s ‘Boy,’” *ABC Arts Online*, October 2006. Consulted on-line at <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/s424394.htm> (Accessed December 12, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Carol Vogel. “The Art World Returns to Venice, Dipping en Masse Into Nostalgia,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2001, E1. Consulted at ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003).

Surrounding Mueck's oeuvre is a constant tension between the illusion he creates and the willingness to dissolve the illusion into the material process of making. Critics such as Vogel have read this tension as a slippage between the sculptures as art and the sculptures as film or movie props. Within these debates, the term "realism" has become a common way of categorizing Mueck's work. More specifically, his sculptures have been identified as *hyperrealism*, a term I have been careful to use only selectively throughout my study, because the slippage in Mueck's work is not always between the fantastical and the real, which characterize the hyperreal, but between sculpted object and human body.

The issue of realism became a central concern for critics who wrote reviews for a small showing of Mueck's work at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in 2002. Joanna Shaw-Eagle of the *Washington Times* said Mueck's sculptures embodied a "contradictory realism," combining "what appears as the super-real with what couldn't possibly exist."<sup>43</sup> Shaw-Eagle argued that Mueck's attention to details, plus his alterations of scale, pushed the works' effect beyond realism by inserting "a mystery that makes viewers look long and hard."<sup>44</sup> Blake Gopnik, writing for the *Washington Post*, took Shaw-Eagle's interest in Mueck's use of a realist tradition one step further, citing in his article the works of Michelangelo and Rodin as looking "deeply stylized" against that of Mueck's.<sup>45</sup> Gopnik unpacked for his readers his view of how Mueck's work deconstructs realism into two parts, "illusionism" and "naturalism." Illusionism for Gopnik is the element in the work that convinced viewers of the object that it is not

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<sup>43</sup> Joanna Shaw-Eagle. "Sculptor Moves Beyond Realism: Artworks adds Special Effects to Human Features." *The Washington Times*. July 20, 2002: D1, D5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Blake Gopnik, "Sizing up Ron Mueck," *Washington Post*, July 28, 2002.



“man-made” but rather a “naturally occurring feature of the world around them.” It was this illusionistic quality, Gopnick argued, that convinces the viewer of the works’ naturalism, or the possibility that Mueck has copied his figures accurately from the natural world, giving the sculpture a referent. The crux of illusionism leading into naturalism, for Gopnick, was Mueck’s meticulous attention to details. To fend off Mueck’s opponents, Gopnick added, “It is, in fact, Mueck’s thorough-going illusionism and his manipulated naturalism that keeps his artwork from becoming empty special effects.”<sup>46</sup>

Instead of seeing the relationship of Mueck’s process, materials, and aesthetics to his earlier career in puppetry and special effects as a drawback of the work, I find this relationship to be one of the more conceptual aspects. Recall that Mueck’s intention in translating his puppet-making skills was to make objects that could not be justly captured by a two-dimensional image. As former Hirshhorn curator Sidney Lawrence has identified, a productive overlap exists between Mueck’s work and those of puppeteers and special effects experts. In his unpublished paper, *Realism as Entertainment: The Sculpture of Ron Mueck*, Lawrence argued that the experience with one of Mueck’s sculptures was similar to that of an experience at the theme park Universal Studios.<sup>47</sup> He concluded in his paper that “in terms of today’s high art, the theme park idea isn’t far off the mark.”<sup>48</sup> This is a difficult conclusion to come to for a museum professional because it forms a close kinship between the space of the gallery and that of the theme park.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Sidney Lawrence. “Realism as Entertainment: The Sculpture of Ron Mueck” unpublished paper written for CAA. Lawrence sent me an electronic version of this paper prior to my phone interview with him in July 2007, the paper has not been published.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Michael DeAngelis’ article will help to unpack this issue. Michael DeAngelis, “(Dis)Orientation: Roller Coasters, Theme Parks, and Postmodernism,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 37 (1997): 107–129.

The Smithsonian's consultant and advisor to museums, Elaine Heumann Gurian, argued that "museum professionals do not want to be in show business; we want to be in academia. And yet, like it or not, exhibitions are in part public entertainment."<sup>50</sup>

Retrospectives of Mueck's work have become public entertainment. Lawrence recalls that during Mueck's show at the Hirshhorn he watched as people consumed "like potato chips" brochures with *Big Man* (Figure 4.15; 2000) on the cover: 30,000 in five weeks.<sup>51</sup> Lawrence attested that "as a longtime member of the Hirshhorn staff (now working independently of the Hirshhorn), I can report that 'Big Man' is the single most asked-about, commented-upon, lingered-around and photographed object in the collection."<sup>52</sup> People like Mueck's work, and the popularity leading to a confusion of art and entertainment is perhaps why art historians and critics are hesitant in including Mueck's sculptures as part of a contemporary art narrative. The public enthusiasm engendered by the encounter with Mueck's work is part of its success as sculpture and as entertainment.

### ***Marketing Encounter with Mueck's Sculpture***

Mueck's sculptures emerged in the art world during a moment in British art that was steeped in reinvention. Mueck's works were appealing to institutions that were seeking to re-imagine themselves for the purpose of attracting a wider audience. In some cases, private collectors teamed with institutions for a longer-lasting and broader impact on the art world. One example was advertising executive and art collector Charles Saatchi, who

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<sup>50</sup> Elaine Heuman Gurian. *Civilizing the Museum*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 155.

<sup>51</sup> Sidney Lawrence. "'Big Man,' Still Exerting a Gigantic Hold on Museum-Goers," *The Washington Post*, Washington D.C., July 20, 2003.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

partnered with the Tate Galleries in an attempt to cultivate a younger generation of British artists.<sup>53</sup> In the late 1980s, he began acquiring works by younger artists who had not yet established a name for themselves in the art market. At times Saatchi would buy an entire collection of works shown in a student's exhibition. Saatchi displayed the works he collected in his gallery, exciting the art market, nurturing newborn careers, and motivating prices for the work.<sup>54</sup> Beginning in 1996, Mueck became one of the Young British Artists (YBA), a group of painters, sculptors, and installation artists working in London in the 1990s, who were initially collected and shown only by Saatchi.

In 1997, Mueck's *Dead Dad* was included in a touring exhibition, organized by Saatchi, titled *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Charles Saatchi Collection*. *Dead Dad* was characterized as the "still center" of an exhibition whose works of art ignited controversy and debates about the nature of contemporary art, its appropriate subject, and the place of British artists in a global art scene. Many of Mueck's fellow YBAs displayed works in *Sensations* that reflected a direct engagement in the everyday and established a point of departure for art that was close to materials circulated by the mass media. To synthesize this phenomenon, the English art historian and critic Julian

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<sup>53</sup> Born in Baghdad, Saatchi grew up in a Jewish family in north London. In 1970 Charles and his brother Maurice started the advertising firm *Saatchi & Saatchi* which, by the late eighties had become the largest in the world. One of *Saatchi & Saatchi's* most important triumphs, it is said, was a billboard with an image of hundreds of jobless men in queue outside the unemployment office. The tag line read "Labour Isn't Working." According to many the billboard helped to secure the first and only female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher's winning position in the 1979 election. For a critique of Saatchi please see Rita Hatton and John A. Walker, *A Critique of Charles Saatchi*, Ellipsis, 2000. Also see Kevin Goldman, *Conflicting Accounts: The Creation and Crash of the Saatchi and Saatchi Advertising Empire*, Fireside, 1998.

<sup>54</sup> In a 1999 interview with Saatchi, *New York Times* art critic Deborah Solomon contended that Saatchi had "assembled the defining contemporary art collection of a nation." Supporting close to twenty-five hundred works from over three hundred and fifty artists, Saatchi's collection was and continues to be a substantial representation of current art trends. (Deborah Soloman. "The Collector," *New York Times*, September 26, 1999. Consulted on-line: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9805E4DB1E3CF935A1575AC0A96F958260&scp=10&sq=Deborah+Solomon+The+Collector>. (Accessed September 23, 2006).

Stallabrass coined the term “High Art Lite” to define the work that came to popularity in the 1990s, which he saw as encapsulating “the idea of a fast food version of the less digestible art that preceded” it.<sup>55</sup> High Art Lite of the 1990s was characterized by Stallabrass as breaking with the more provincial flavor of the previous generations, appealing to an international art market, and, most importantly, maintaining a strong affinity to the mass media. This affinity paralleled the artists’ fascination with the “everyday” and promoted the production of works that often had spectacular forms and were visually accessible to a public beyond art connoisseurs.<sup>56</sup> Stallabrass contends that High Art Lite took on an “accessible veneer building in references and forms that people without specialist knowledge would understand—and even sometimes, in its use of mass culture, incorporating material that those with specialist knowledge would generally *not* understand...”<sup>57</sup>

*Sensation* included a cast of contemporary British artists whose work, like Mueck’s, enunciated a renewed fascination with realism, the body, and the human condition, all staged as strange and at times uncanny works. For example, Jake and Dinos Chapman (Figure 4.16; *Great Deeds Against the Dead*, 1994) used a realist language in representing mutilated human bodies in sculpture. Those in *Sensation* pushed the boundaries of a realist aesthetic by exhibiting works that questioned the autonomy of the art object from the everyday, and by staging disturbing encounters with deformed bodies and literal representations of death. Likewise, the grotesquely obese

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<sup>55</sup> Julian Stallabrass. *High Art Lite*, (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 9. Stallabrass argued that although there was a concerted effort to appeal to a broader public there was still focus on art-buyers and dealers. He contended that this “led to a wide public being successfully courted but not seriously addressed. It has left a large audience for high art lite intrigued but unsatisfied, puzzled at the work’s meaning and wanting explanations that are never vouchsafed: the aim of this book is to suggest the direction some of those answers might take, and to do so in a style that is as accessible as the art it examines.” (Stallabrass,11)

renditions in Jenny Saville's paintings of female forms (Figure 4.17; *Propped*, 1992) abuse the painted surfaces of the body and its implied interior. Corpulent thighs expand into smears of blue and black paint which make the body appear at the verge of bursting, spilling its innards through the picture frame into the space of the viewer. Mark Quinn's interpretations of a flayed corpse, and his portrait in his own blood (Figures 4.18 and 4.19), or Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* (Figure 4.20; 1990), in which maggots eat away a cow's head, all speak to the corpulent and its eventual decay and death.

Those critics who took the New British Art seriously praised these artists for a concern with reality that set their work apart from media-based conceptual works from the past. Writing for the *Sensation* catalog, Norman Rosenthal, Exhibition Secretary at the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) in London, asked "So what is so new about the art in 'Sensation'?" and "Why has this art had such a public resonance[?]"<sup>58</sup> For Rosenthal the answer was realism: "a totally new and radical attitude to realism, or rather to reality and real life itself."<sup>59</sup> Writing for the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith echoed Rosenthal's assumptions. She told readers that *Sensation* brought to light the explosion of a new group of artists onto a once frumpy art scene: *Sensation* "captures a particular moment and makes what these artists have done more undeniable and real to us, and maybe even to them. And for better or worse, 'real' may be what it is all about."<sup>60</sup> For Smith the "real," as constituted by the work in *Sensation*, was about "mirroring," as the work "revels in the physical" and rejects high-tech gadgetry in favor of "portable art

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<sup>58</sup> Norman Rosenthal, "The Blood Must Continue to Flow," in *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Charles Saatchi Collection*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997) 10.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Roberta Smith, "Bringing America Up to Speed," *The New York Times*, October 1999. Consulted at ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), AR40.

objects...that demand a traditionally buffered one-on-one relationship to the viewer.”<sup>61</sup> Together, Rosenthal and Smith exposed a characteristic of *Sensation*—the “real”—that was simultaneously an old-fashioned way of making art and a radically new approach to the problem of representation and display. After a generation steeped in immateriality, conceptualism, and anti-objectness, the YBAs forced a new brand of realism onto an international art scene—a new brand of realism that was deeply invested in literal flesh. Issues of the human condition were explored through objects that used a language that was seemed more visually accessible non-connoisseur public.

### **“‘*Sensation*’ when it might as well be called ‘*Sensationalism*’”**

*Sensation* was an exhibition that was heard, if not seen, across Europe and the United States. It made a controversial splash from which spread a wake of newspaper articles, publications, and court proceedings. While much of the controversy had to do with Saatchi’s exploitation of shock value and manipulation of the art market, the conversation returned again and again to criticize the entertaining display of art that pushed the limits of the representation of human bodies in art. Although Mueck’s *Dead Dad* was not one of the objects in question, the artist was tangentially involved in an intense debate over what could be exhibited in public museums and paid for by public funds. The British press was the main platform for debate, with the show’s opponents questioning the Royal Academy in London, the objects in *Sensation*, and the show’s only lender, Charles Saatchi. Objections were raised concerning not only the objects on display but the nature

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

of their collector. Those that voiced opposition said “that the art was inappropriate for the Academy; that individual pieces are distasteful and offensive...”<sup>62</sup> One of the main objections was to Marcus Harvey’s image of the English serial killer of children, Myra Hindley. Hindley’s police photograph was reproduced using a repetitive patterning of children’s handprints. In London, ink and raw eggs were splattered on the work, and protests outside the museum discouraged patrons from entering. In its defense, the Royal Academy’s secretary, David Gordon, argued for the inclusion of the painting, offering an interpretation that viewed the image as one of awareness, not portraiture.<sup>63</sup> Other oppositions to the show were not so much of an aesthetic nature, but instead questioned the Royal Academy’s practices and the decision to show a group of works belonging entirely to a single private collector. Some claimed the show gave “too much weight to the opinions of one collector, Mr. Saatchi.” Not only did this limit the scope of the exhibition but it also toed the line of “sensationalism,” with some critics arguing that after accruing a debt of over two million U.S. dollars in 1996, the museum was trying to use the show for purposes of financial recovery.<sup>64</sup>

The heated debates over the content of *Sensation* and the financial gain of the museum (and possibly the collector) in London were the beginnings of a scandal that spread to the United States. In 1997, when the exhibition was opened at the Brooklyn

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<sup>62</sup> Sarah Lyall “Art That Tweaks British Propriety,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 1997. Consulted at ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), B7.

