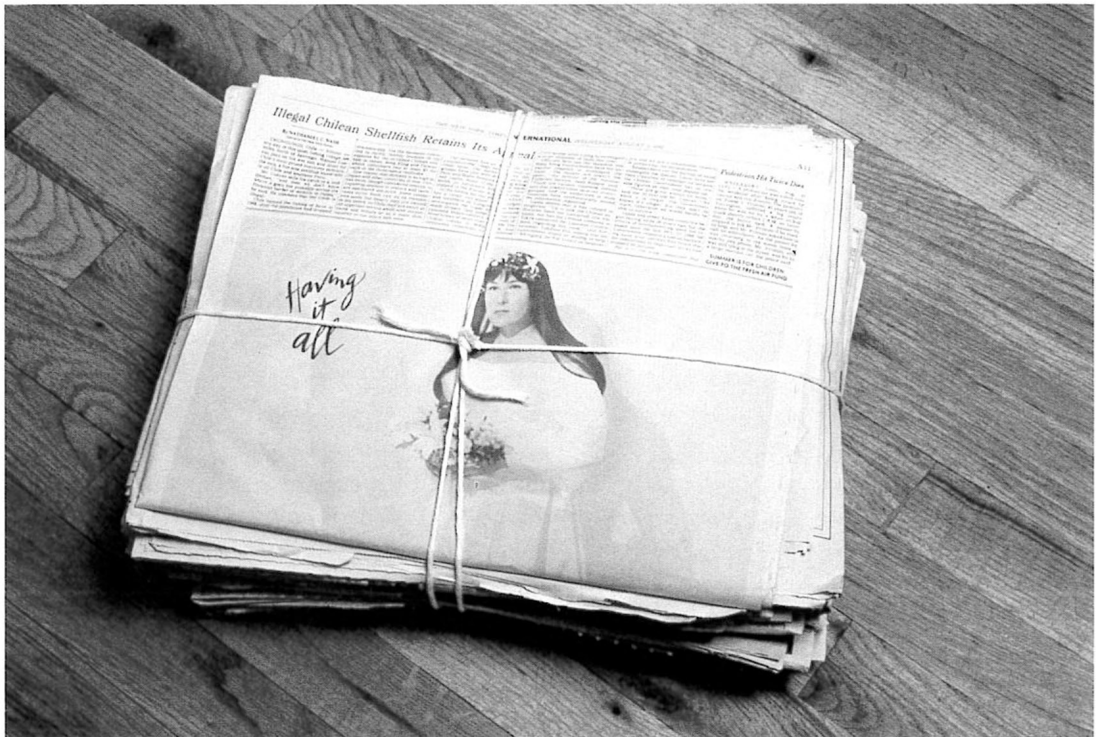
Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties

Elisabeth Sussman



Robert Gober, *Newspaper (Having It All)*, 1992

A recent work by Robert Gober on exhibition in the "1993 Biennial" is an edition of bundles of newspapers. Stacked and tied for carrying out to the garbage recycling bins, these newspapers are actually fabricated. On their top pages, Gober intersperses real stories and photographs, culled from weeks and months of newspaper reading, with stories and images that he has created. These articles cover the usual combination of everyday banalities (ads for home cleansers) to more critical issues such as environmental disasters and cutbacks in welfare. The leitmotif of the majority of the articles is the ongoing debate over the body and sexuality that has been at the center of our cultural struggles. Thus abortion, homosexuality, birth control, and references to the AIDS epidemic dominate the reporting. Among the most notable of the invented images is a photograph that shows Gober in a wedding dress captioned "Having it all." These newspapers have appeared in several exhibitions, most recently in an installation at the DIA Center for the Arts, New York. They can be succinctly described as allegorical representations of life and death, with the newspapers functioning as signifiers of community, of the public, and of the everyday. Fashioned as they are to highlight content related to the artist's political concerns, the newspapers became political statements of identity. But Gober addressed this identity within a collective context, within a larger vision of the social.