<sup>63</sup> David Gordon: “Some people are, quite wrongly, assuming that this is a portrait of Hindley...But it has not been painted from life. My interpretation is that the child’s handprints are seeking protection, crying out in horror at what has happened. It’s a very severe way of brining attention back to the crimes against children that are still being committed. It’s a terrible warning that, to me, makes it a moral work and justifies including it in the exhibition.” Sarah Lyall “Art That Tweaks British Propriety,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 1997. Consulted at ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), B7.

<sup>64</sup> Sarah Lyall “Art That Tweaks British Propriety,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 1997. Consulted at ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), B7.

Museum in New York City, then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani disputed the display of a mixed media painting by Chris Ofili, a British-born artist of Nigerian decent. The painting in question is an image of the Virgin Mary comprised of numerous small clippings from pornographic magazines and adorned with clumps of dried elephant dung. On September 22, 1999, the Mayor held a press conference in which he publicly accused Ofili of “Catholic bashing”<sup>65</sup> and threatened to withhold funding and evict the museum if the piece was not excluded from the exhibition. Then First Lady Hillary Clinton said that Mayor Giuliani had had a “very wrong response,” and that “our feelings of being offended should not lead to the penalizing and shutting down of an entire museum.”<sup>66</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union stepped in, arguing that the Mayor was treading on the museum and the artists’ First Amendment rights for freedom of speech. The clash between the Mayor and the Brooklyn Museum resulted in the museum filing a federal lawsuit against the city for violation of the First Amendment, and Mr. Giuliani filing a counter state lawsuit seeking to evict the museum from its city-owned building and to dismiss its board of directors. Add to this battle a “Barnumesque”<sup>67</sup> museum director—Arnold L. Lehman—and an “advertising wizard”<sup>68</sup> art collector—Charles Saatchi—and you have what the *New York Times* came to call the “museum debacle.” This material

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<sup>65</sup> Abby Goodnough, “Giuliani Criticizes ‘Catholic Bashing’” *The New York Times*, September 25, 1999. Consulted on-line at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9400E5DA103FF936A1575AC0A96F958260&scp=1&sq=Abby+Goodnough%2C+%93Giuliani+Criticizes+%91Catholic+Bashing%92>

<sup>66</sup> Adam Nagourney, “First Lady Assails Mayor Over Threat to Museum,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1999. Consulted on-line at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C02EFD61F3FF93BA1575AC0A96F958260&scp=1&sq=Adam+Nagourney%2C+%93First+Lady+Assails+Mayor+Over+Threat+to+Museum>

<sup>67</sup> David Barstow, “Seeking Buzz, Museum Chief Hears a Roar Instead,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 1999. Consulted at ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), A1.

<sup>68</sup> Deborah Solomon, “The Collector,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 1999. Consulted on-line at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9805E4DB1E3CF935A1575AC0A96F958260&scp=10&sq=Deborah+Solomon+The+Collector>



sets the tone/scene for the reception of Mueck's *Dead Dad* and has been used to market many of his solo-exhibitions.

The timing of the debacle paralleled a plethora of discussion concerning public funding for the arts, especially funding for that which was deemed "offensive" art. In 2000 the Cultural Program at the University of Chicago organized "Taking Funds, Giving Offense, Making Money," a conference which was attended by close to four hundred people. Said to be "yet another chapter in the culture wars," museum directors, academics, lawyers, and journalists came together to discuss "the actions and decisions of all those who influence how the public experiences and participates in the arts and cultural activities."<sup>69</sup> Subsequently, a substantial body of literature arose around the *Sensation* controversy that frames *Sensation* amongst debates of public funding for the arts in America. I will now discuss in greater depth the marketing campaigns that accompanied solo exhibitions of Mueck's work at three major art museums: the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

### **Mueck at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York**

The popularity of Mueck's work with nontraditional audiences and the wide appeal that *Dead Dad* had in Europe motivated the Brooklyn Museum of Art to take an innovative approach to boost exhibition turnout when they held a retrospective of Mueck's work in

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<sup>69</sup> Lawrence Rothfield, ed. *Unsettling "Sensation": Arts-Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2001) p. xi-xii. In addition see Dublin, S.c. *Displays of Power: Controversy in the American Museum from Enola Gay to Sensation*. (New York: New York University Press, 1999) and Macdonald, R.R. "Tolerance, Trust and the Meaning of 'Sensation'" in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*. G. Corsane. Ed. (London: Routledge 2005), 195-199.

2001. The museum reminded viewers of Mueck's affiliation to the Young British Artists and the controversy that had occurred during the Sensation show. This helped to bring visitors to the museum who were eager to see the work of an artist who had been displayed in an exhibition that had stirred so much controversy. This type of sensationalism was part of the museum's aim of reaching a younger generation of viewers. The Brooklyn museum also reached out to their targeted audience by posting behind-the-scenes images of the installation of the Mueck exhibition on Flickr.com. This move was noted by museum professionals as innovative and incited a dialog about the use of technology both inside and outside the gallery.<sup>70</sup> The museum originally posted only twenty-five images; to date, a search on Flickr.com for "Ron Mueck" will return over 5,000 images, many of which were taken by viewers during their visits to exhibitions of Mueck's sculptures in Edinburgh, Brooklyn, Ottawa, Fort Worth, and the National Gallery of Victoria (Australia).<sup>71</sup> This makeshift archive documents the personal interactions with Mueck's sculptures as viewers capture themselves looking, staring, and contemplating the surfaces and textures of Mueck's fabricated bodies. The quickly growing collection of Flickr photography and commentary shows that viewers connect with Mueck's work and have a desire for more information regarding the installation and fabrication of his work. In support of this desire the museum also posted a film of the artist working in his studio as artist-in-residence at the National Gallery in London. The film served to underscore the meticulous nature of Mueck's process, and demonstrated to viewers how the illusion of life was constructed inside the artist's studio.

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<sup>70</sup> James Yasko. "Museums and Web 2.0." *Museum News*. July/August 2007, 42-47, 72.

<sup>71</sup> To see the image go to <http://flickr.com/search/?q=Ron+Mueck>.

## Mueck at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh

Chosen to accompany the season of the Edinburgh Festival—a spectacle in and of itself that attracts a large crowd—the Mueck exhibition at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, was a not a typical choice for the museum. A £30-million renovation of the galleries was completed in the summer of 2004, and although the galleries were inaugurated with a slew of impressionist exhibitions, the Royal Scottish Academy Building debuted its facelift with its first contemporary art show, *Ron Mueck*, in the summer of 2006.<sup>72</sup> The National Gallery used local newspapers to drum up enthusiasm for the show long before it opened, as early as nine months prior to the opening. First announcements even reminded readers of Mueck’s involvement with *Sensation*: the headlines read “RSA to Showcase Controversial Artist.”<sup>73</sup> As the show approached, the publicity intensified, and many speculated that the anticipated show would be “a massive draw,” a “larger than life” exhibition.<sup>74</sup> This framing of Mueck’s work, long before it was even seen, says that the museum sought to advertise the exhibition as spectacular entertainment, again reminding potential visitors of the controversy that erupted because of *Sensation*.

## Mueck at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

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<sup>72</sup> The Playfair project was named after the architect William Playfair who designed the National Gallery of Scotland and the Royal Scottish Academy in the early nineteenth century. One of the largest engineering endeavors of its kind, the Playfair Project connected, via a subterranean tunnel, the National Gallery of Scotland and the Royal Scottish Academy Building in Edinburgh. Tim Cromwell. “Sculptor brings figures to gallery.” *The Scotsman*. August 9, 2006. Section: News.

<sup>73</sup> Raymond Duncan. “RSA to showcase controversial artist.” *The Herald*, Edinburgh, December 20, 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Rachel Millard. “Galleries think big to stand out from the crowd: The Edinburgh Art Festival is no Cinderella,” *Scotland on Sunday*, Edinburgh, July 23, 2006.

During an interview I conducted in 2007, Alain Boisvert, chief of marketing and communications at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in Ottawa, explained that at the National Gallery of Canada, the staff separates the museum's visitors into two categories: "lapsed visitors," or people who go to the museum but maybe have not been for a month or two, and "non-visitors," or those who do not come to the gallery on a regular basis, if at all a third category includes out-of-town visitors and tourists. In designing the campaign for the exhibition of Mueck's work, Boisvert's goal was to make the show appeal to all three audience categories and to bring people into the museum who may have not otherwise come.<sup>75</sup> For example, in an attempt to target a younger audience, a postcard with Mueck's *Spooning Couple* (Figure 4.22, postcard) was distributed on college campuses, in nightclubs, and at restaurants in Ottawa's downtown district. Boisvert said that Ottawa's "underground" was a primary target, selling the Mueck show as "a place to go before going out." In fact, the museum on a handful of occasions (both officially and unofficially) remained open past its regularly scheduled closing at five p.m. Mueck's show incited a fan following in Ottawa that was described as "downright cultish."<sup>76</sup>

Mueck's sculptures have been counted among the most popular exhibitions during a time when it was being reported that the United States was enjoying radically increasing numbers of visitors to museums each year. Circulating in the press in the late 1990s were reports that museums such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the

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<sup>75</sup> Alain Boisvert expressed that it was the museum's hope that people would come to see the Mueck exhibition and stay to visit the permanent collection; whether or not this hope was realized is anyone's guess. During my visit, as I toured the galleries, it became apparent that the Mueck show was very much the center of attention. An adjacent exhibition by Canadian sculpture and painter, Robert Davidson, was included in the price of the Mueck ticket. The second exhibition captured a good quantity of visitors that had purchased the joint ticket, though the permanent collections were far from crowded.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Gessell, "Massive art, Massive Controversy," *Ottawa Citizen*, February 27, 2007

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York were seeing record numbers of visitors for what they termed “blockbuster” exhibitions.<sup>77</sup>

Record-breaking numbers have been counted for each of Mueck’s exhibitions. According to PR personnel who worked on the Mueck campaign at each of the museums that sought to frame the encounter with his work as a Blockbuster exhibition, the intention was to attract people who do not usually frequent museum events. William Snow, who works in the marketing department at the National Galleries of Scotland, said that the main objective was to create a “buzz” and “to make people feel as though something major was happening at the National Gallery Complex.”<sup>78</sup> The use of such unorthodox publicity techniques as the use of internet social sites and distribution of cards in nightclubs helped make Mueck’s exhibitions into blockbuster events. The result of these campaigns was not only that people came to see the exhibitions, but they were actively engaged in talking about their encounters with Mueck’s work.

### ***Generating Empathy as Key to Mueck’s Works***

*Dead Dad* remained a wildly successful and popular work in all of Mueck’s exhibitions in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Because the sculpture was effective in eliciting strong viewer response, skeptical critics of Mueck’s work often demonstrated a spot of reserve for the emotions brought about by an encounter with *Dead Dad*. What made the work so successful? Between the brutal realisms in YBA art and the later spectacles drummed up

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<sup>77</sup> Judith H. Dobrzynski. “Art Museum Attendance Keeps Rising in the U.S.” *The New York Times*. February 1, 1999.

<sup>78</sup> Email from William Snow, May 2007.

by museum officials to frame Mueck's work, *Dead Dad* successfully existed in a liminal space, in that "still center," between a cadaver and its representation in art, entertainment, and science. The success of the sculpture is predicated on the viewer's ability to perceive this liminality and follow as the figure shuttles between the illusion of a flesh-and-bones human body and a carefully fabricated sculpture in the round. Left free of the undertaker's handiwork—no overdone makeup, coiffed hair, or crisply pressed suit—*Dead Dad* is a hauntingly familiar image. It is akin to a body from a crime television show or medical drama, waiting to be rolled into a refrigerator compartment at the morgue.

In Hanson's work, mimetic realism caught many viewers off-guard because the sculptures look so much like real people, but Hanson's illusion was only stable from faraway. Once viewers got up close to Hanson's people, the artifice was destabilized and what appeared at first to be people plucked from the everyday reverted back to being sculptural representations of generic American types. Mueck's work embraces the reproduction of the human body in sculpture and uses the effect of this duplication to motivate an encounter that is perceived as bodily, emotional, and sculptural all at the same time.

Both sculpture and displayed cadavers can be used to elicit a visceral response from viewer. The slippage between corpse and sculpture, promoted by *Dead Dad*, is startling for viewers because it motivates a realization that at the end of our lives, we too will become something akin to that which is represented by *Dead Dad*. Robert Rosenblum articulated uneasiness in encountering *Dead Dad*. He describes a palpable slippage, between the real and the unreal when viewing Mueck's sculpture.

There, with its matter-of-fact, colloquial title, *Dead Dad* (1996-1997), was something both so shockingly real and so shockingly unreal, that like an unexpected trauma, it left an indelible imprint.<sup>79</sup>

The tension between the real and the unreal is definable as a slipperiness which allows Rosenblum to read *Dead Dad* as both something akin to a real dead body and a very real looking representation of a dead body. This slipperiness allows *Dead Dad* to exist in the pergatory between the time of the living and the non-time and non-space of the non-living. Empathy becomes a path to sustaining the viewer in limbo.

Viewers who are versed in artistic practice and aesthetics, such as Rosenblum, as well as novice viewers who are not formally versed in looking at and thinking about art have all had meaningful encounters with *Dead Dad*. Viewers admire the sculptures because of the technical complexity that makes them so life-like and because their subject matter, which may be intimately familiar. The life-likeness, or death-likeness, and the familiarity of subject matter, also open a space for viewers to attempt to relate to the sculptures as if they were real human beings, not just representations of people. Those who encounter Mueck's sculptures remark that they inspire memories of the birth of their own children, their adolescence, and elderly or deceased parents. The strong ability to identify with (and perhaps even sympathize with) Mueck's figures is due to the viewer's willingness to project human feelings and emotions onto the objects. This may in some cases simulate the familiar effect of forming a close bond with another human being.

What is most notable about the empathic responses to *Dead Dad* is the viewer's description of an empathy that transcends the work and extends into personal experiences with death and dying. Juliet Michaelson, for example, made the following remarks in *The Guardian*, (August 14, 2006) after seeing the corpse-like sculpture displayed at the

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Rosenblum, "Ron Mueck's Bodies and Souls," 46.