Gary Hill, *Tall Ships*, 1992 (detail of installation at "Documenta 9," Kassel, Germany)

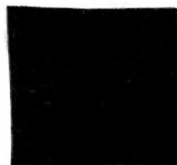
I consider Gober's newspapers paradigmatic of the 1990s. For although sexual, ethnic, and gendered subjects motivate the content of recent art, these identities fragment but do not destroy the social fabric. Paradoxically, identities declare communities and produce a decentered whole that may have to be described as a community of communities. Hence the Gober newspapers are also a record (its meaning constructed) of the everyday: of the communities and the individuals which make up those communities, the economic, environmental, and political struggles of our time. The Gober work is a signature piece for the early nineties, for it is an attempt to present a specific point of view, in a form that represents a traditional aspect of collective life, and it is

precisely this representation of a refigured but fragmented collectivity that has been lacking in current art production and that this exhibition attempts to present.

I am not using collectivity in the sense of a socio-political organization alone. I do not mean to characterize the art of the last two years by sociological analysis, but to recognize that art production springs up from a relation of cultures and identities (in the plural). It is their rich interrelations that make up the social reality which underlies the art of this Biennial.

Looking at art in terms of such things as class, gender, or nation runs a risky course. Such art work is most often regarded by the art world as propaganda or agitprop. But the art in the Biennial, like all art related to the important issues of our time—our identities, allegiances, environment, relationship to technology—must be considered with three important criteria in mind. First of all, despite a widespread belief to the contrary, art committed to ideas is not lacking in what are thought of as the traditional aesthetic qualities, for instance, sensuality, contradiction, visual pleasure, humor, ambiguity, desire, or metaphor. Second, works of art that are related to particular cultural positions are not unchanging. We must not fall into easy essentialist definitions or ideas of groups that are monolithically united. Identities, ethnicities, nationalisms, or technologies must also be described as at times shifting, and, like culture, must be conceived of as always being in a state of process or conflict, or what Homi Bhabha calls negotiation.[1] The concept of a border that encircles, binds in, and can be crossed is useful here. Feminism, for instance, is a viable identity term only if, as Judith Butler says, it "presupposes that 'women' designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category," and "that becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability."[2] Similarly, nature cannot be easily defined as our more sophisticated world of technology creates infinite possibilities. "Either one adopts a sort of veneration before the immensity of 'that which is' or one accepts the possibility of manipulation."[3]

The third criterion for viewing the art in this Biennial is a willingness to redefine the art world in more realistic terms—not as a seamless, homogeneous entity but as a collectivity of cultures involved in a



Mike Kelley, *Untitled (Pasolini)*, 1990. Felt banner, 91 1/2 x 70. Metro Pictures, New York.

process of exchange and difference. This process is embedded, for instance, in the irony of Mike Kelley's Biennial work: cheap banners made from signs found around college campuses for the groups—gays, straight women, black power, male heterosexuals—vying for the allegiance of the malleable pre-ideological American adolescent.

Finally, two other generalizations characterize the artists of this Biennial. First, they realize their ideas along a spectrum that runs from a direct engagement with the material thing or situation to a more conceptual engagement through replica, history, memory, and technology. Second, as the discussions of artists' works will indicate, a major synthesis of interest that has fully emerged in the early 1990s is the body. This is indeed a collective subject, approached by many artists and critics in different ways and with many different suppositions of what constitutes or is part of the physical (including sex and gender) and social (including psychological) body. It is the interplay of these elements that describes the art of the early 1990s.

I will begin with four artists who, on significant levels, involve the technological and the replica in their representation of the body, whether individual or communal: Gary Hill, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman, and Shu Lea Cheang.

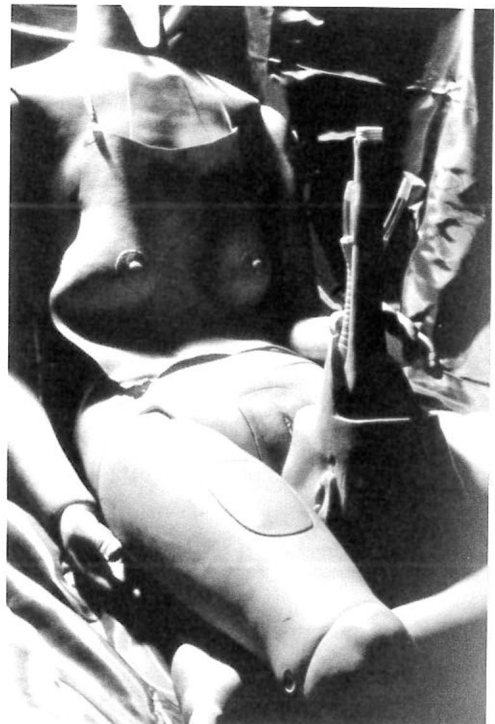
The work of Gary Hill and Charles Ray achieves its impact phenomenologically, through manipulations of space and scale and through the uncanniness we experience in the contrast between the real thing—person or object—and its