National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh: “I loved Mueck's *Dead Dad* because it made me think as well as feel. It made me realize that part of the sadness of losing your father is due to the realization that he was not an invincible superhero but humanly vulnerable.”<sup>80</sup> Yet while encounters with Mueck’s people do elicit human empathy, it is an empathy that is always already interrupted by the fact that Mueck adjusts scale and manipulates dimensions. These alterations suspended the figures between the sculptural and the corporeal, while never really tying them concretely to either category.

## **Conclusion**

Ron Mueck’s sculptures look a lot like people. His attention to the recreation of dermatological details and physiognomic particularities, more than Duane Hanson’s, produces a verisimilitude that is so convincing that when viewers encounter Mueck’s work, they have a strong desire to connect with them as if they were other living, breathing human beings. But Mueck’s sculptures are about the *imitation* of human qualities and emotions, not a direct reproduction of such. The mimetic effect of each of Mueck’s sculpted people—a newborn child, an old woman, or a middle-aged man—allows them to emerge from the sculptural media (resin, silicone, fiberglass, and paint) as bodies, while simultaneously remaining very much wedded to their objectness. This paves the way for his objects’ *between-ness* As Mueck thinks of his works:

On one hand I try to create a believable presence, and on the other hand, they have to work as objects. They aren’t living persons, although it’s nice to stand in front of them and be unsure whether they are or not. But ultimately, they’re

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<sup>80</sup> “Dead Dad Made Me Cry,” *The Guardian*, August 14, 2006. Online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2006/aug/14/art.edinburgh2006>



fiberglass objects that you can pick up and carry. If they succeed as fun things to have in the room, I'm happy. At the same time, I wouldn't be satisfied if they didn't have some kind of presence that made you think they're more than just objects.<sup>81</sup>

Both viewers' and critics' responses, trained and untrained, respond to Mueck's human bodies as sculptural objects. The material, fabrication, and techniques used in displaying and marketing Mueck's sculptures are key elements in drawing viewers in and suspending them between a reality and illusion as it draws them into a simulated human-to-human meeting. Yet while untrained viewers and museum officials embrace the effects of that meeting, art critics express weariness, creating debates among scholars concerning Mueck's use of verisimilitude, illusionism, and realism. To classify Mueck's sculptures and the encounter that they stage as separate from art is to deny the complexity of the truly conceptual effect staged by the work: the palpable slippage between the human body—dead or alive—and the representation of the human body in certain kinds of sculpture.

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<sup>81</sup> Sarah Tanguy, "The Progress of Big Man: A Conversation with Ron Mueck," *Sculpture Magazine* 22, no. 6 (2003), [http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag03/jul\\_aug03/mueck/mueck.shtml](http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag03/jul_aug03/mueck/mueck.shtml).

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

My purpose in writing this dissertation has been to chart a new course through figural realism of the last fifty years. I have done so by highlighting the work of three artists who make sculptural representations of human bodies. What separates these three artists from their contemporaries is a sustained commitment to mimetic realism, a mode that produces in viewers a palpable oscillation that suspends sculpture in a liminal state between categories of object, subject, living, dead, presence, and absence. Mimetic realism poses an interesting set of challenges for the contemporary art world and the presumed stability of established models of artistic production, exhibition, and reception.

The case studies that form the core of this study have investigated the particular technologies of making, the conceptual practices of display, and the moments of encounter that are characteristic of mimetic realism. Chapter Two unpacked the effects of mimetic realism in the life-size and life-like work of Duane Hanson. His figures are representations of people he claimed to have encountered while living in a Floridian suburb in the late 1960s and 1970s. The sculptures attempt to duplicate, with a high degree of accuracy, the physiognomy and physique of a variety of American types,

including supermarket shoppers, sunbathers, housewives, football players, policemen, and museum guards. In seeking to provide a vivid life-likeness, Hanson experimented with early plastics—polyvinyl acetate, fiberglass, and resin—which provided flexibility of form and surface finish that appeared in color and texture more like human flesh than the more traditional media, bronze or stone. To increase the sculptures' credibility, Hanson dressed each figure in clothing and accessories purchased from inexpensive department stores. When exhibited within the institutional confines of the modernist gallery, Hanson's figures appeared to be incongruent intrusions that provoked viewers, critics, and scholars to reconsider what did and did not belong in an art gallery.

Chapter Three, on Robert Gober's adaptation of mimetic realism, plotted a move away from a strictly figural project, such as Hanson's, to sculpture that represented a human-like presence without ever duplicating a whole human body. While Gober extended the theme of mimetically rendered bodies, he approached the subject initially through sculptures that looked like everyday objects. He re-made, from scratch and by hand, the mundane and ubiquitous objects—light bulbs, sinks, urinals, and drains—that are used by human bodies during daily rituals such as sleeping, eating, cleaning, and excreting. Like Hanson, Gober explored alternative materials and frequently substituted one material for another—a light bulb made of wax instead of glass—to underscore the handmadeness of each sculpture and thus to draw it closer to the human body. When installed in the gallery, Gober's sculptures produce a palpable human-like presence that evokes an eerie feeling that someone, not just something, was in the gallery but had momentarily departed. Gober's project demonstrates the multiplicity that is inherent in

mimetic realism and the varied guises it can assume while still maintaining its ability to oscillate between the states of presence and absence.

The last case study chapter analyzed the larger and smaller-than-life-sized mimetic realist sculptures made by Ron Mueck. Each of his figures echoes Hanson's in their corporeality, but due to advances in plastics (the wider use of silicones, resins, and other polymers) Mueck's sculptures can provide a very convincing simulation of the appearance, color, and complex textures of human flesh. The surfaces of Mueck's sculptures become a landscape of fine lines and wrinkles, blemishes, moles, rosacea, faintly visible veins, and individual hairs. Viewers do not just marvel at the sculpture's surfaces, for there is also a very palpable sense that the figures have an internal anatomy that includes muscular tissues, ligaments, bones, and joints. Mueck's mimetic realist figures evoke intensely attentive responses from their viewers and stage uncanny encounters that some have described as akin to seeing a real person or cadaver.

As much as the sculptures by Hanson, Gober, and Mueck provide convincing simulations of human bodies (as a whole, in parts, or as absence), viewers are aware, after an initial moment of mistaking the realism for actuality, that they are not real and that there is a complex game of perception afoot. When they choose to engage in this game, viewers are motivated to continuously explore the possibility that the sculptures could become, are in the process of becoming, or had been at some point in the past, something other than just an object. This exploration can be infinite and produce a desire in the viewer to walk around the sculpture to get an overall sense of its presence, coming in close to focus on surface details, or take note of the plethora of particularities that always leads to a very palpable corporeal physicality.

With mimetic realism, physicality can be manifested as the literal appearance of another human body, as with Hanson and Mueck, or it can be a sense of the traces left by the body on things it used, as with Gober. *Still Life* (Figure 5.2), a work made by Mueck in 2009, represents a convergence of the types of mimetic realism this study has presented. Mueck's sculpture is an oversized representation of a slaughtered and plucked chicken, hung by its feet. As with much of Mueck's work, *Still Life* consists of a plethora of detailed specificity that is eerily reminiscent of a real dead chicken. Its surface is dappled with goose-bumped follicles, translucent and yellowed. The slippery skin, bunching at the joints, pulls taut to reveal the firm masses of meat, the chef's poultry selection: drum sticks, breasts, wings, and thighs. The chicken was killed, drained, and had its feathers plucked by someone in anticipation of culinary preparation and eventual consumption. In this post-processes state, the chicken slips between dead carcass and poultry, something to be buried or discarded, and something to be cooked and eaten. Its installation, hanging from the ceiling, may also remind the viewer of the popular comedic prop, a rubber chicken. This type of mimetic realism calls to mind Gober's objects such as *Bag of Donuts* (Figure 3.13), which became a polysemic representation for a body part, an object, and food. As a former special-effects expert and puppeteer, the products of Mueck's labor typify a nontraditional overlap between avant-garde art and popular spectacle.

As alluded to in Chapter One, the mimetic realism of modern and contemporary sculpture is historically informed by earlier invocations of heightened verism, in such examples as the wax models for anatomy lessons or pious statuary from Spain. *Still Life* introduces an opportunity for considering mimetic realism within the history of the genre

of still life. Following this lead one could look for historical inspiration and visual intertextuality in the ways in which Mueck's sculpture connotes seventeenth-century Dutch traditions of still life painting. There is also congruity between the deceptive still life traditions of the seventeenth century and the subject matter of the later nineteenth-century tromp l'oeil painting *For Sunday's Dinner* by William Harnett (Figure 5.2; 1888), in which a dead chicken, whose feathers have been plucked, hangs by one foot from a nail in front of what appears to be a pantry or cupboard door. This type of looking back can only yield a fruitful look forward, and a richer understanding of the blurring between what is real and what is artificial as promoted by works of mimetic realism.

## Figures



Figure 1.1.  
Edgar Degas. *La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans* (Little Dancer of Fourteen Years),  
c.1881. Bronze casting of wax original, (height) 3 feet, approx. The Tate Gallery,  
London.





Figure 1.2.  
Auguste Rodin. *The Age of Bronze*, c. 1876. Bronze, height 70 inches, approx.  
Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 1.3.  
Hans Bellmer. *La Poupée*, 1938, color print, photograph.

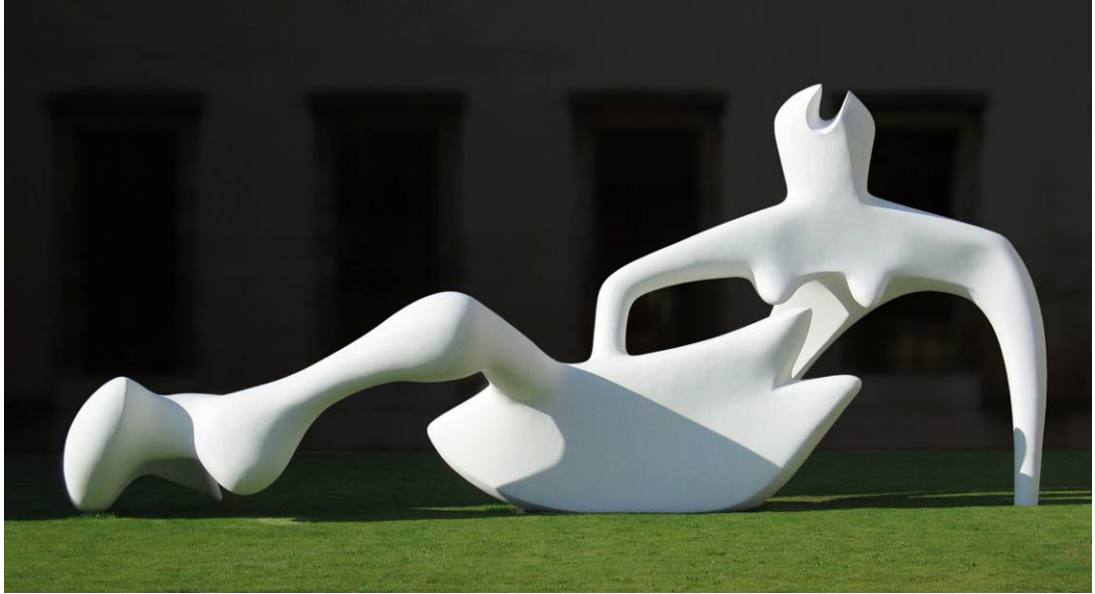


Figure 1.4.  
Henry Moore. *Reclining Figure*, 1951, painted plaster, (length) 30 feet, approx.  
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



Figure 1.5.  
Barbara Hepworth. *Mother and Child*, 1934. Grey Cumberland alabaster,  
9 x 1 x 7 inches, approx. The Tate Gallery, Liverpool.



Figure 1.6.  
Alberto Giacometti. *Tall Woman III*, *Walking Man II*, and *Monumental Head*, installation view at the Fondation Beyeler, Switzerland, in May 2009.



Figure 1.7.A.  
Marcel Duchamp. *Étant Donnés* (interior), 1946-66, mixed media assemblage,  
7 feet 11 1/2 inches x 70 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

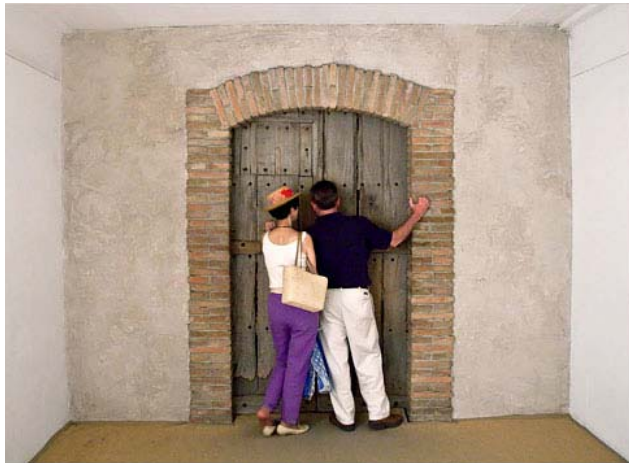


Figure 1.6.B.  
Marcel Duchamp. *Étant Donnés* (exterior), 1946-66, mixed media assemblage, 7 feet 11  
1/2 inches x 70 inches. Installation view Philadelphia Museum of Art, October 2009.

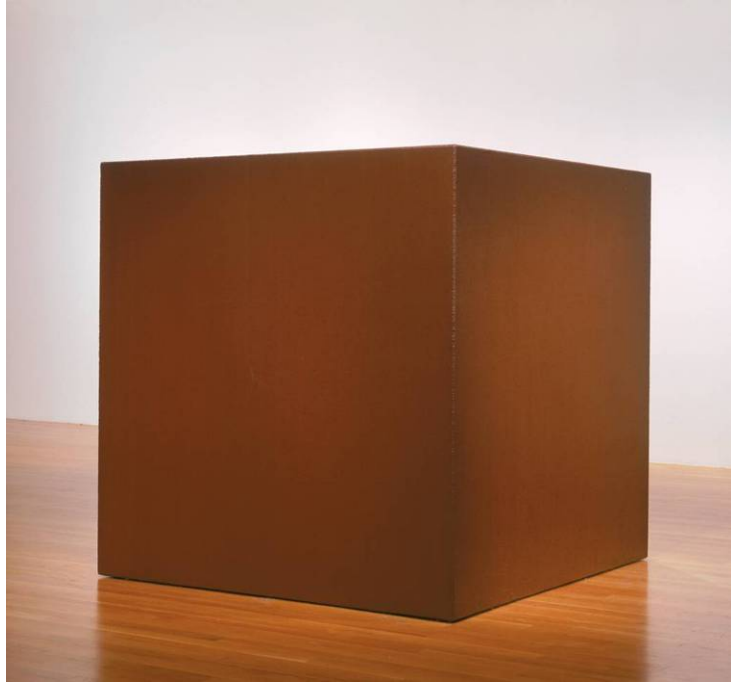


Figure 1.8.  
Tony Smith. *Die*, 1962, painted steel, 6 x 6 x 6 feet. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 1.9.  
Valie Export. *Tapp und Tastkino (Pat and Paw Cinema)*, 1968, performance, Vienna.



Figure 1.10.  
Duane Hanson. *Man in Denim Suit*, later retitled *Self Portrait*, 1976, polyvinyl,  
polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories,  
Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles, California.



Figure 1.11.A.  
*The Uncanny*. Curated by Mike Kelley, installation view at Tate Liverpool,  
20 February–3 March, 2004.  
[Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 15 July – 31 October, 2004.]





Figure 1.11.B.  
*The Uncanny*. Curated by Mike Kelley, installation view at Tate Liverpool,  
20 February–3 March, 2004.  
[Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 15 July – 31 October, 2004.]



Figure 1.12.

Duane Hanson. *Man on Bench*, 1977, polyester resin, fiberglass, polychromed with oil paint, accessories. Installation view. Charles Saatchi Gallery, London, 2008.



Figure 1.13.

Gregorio Fernández (1576-1636) and unknown polychromer. *Dead Christ*, c. 1625-30.

Polychromed wood, horn, glass, bark, and ivory or bone, 46 x 191 x 74 cm.

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 1.14.  
Joseph Towne. *Section of Thorax at the Level of the Heart*, c. 1827-79, wax,  
39.7 x 50 x 55.5 cm. Gordon Museum.



Figure 1.15.  
Museo di Storia Naturale di Firenze, Zoologia "La Specola", Florence, Italy. 2009,  
Wax anatomical models.



Figure 1.16.  
Gunther von Hagens. *Autopsy Body after Plastination,*  
*Body Worlds*, c. 2004.



Figure 2.1.  
Duane Hanson. *Vendor with Walkman*, 1989, bronze, polychromed in oil, mixed media,  
with accessories, Fort Lauderdale International Airport, Florida.

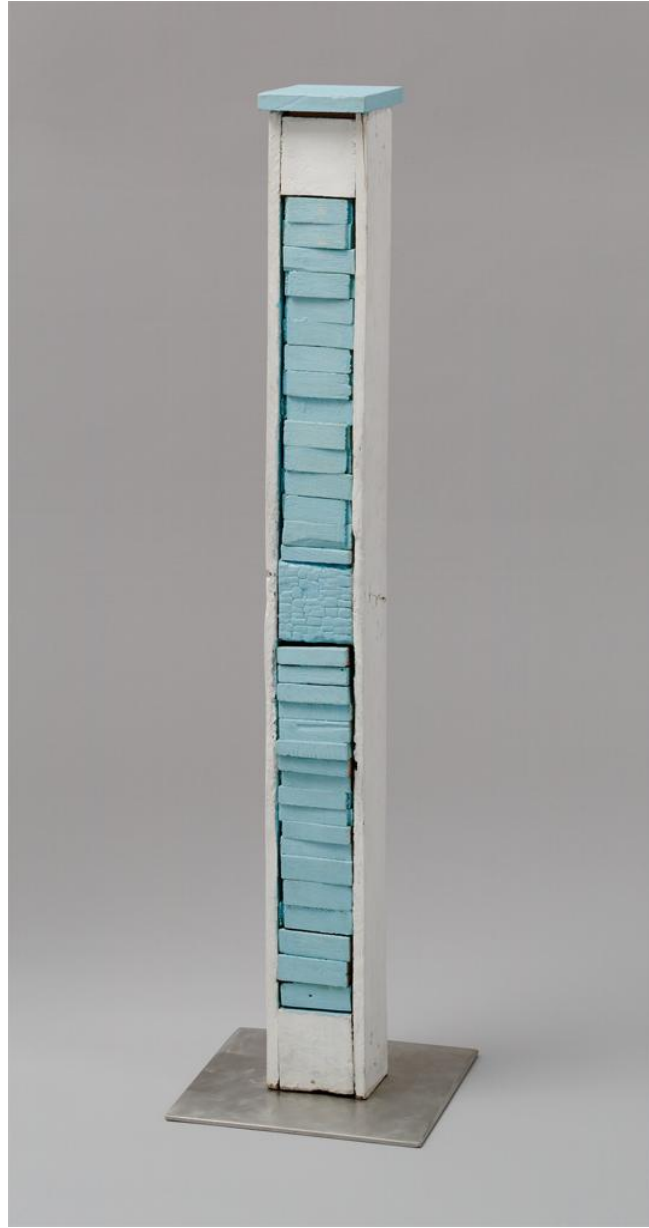


Figure 2.2.  
Duane Hanson. Solo exhibition, 1958, installation view, Worpswede, Germany.



Figure 2.3.  
David Smith. *Iron Woman*, 1955-57, metal and iron alloy, 59 x 55 x 11 inches.  
Collection of the artist.





Figures 2.4. and 2.5.

(Left) Louise Bourgeois. *Sleeping Figure*, 1950, painted balsa wood, 6' 2 1/2" x 11 5/8" x 11 3/4 inches, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

(Right) Louis Bourgeois. *Figure*, wood, paint, stainless steel, and nails, 47 3/4" x 12 x 12" inches, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 2.6.  
Eva Hesse. *Repetition Nineteen III*, 1968, fiberglass and polyester resin, nineteen unites,  
each 19 to 20 1/4 inches x 11 to 12 3/4 inches in diameter,  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 2.7.

Duane Hanson. *Bowery Derelicts*, 1969, polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, Neue Galeria, Aachen, Germany.

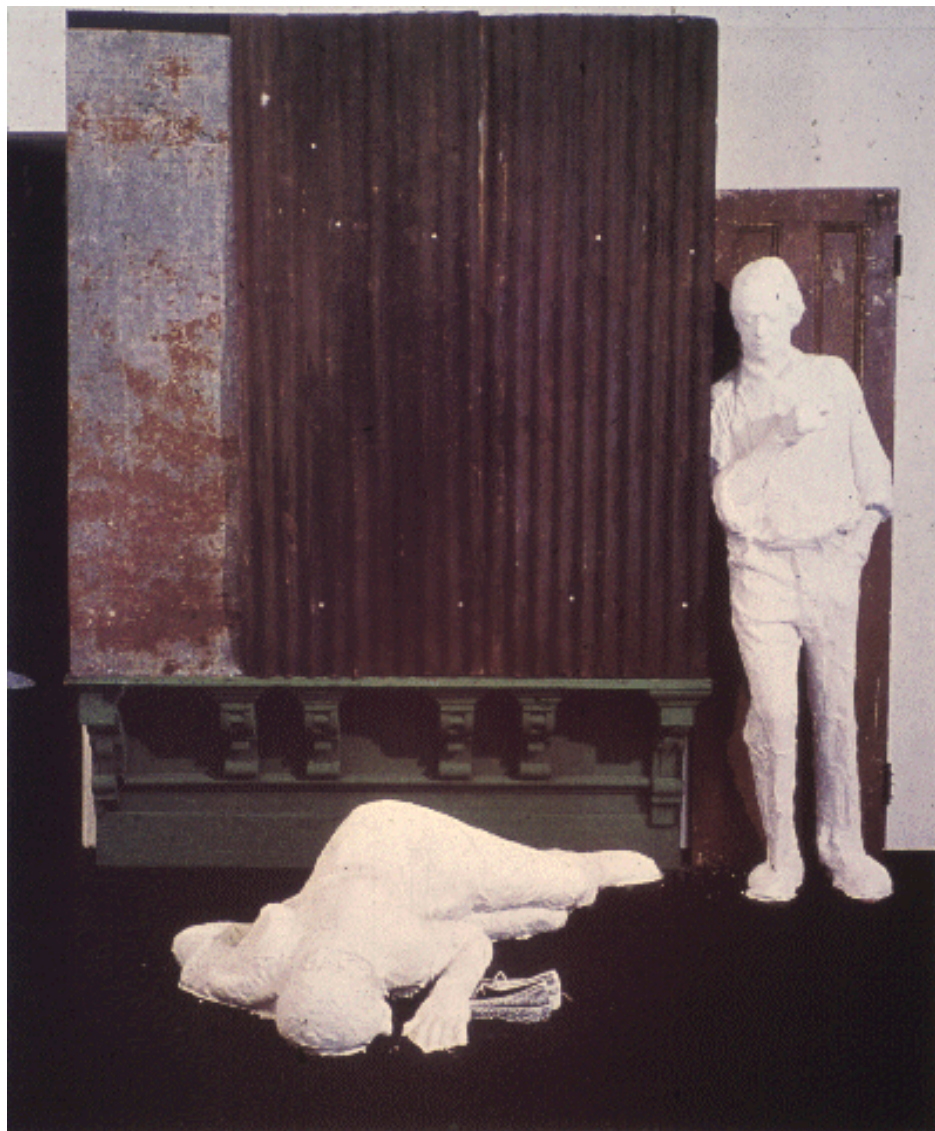


Figure 2.8.  
George Segal. *The Bowery*, 1970, plaster, wood, metal, 96 x 96 x 72 inches,  
Kunsthaus, Zurich, Switzerland.



Figure 2.9.A.  
Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *Sollie 17* (interior), 1979-80, mixed  
media construction 120 x 336 x 168 in. (304.8 x 853.4 x 426.7 cm)  
Smithsonian American Art Museum.

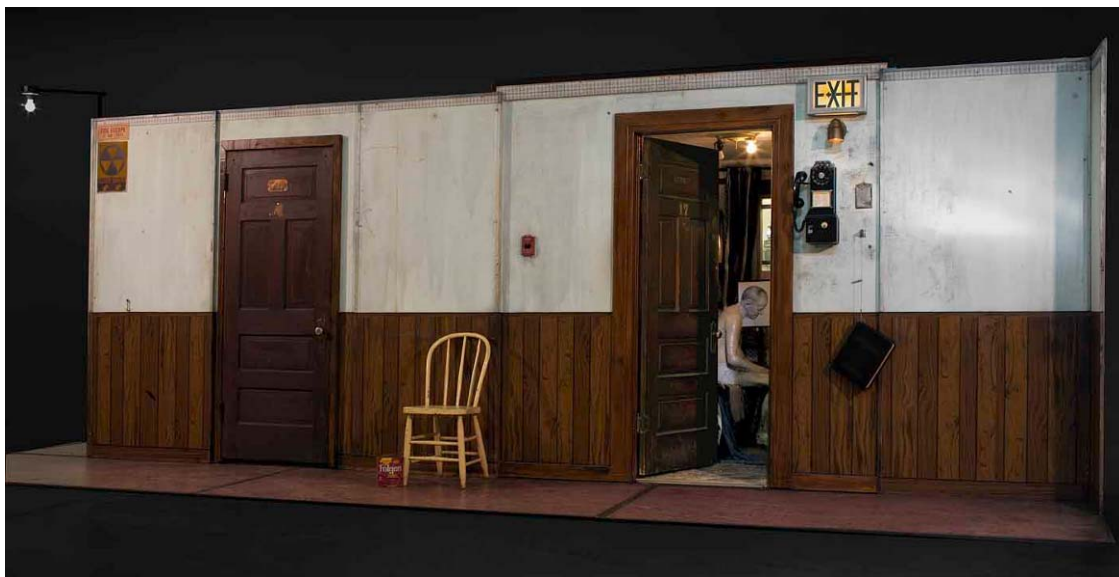


Figure 2.9.B.  
Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *Sollie 17* (exterior), 1979-80, mixed  
media construction 120 x 336 x 168 in. (304.8 x 853.4 x 426.7 cm)  
Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 2.10.

Duane Hanson. *Race Riot*, 1967, polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, Friedrich Christian Flick Collection.



Figure 2.11.  
Andy Warhol. *Red Race Riot*, 1963, synthetic polymer paint and silk-screen ink on canvas. Andy Warhol Foundation, New York.



Figure 2.12  
Duane Hanson. *Abortion*, 1965, wood, cloth, plaster and mixed media, 28 cm x 64 cm x 41 cm, Hanson Collection, Davie, Florida.



Figure 2.13.  
Edward Kienholz. *Back Seat Dodge '38*, 1964, mixed media, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



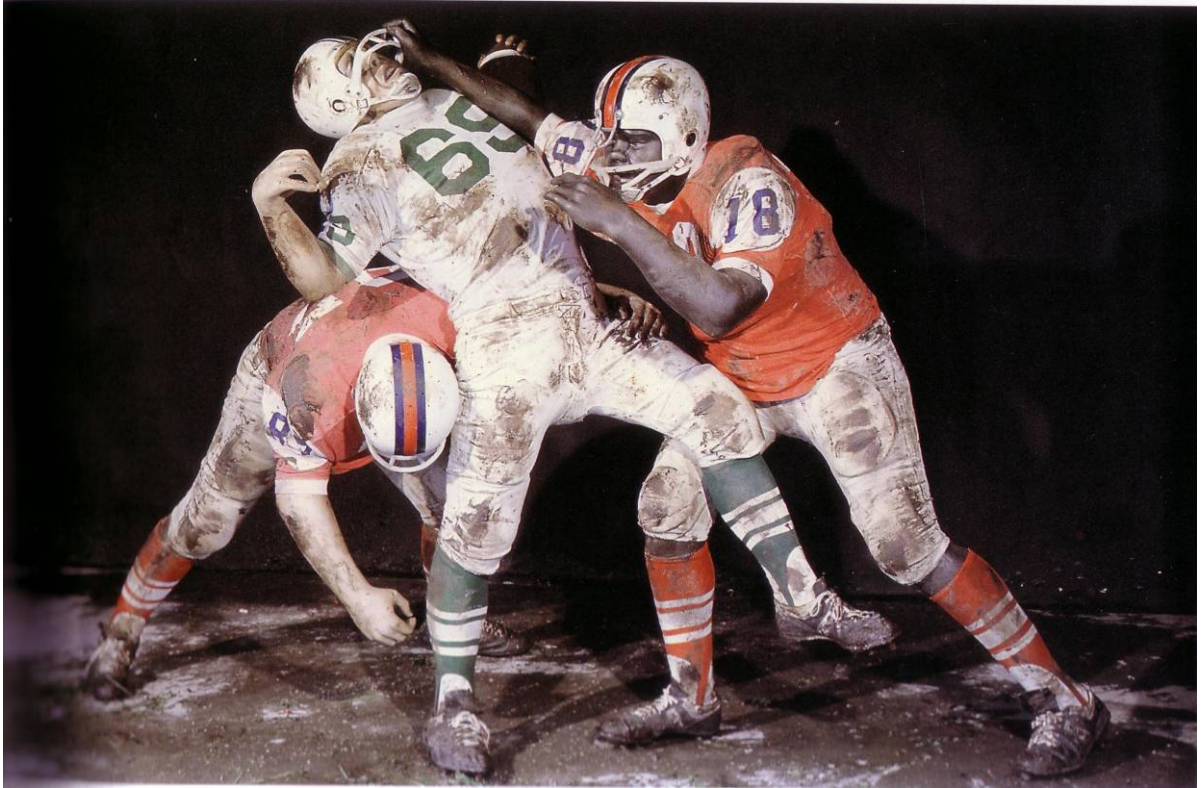


Figure 2.14.

Duane Hanson. *Football Players*, 1969, polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna.



Figure 2.15.  
Duane Hanson. *Supermarket Shopper*, 1970, polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, Neue Galerie, Aachen, Germany.



Figure 2.16.

Duane Hanson. *Woman Eating*, 1971, polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.



Figure 2.17.  
John De Andrea. *Artist with Sculpture*, 1980, polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed  
in oil, location unknown.



Figure 2.18.

Duane Hanson. *Self-Portrait with Model*, 1979, polyvinyl, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, Hanson Collection, Davie, Florida.



Figure 2.19.

Duane Hanson. *Sunbather*, 1971, polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.



Figure 2.20.  
Duane Hanson. *Museum Guard*, 1975, polyester resin and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri.



Figure 2.21.  
Duane Hanson. *Housewife*, 1970, polyester resin in fiberglass, polychromed in oil,  
mixed media, with accessories, Sammlung Onasch,  
Neues Museum Weserburg, Bremen, Germany.

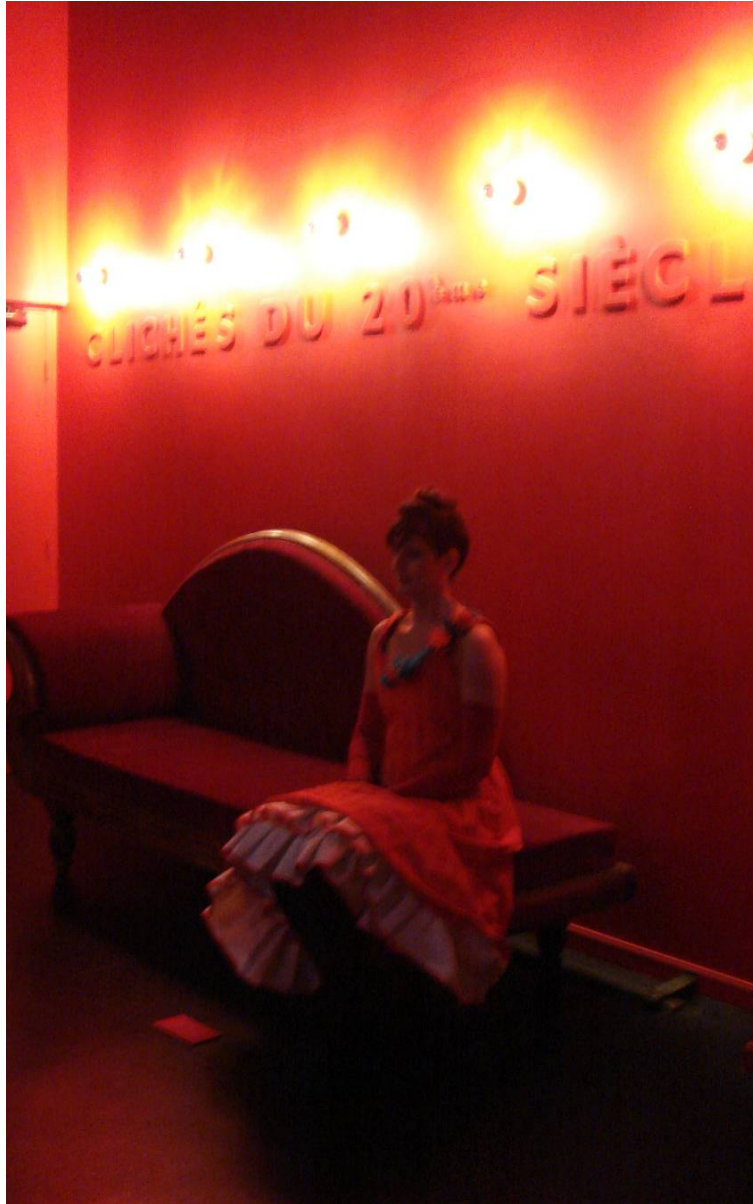


Figure 2.22.  
Photograph of a live-actress dressed as a nineteenth century French can-can dancer,  
Musée Grévin, Paris, 2007.



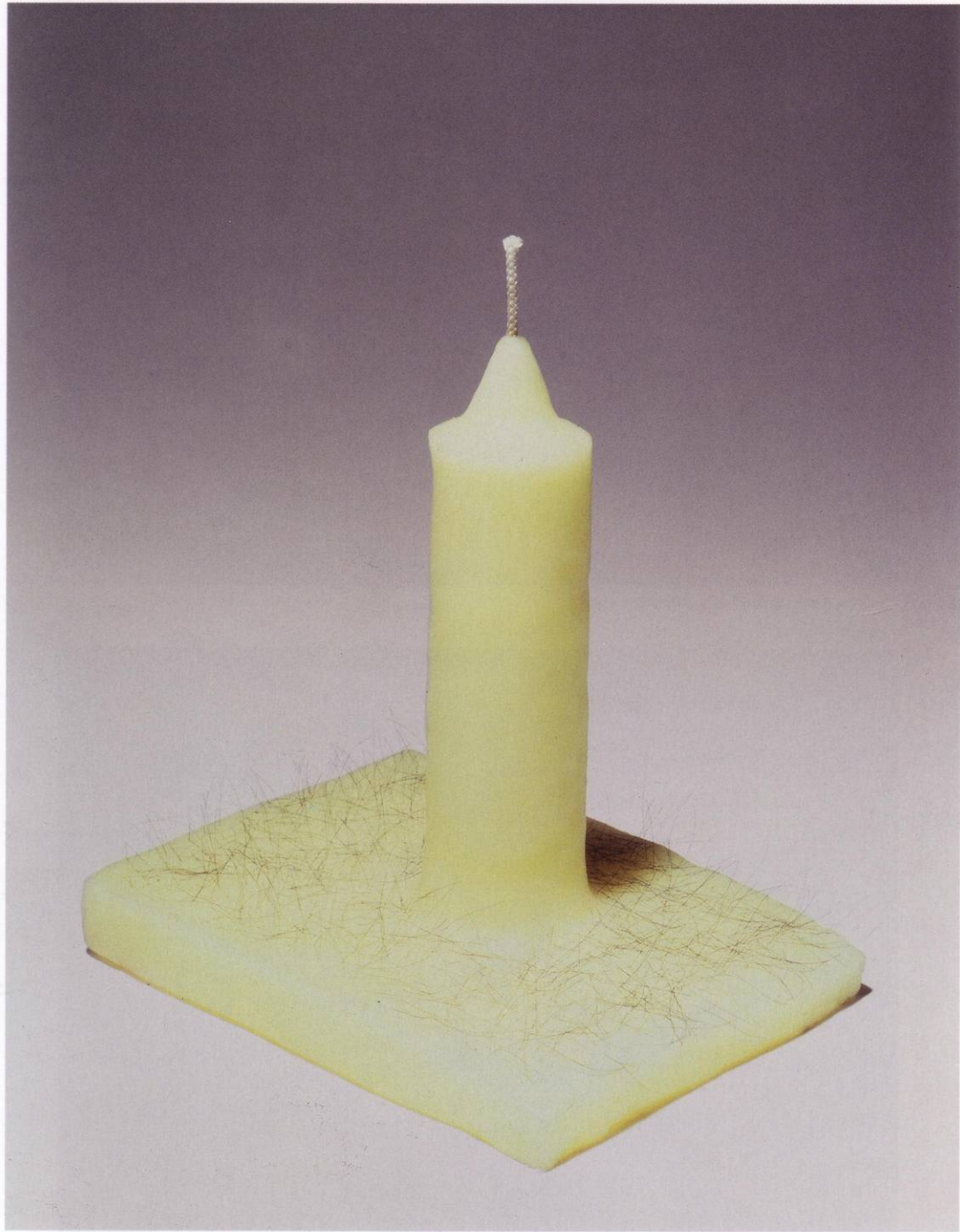


Figure 3.1.  
Robert Gober. *Untitled Candle*, 1991, beeswax, string, and human hair,  
8 x 4 7/8 x 6 1/2 inches. Private collection.



Figure 3.2. and Figure 3.3.

(Left) Sherrie Levine. *Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp)*, 1991, cast bronze on wood artist's base, 26 x 15 x 14 inches.

(Right) Mark Bidlo. *Not Robert Rauschenberg: Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 2005, traces of graphite on paper, mat and label in gold leaf frame. 22-3/8 x 20-7/8 inches, courtesy of Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, New York.



Figure 3.4.

Haim Steinbach. *Ultra red #2*, 1986, wood, plastic laminates, four lava lamps, nine enamel pots, and six digital clocks, 67 x 76 x 19 inches.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.



Figure 3.5.  
Robert Gober in collaboration with Sherri Levine. *Untitled Lightbulb*, 1990, enamel paint, beeswax, rope, 8 x 3 x 3 inches. Private collection.



Figure 3.6.  
Robert Gober. *Untitled*, 1993-94, beeswax, wood, glassine, felt-tip marker pen ink, 9 1/2 x 47 3/4 x 40 inches (butter with wrapper). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Figure 3.7.  
Robert Gober. *Untitled*, 1994-95, wood, bronze, paint, handmade paper, 24 x 71 x 73 1/2 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.



Figure 3.8.  
Robert Gober. *Half Stone House*, 1979-1980, wood, stone, glass, stainless steel, paper,  
paint, linoleum block print, 42 x 32 x 41 inches.  
Private collection.



Figure 3.9.  
Gordon Matta-Clark. *Splitting*, 1974, colour photograph . 680 x 990 mm, estate of  
Gordon Matta-Clark.



Figure 3.10.A.

Robert Gober. *Burnt House* (exterior), 1980, wood, paint, plexiglass, linoleum block print. 33 x 26 x 30 inches, private Collection.



Figure 3.10.B.

Robert Gober. *Burnt House* (interior detail), 1980, wood, paint, plexiglass, linoleum block print. 33 x 26 x 30 inches. Private Collection



Figure 3.11.A  
Robert Gober. Installation view, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, installation view  
30 September– 28 October 1989



Figure 3.11.B.  
Robert Gober. Installation detail, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York,  
September 30-October 28, 1998



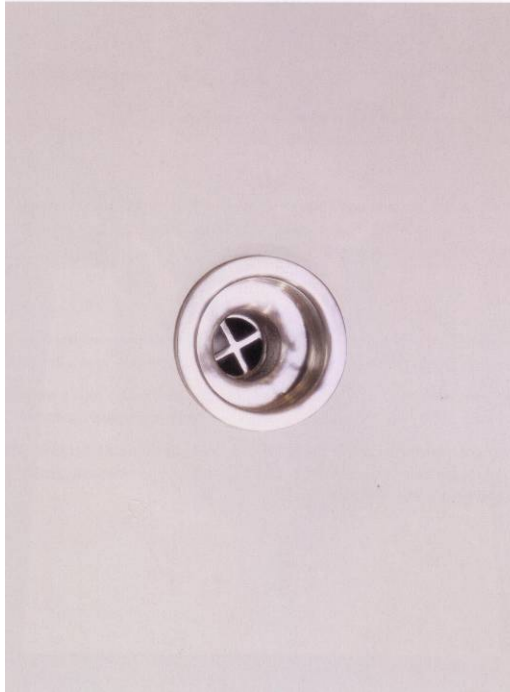


Figure 3.12.  
Robert Gober. *Drain*, 1989, cast pewter, 4 1/3 inches diameter x 3 inches deep.  
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.



Figure 3.13.  
Robert Gober. *Bag of Donuts*, 1989, acid free hand cut paper, graphite, dough,  
synthetic resin, 11 x 6 1/2 x 6 inches. Goetz Collection, Munich.



Figure 3.14.  
Robert Gober. (Detail) *Hanging Man—Sleeping Man*, 1989,  
hand-printed silkscreen on paper.

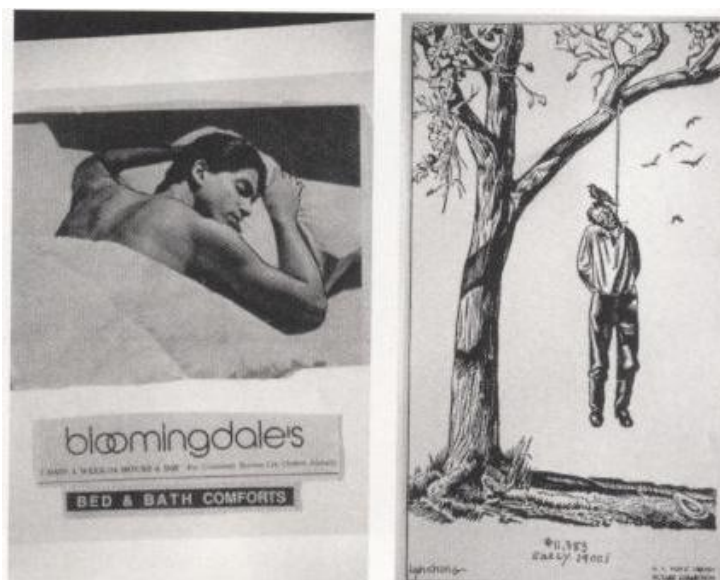


Figure 3.15.  
Source material for wallpaper, *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man*, 1989.



Figure 3.16.

Robert Gober. *Wedding Gown*, 1989. Silk satin, muslin, linen, tulle, welded steel. 54 1/4 x 57 x 38 1/2 inches, installation view at the Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 3.17.

Robert Gober, *Cat Litter*, 1990. Plaster, ink, latex paint. 18 1/2 x 11 x 5 1/4 inches. Installation view at the Art Institute of Chicago.

# Vatican Condones Discrimination Against Homosexuals

## Youth Worker Held In Death of Son, 9

**By PETER STEINFELD**

A Vatican office has urged Roman Catholic bishops in the United States to welcome laws intended to protect homosexuals and to oppose those if they promote equal acceptance of homosexual couples.

There are areas in which it is not unfair discrimination to take special measures to care for the needs of the disabled, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which reviews matters of doctrine for the church, said in a statement last week.

But the statement focused on specific legislation was unusual.

Previous documents have brought

service and employment of teachers and other workers.

The statement was given to news organizations this week by New Ways Ministry, a Catholic group that works headquarters in Mount Rainier, Md., and was first reported by The Washington Post.

The document called the statement an "unusually detailed" Vatican statement on the question of legislation "and on the question of legislation" and Archbishop Ruffini G. Winkler of Milwaukee. That this is the first time have seen anything so detailed.

Vatican statements normally present general moral principles and leave their legal applications to the local bishops.

The American bishops have taken a variety of stances toward various laws regarding discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation.

**Edwards 1988 Statement**

The Vatican statement repeated the Vatican office's 1988 description of homosexuality as "not a sin" but "a more serious" one "from he seen as an illness or disorder."

This language, the statement said, was meant to clarify "an overly negative interpretation" of homosexual orientation, the statement said.

In its own statement, New Ways Ministry said that the Vatican's defense of discrimination in areas like adoption, foster care, military service and employment of teachers and nurses reinforced its "banned stereotypes."

The group also cited a May 1988 study by the National Center for Human Resources Development, which found that 18 percent of American Catholics support equal rights in employment for homosexuals.

**SUMMER IS FOR CHILDREN: GIVE TO THE FRESH AIR FUND**

**WOODBRIDGE, N.J., May 18 (AP)**—A youth worker has been charged with murder in the death of her 9-year-old adopted son, the employment of teachers and nurses reinforced its "banned stereotypes."

The woman, who has been held in Gloucester County Jail since she took the child early Thursday morning, Mrs. Fritsch, of Monroe Township, told the authorities that she was punishing the boy, who was adopted when he was 2.

The case was assigned to Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, where he died.



Figure 3.18. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1992-1993. Toned gelatin silver print. 19 7/8 x 15 7/8 inches, image size: 15 1/4 x 12 1/2 inches. Edition 15.

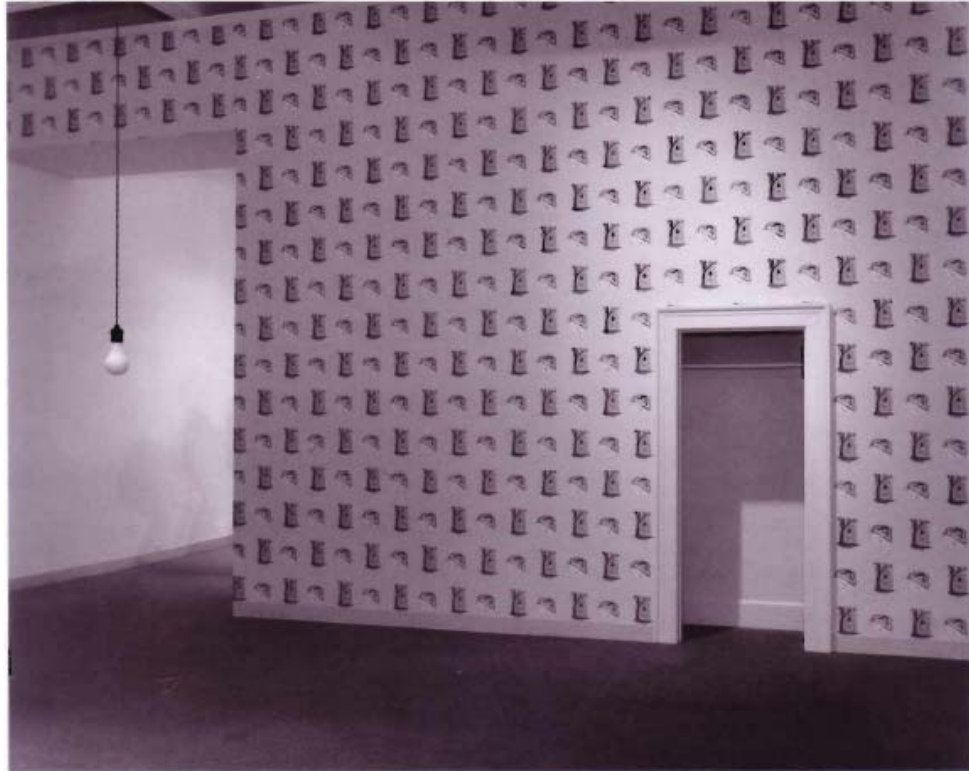


Figure 3.19.

Robert Gober. *Hanging man/Sleeping man wallpaper, Untitled (lightbulb), and Untitled Closet*. Installation at the Hirshhorn Gallery, 1990.



Figure 3.20.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Last Light)*, 1993, 24 light bulbs, extension cord, plastic light sockets, dimmer switch, from an edition of 24, 1 x 52 x 21 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago.

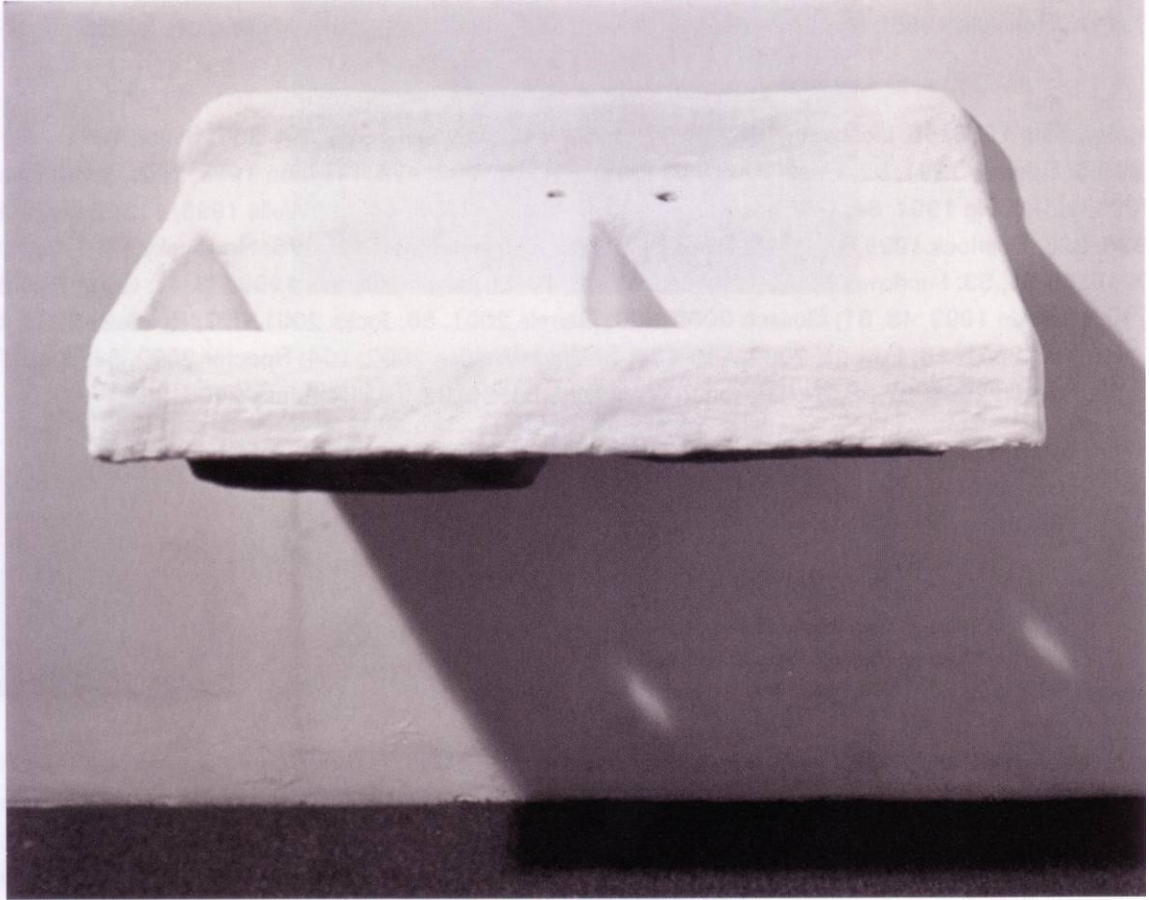


Figure 3.21.  
Robert Gober. *The Small Sink*, 1983, plaster, wire lath, latex paint, 9 x 33 x 18 inches.  
Private collection.

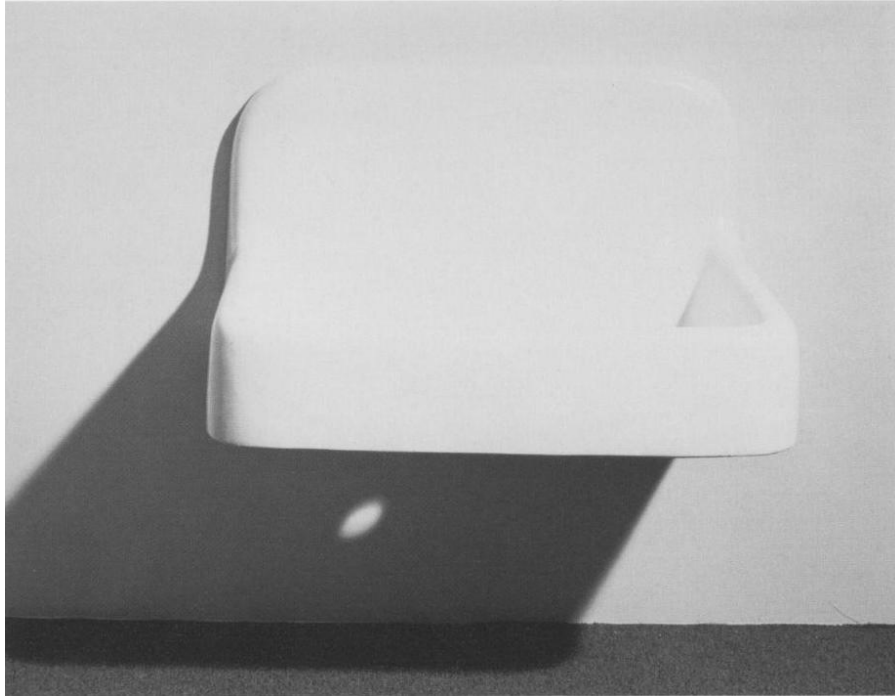


Figure 3.22.  
Robert Gober. *The Silent Sink*, 1984, plaster, wire lath, wood, semi-gloss enamel paint,  
20 x 27 x 35 inches. Private collection.



Figure 3.23.  
Robert Gober. Mulberry Street studio view, (left) *The Silly Sink*, 1985,  
(right) *The Sad Sink*, 1985.

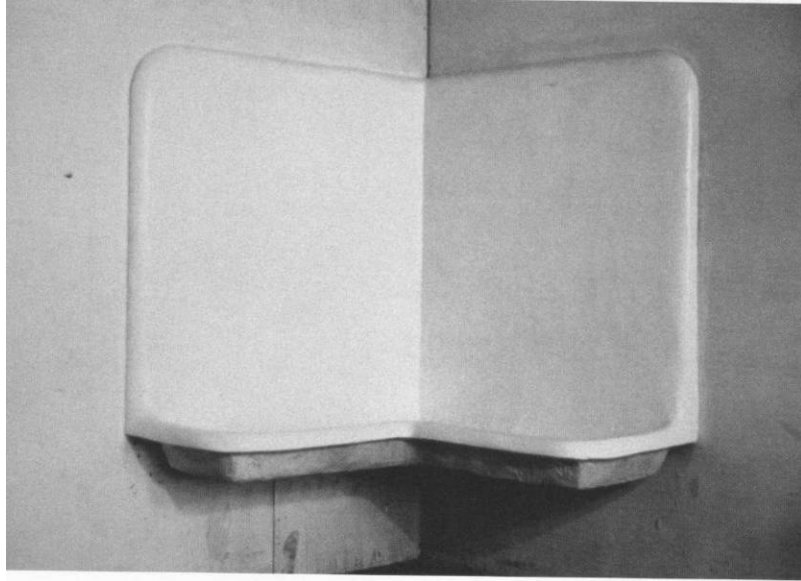


Figure 3.24.

Robert Gober. *The Scary Sink*, 1985, plaster, wood, steel, wire lath, semi-gloss enamel paint, 60 x 78 x 55 inches. Private collection.

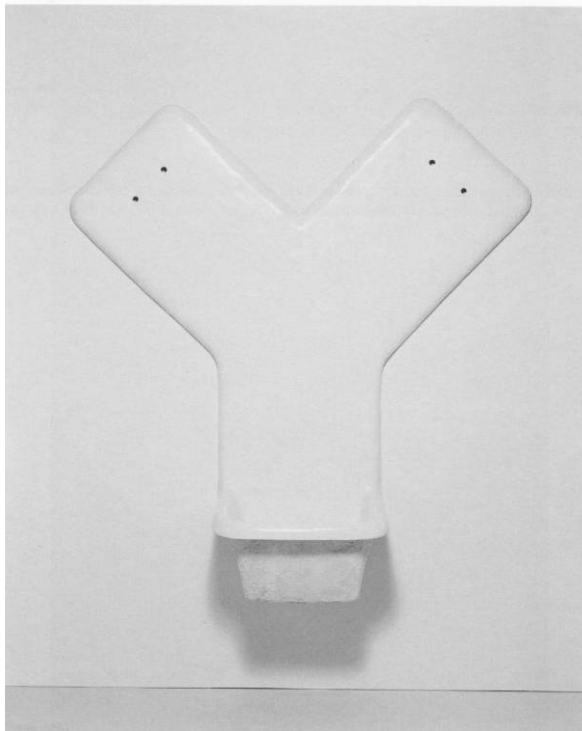


Figure 3.25.

Robert Gober. *The Subconscious Sink*, 1985, plaster, wood, steel, wire lath, semi-gloss enamel paint. 90 x 83 x 26 inches. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.



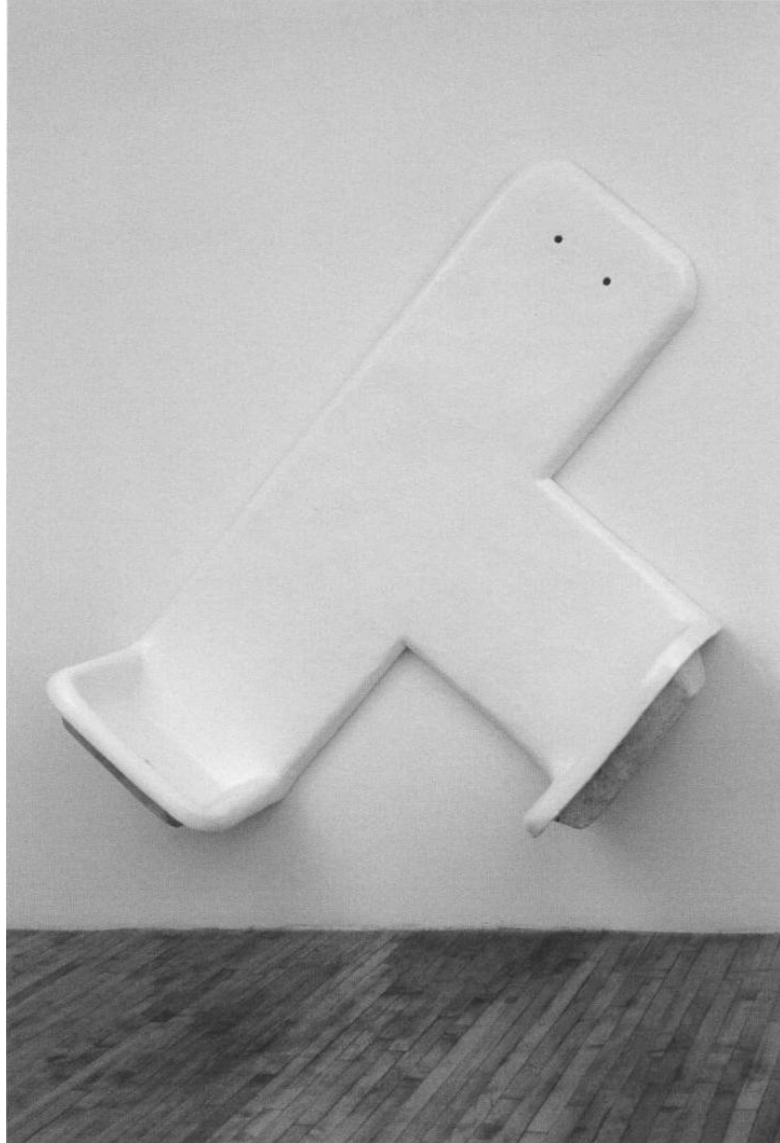


Figure 3.26.

Robert Gober. *The Split-up Conflicted Sink*, 1985, plaster, wood, steel, wire lath, semi-gloss enamel paint, 81 x 81 ½ x 25 inches. Astrup Fearnley Collection, Ohio.

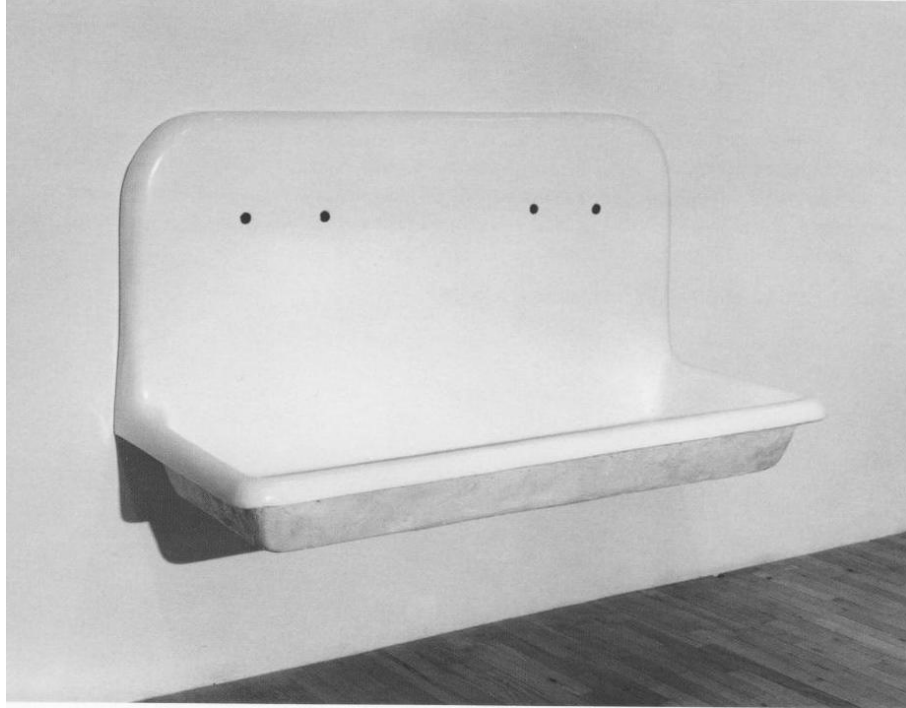


Figure 3.27.  
Robert Gober. *Double Sink*, 1984, plaster, wood, steel, wire lath, semi-gloss enamel paint, 36 x 64 x 28 inches. Private collection.

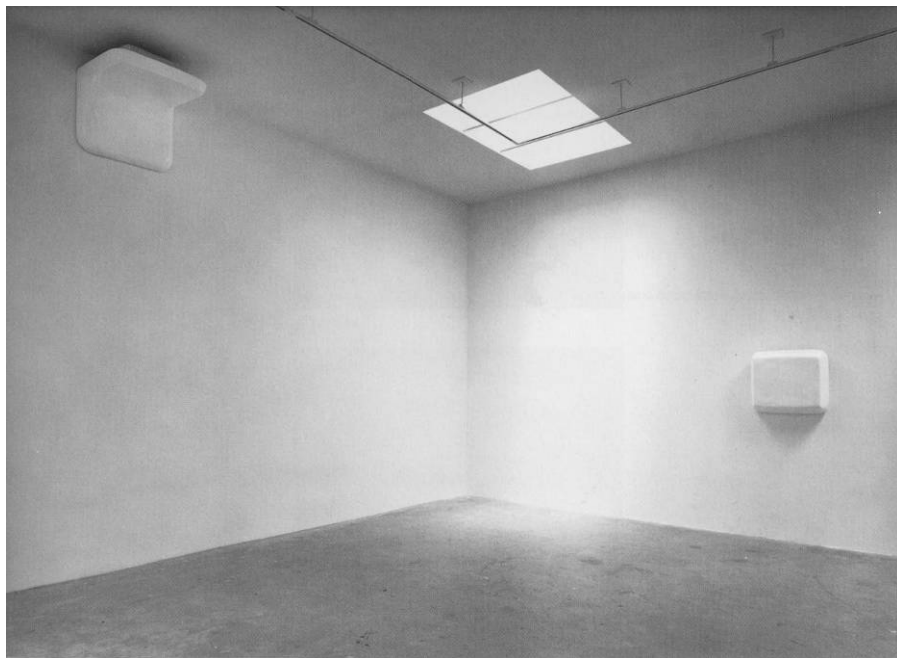


Figure 3.28.  
Robert Gober. Installation view: *The Floating Sink* and *Inverted Basin*, Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, 14 June–12 July 1986.

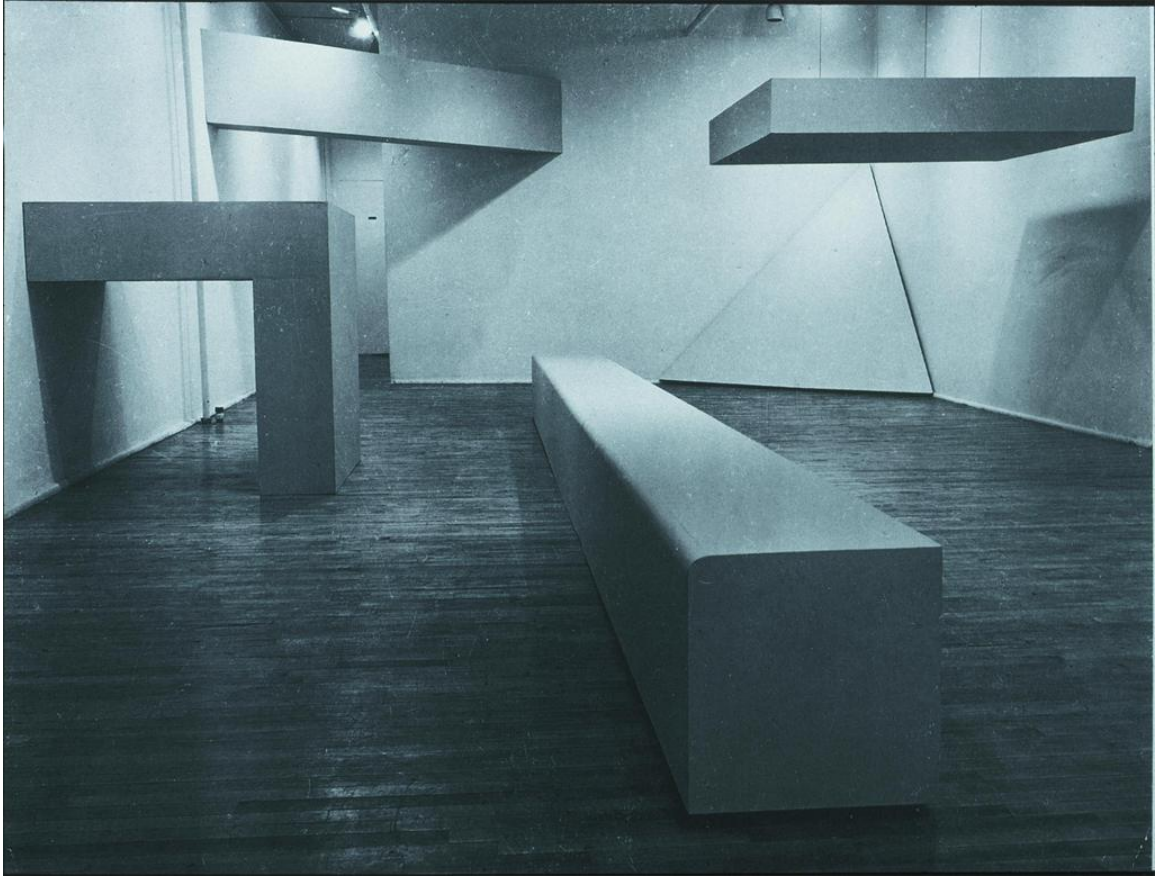


Figure 3.29.  
Robert Morris. One-person exhibition, 1964. Installation view at the  
Green Gallery, New York.

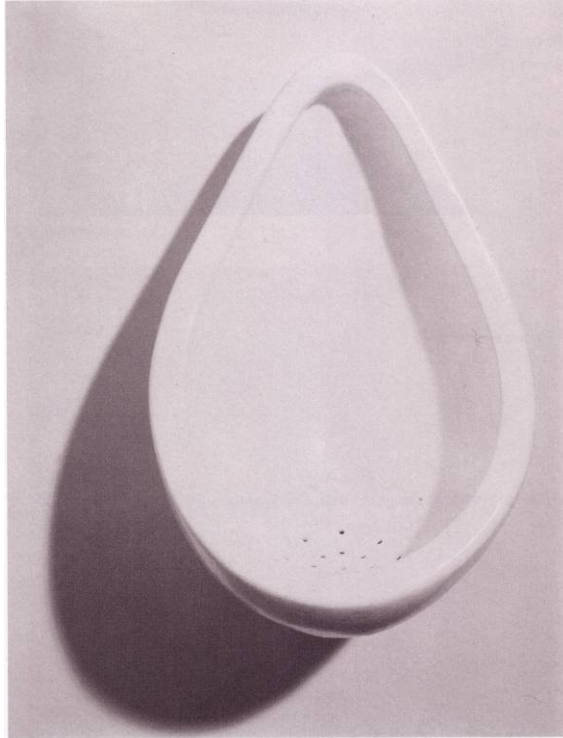


Figure 3.30.  
Robert Gober, *Urinal*, 1984, plaster. Wire lath, wood, semi-gloss enamel paint.  
30 X 20 X 20 inches. Private Collection.



Figure 3.31.  
Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917. Original work lost. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz.  
Gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 x 7 inches.

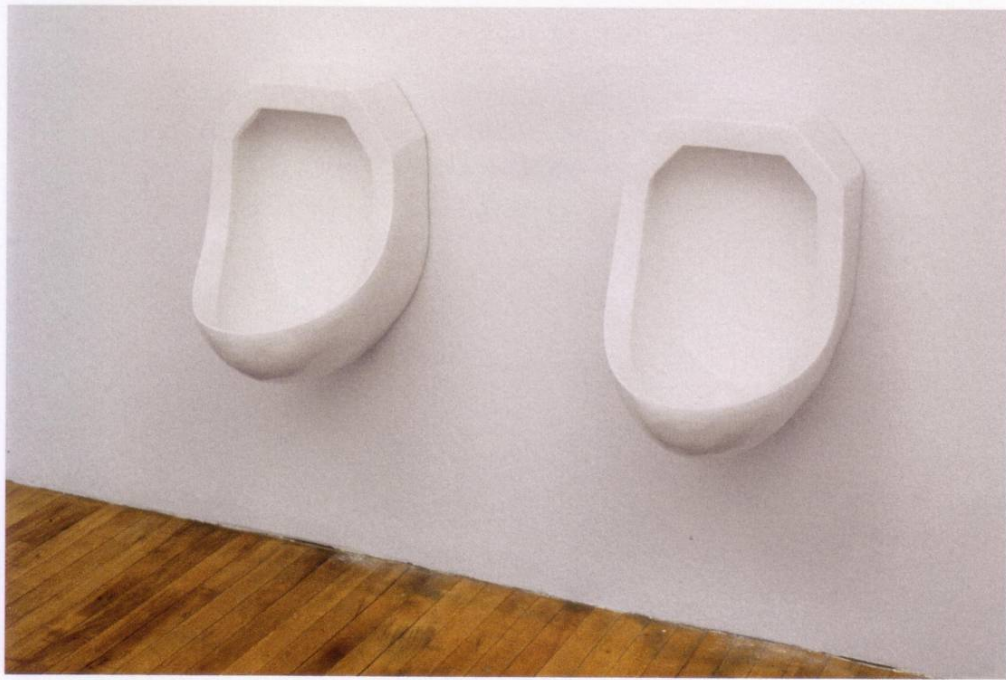


Figure 3.32.  
Robert Gober, *Pair of Urinals*, 1987. Wood, wire lath, plaster, and enamel paint.  
21 1/2 x 5 1/4 x 15 3/4 inches. Private Collection

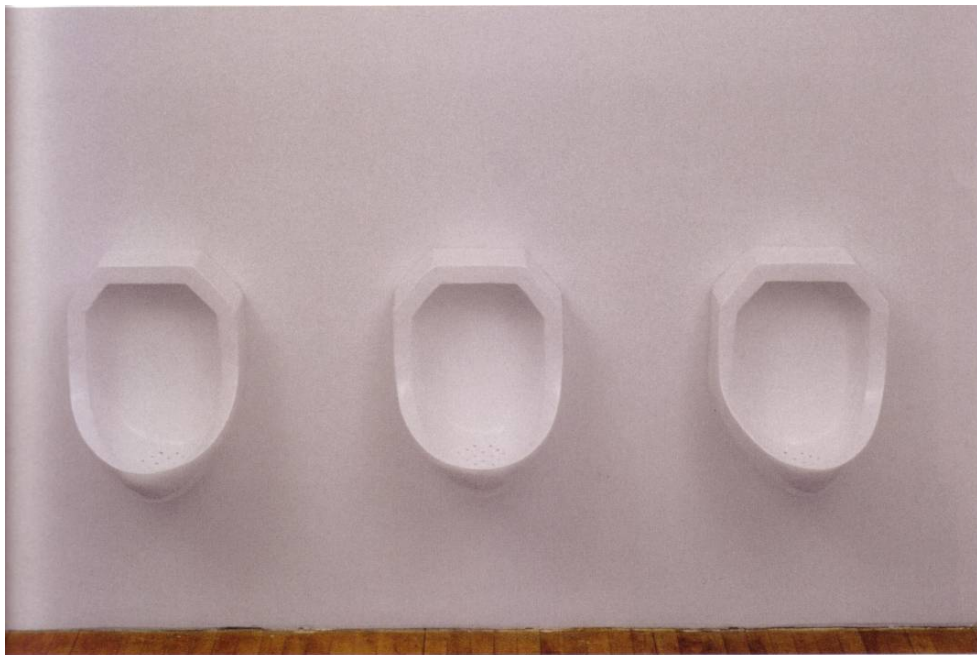


Figure 3.33.  
Robert Gober, *Three Urinals*, 1988. Wood, wire lath, plaster, and enamel paint.  
Each 21 3/4 x 15 1/4 x 15 inches. Private Collection.



Exhibition view of Robert Gober, Christopher Wool, 303 Gallery, New York, 14 April–8 May 1988

Figure 3.34.  
Installation view of *Robert Gober and Christopher Wool*, 303 Gallery, New York, 1988.



Figure 3.35.

Robert Gober. *Untitled*, 1990, beeswax, wood, leather shoe, cotton fabric, human hair.



Figure 3.36.

Robert Gober. *Untitled*, 1991-1993, wood, beeswax, human hair, fabric, paint and shoes.  
9 x 16 1/2 x 45 inches. Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.



Figure 3.37.

Robert Gober. *Untitled*, 1991, wood, beeswax, leather, fabric and human hair, 13 1/4 x 16 1/2 x 46 1/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.





Figure 3.38.  
Robert Gober. Installation view, Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, c. 1991.



Figure 4.1.A.  
Ron Mueck. *Dead Dad*, 1996-97, mixed media, 7 7/8 x 15 x 40 1/8 inches.  
The Saatchi Collection, London.



Figure 4.1.B.  
Ron Mueck. *Dead Dad*, installation view, the National Gallery of Victoria,  
Melbourne, Australia., 2010.



Figure 4.2.  
Film still. *Labyrinth*, Jim Henson, 1986.



Figure 4.3.A.  
Ron Mueck. *Two Women*, 2005, mixed media, 33 1/2 x 18 7/8 x 15 inches. Glen Fuhram  
Collection, New York, installed at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2006.

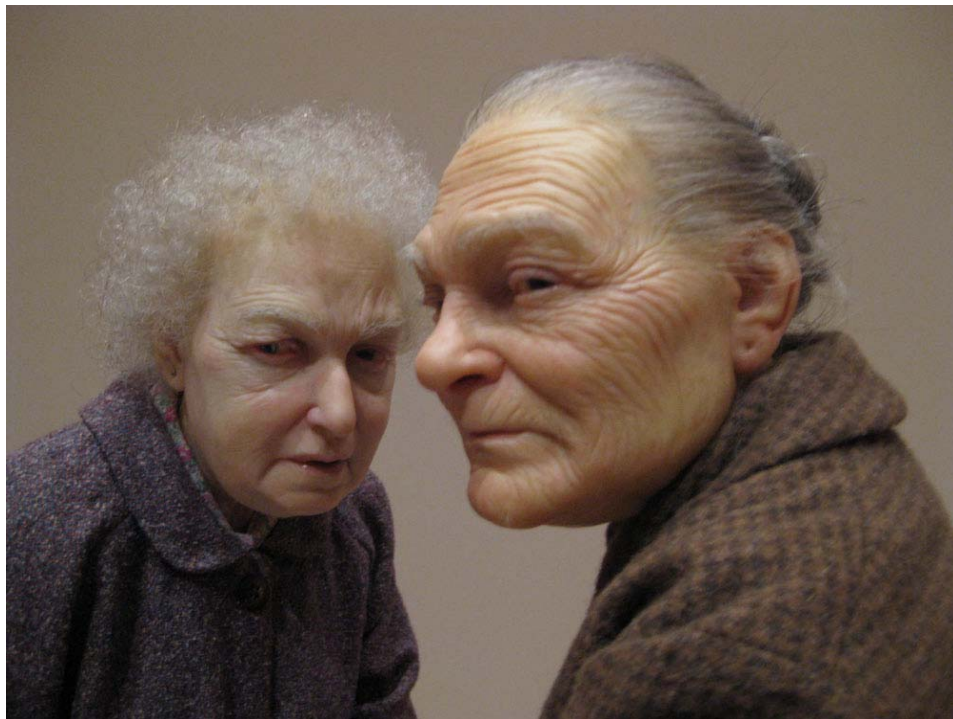


Figure 4.3.B.  
Ron Mueck. *Two Women*, detail.



Figure 4.4.  
Ron Mueck. *Pinocchio*, 1996, mixed media, 33 x 7 7/8 x 7 1/8 inches.  
John and Amy Phelan Collection, New York.



Figure 4.5.  
Paula Rego, *The Blue Fairy Whispers to Pinocchio*, 1995, pastel on paper mounted on aluminum. Private collection.



Figure 4.6.A.

Ron Mueck. *Wild Man* (front), 2005, mixed media, 112 1/8 x 63 3/4 x 41 1/3 inches.  
Installation view, the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, 2010.



4.6.B.

Ron Mueck. *Wild Man* (back), 2005, mixed media, 112 1/8 x 63 3/4 x 41 1/3 inches.  
Installation view, the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, 2010.





Figure 4.6.C.

Ron Mueck. *Wild Man* (detail), 2005, mixed media, 112 1/8 x 63 3/4 x 41 1/3 inches.  
Installation view, the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, 2010.



Figure 4.7.A.

Ron Mueck. *Mother and Child*, 2001, mixed media, 9 1/2 x 35 x 15 inches.  
Collection of the Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Washington, D.C.



Figure 4.7.B.

Ron Mueck. *Mother and Child*, 2001. Installation view with viewer.



Figure 4.8.A.

Ron Mueck. *Spooning Couple*, 2005, mixed media, 5 1/2 x 25 5/8 x 13 3/4 inches.



Figure 4.8.B.

Ron Mueck. *Spooning Couple*, 2005, installation view with viewers, the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, 2010.



Figures 4.9.A and 4.9.B.  
Ron Mueck, *Head of a Baby*, 2003.  
Installation views, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Figure 4.10.  
Ron Mueck installing *Spooning Couple*, location unknown.



Figure 4.11.  
Studio assistant, implanting hairs into figure from *Spooning Couple*, c. 2005.



Figure 4.12.  
Ron Mueck. Color samples.

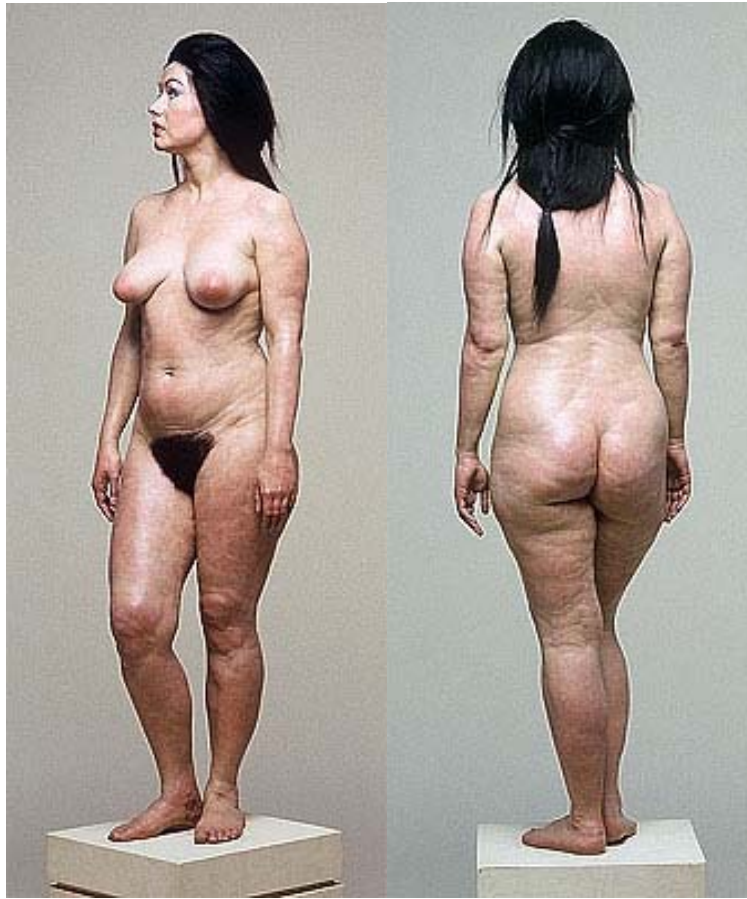


Figure 4.13.  
Even Penny. Ali, 1984, life-size, resin, pigment, hair.



Figure 4.14.  
Ron Mueck, *Boy*, 1999. Installed at the 49<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.





Figure 4.15.  
Ron Mueck, *Big Man*, 2000. Mixed Media, 81 x 46 1/4 x 82 1/4 in.  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, installation view.



Figure 4.16.  
Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Great Deeds Against The Dead*, 1994.



Figure 4.17.  
Jenny Saville, *Propped*, oil on canvas, 1992.



Figures 4.18. and 4.19.  
(Left) Marc Quinn. *Self*, 1991. (Right) Marc Quinn. *No Visible Means of Escape*, 1996



Figure 4.20.  
Damien Hirst, *A Thousand Years*, 1990.



# RON MUECK

Organized by the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain (Paris), in collaboration with the National Gallery of Canada, the Brooklyn Museum and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.  
 Organisée par la Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain (Paris), en collaboration avec le Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, le Brooklyn Museum et la Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

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Spooning Couple / Couple couché en cuillères. 2005.  
 Private collection / Collection particulière

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Figure 4.21.  
 Post-card published by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



Figure 5.1.  
Ron Mueck. *Still Life*, 2009. Mixed media. Anthony D'Offay Gallery.



Figure 5.2.  
William M. Harnett. *For Sunday's Dinner*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 37 1/8 x 21 1/8 inches.

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