Charles Ray, *Boy*, 1992. Mixed media, 6 feet high. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Jeffrey Deitch, Bernardo Nadal-Ginard, and Penny and Mike Winton 92.131.

replica, or simulacra. In his work *Tall Ships*, Hill has created what I would call a virtual space, one that orients the viewer in a notion of a social space. This space relies on the principles of perspective (developed in Italy in the fifteenth century), perceived as an established vanishing point from the vantage of the spectator.[4] *Tall Ships* is a long darkened corridor. What is remarkable about this perspectival space is that it is not limited to the single view of one spectator, though it may work that way; rather, it can be triggered by a group of spectators entering intermittently in real time, thus emulating the multiperspectival movement of the crowd. The entrance of the viewer(s) interactively sets off a series of projected images: thirteen to sixteen people, placed along the sides and at the end of the corridor, begin to walk toward the viewer, at different moments, from the multiple vanishing points. They are at first small, seen from a distance, but as they come closer they grow larger, and their approach becomes nearly confrontational in a face to face with the spectator. The movements of the spectator determine the action of the projected images; their turning and returning along a path of emptiness. Hill selected the people for his projected images in Seattle, his home; he arrived at ethnic and gender diversity randomly.

Tall Ships is the cybernetic representation of community in 1993. It gives us a simulated "community," which relates it to Gober's newspapers, but here constrained by its darkness, spareness, and silence; it is at the edge of integration and disintegration. We as spectators trigger action and at the same time question our "liveness." We are in a technological mental space similar to Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, where androids, "near-perfect replicas of human beings, genetically engineered,"[5] interact with the fictional characters of the film.

What links the work of Hill and Charles Ray is the desire to picture a collectivity—a group—which achieves its impact phenomenologically, through manipulations of space, scale, and psychology, the latter achieved through the uncanny relationship of the simulacra to the real. The common ground shared by Ray and Hill is not instantly apparent, for their media are very different: Hill is



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1992

closer to the cinematographer while Ray, in the Biennial, fabricates objects related to consumer culture. Ray uses phenomenological means to suggest psychological pathologies about fantasies of pleasure and power and the confusion of sexualities that reside in the most commonplace early childhood environments. His cinematic parallels are the films of David Lynch. Both break down the normalcy of that collective utopian subculture of American life, the suburb, and eroticize the events that lie beneath its banal technicolor surface. ("Do suburbs," writes J.G. Ballard, "represent the city's convalescent zone or a genuine step forward into a new psychological realm, at once more passive but of far greater imaginative potential, like that of a sleeper before the onset of REM sleep?"[6])

Ray's work is a 45-foot hook-and-ladder truck parked in front of the Museum for the duration of the Biennial. Up close it becomes apparent that this truck is a replica, a toy scaled up to the size of "the real thing." Inside the Museum, Ray has installed a four-figure sculpture of a "family"—father, mother, daughter, and son—all nude, all in the same less than 5-foot height. In its pairing of the collective family and the firetruck, Ray's work introduces a gendered psychology, recalling again Gober's newspapers with their sexually centered texts and images. Scale creates the psychological tension: the macho fantasy of the little boy promised in the phantasmic magnified scale of the product-glossy firetruck is also repeated by the reduced scale of the nude family, brought down to a physical size where an erotic imaginary interplay can be enacted.

Cindy Sherman's recent photographs are of sculptural constructions, made of mannequins that certainly share the robotic erotic fantasy of Ray's figures. But if Ray's mannequins are, like Dorothy's Kansas, purposefully banal and mundane, Sherman's set us down in the Hollywood of Oz. Sherman has taken sexual fantasies straight out of psychoanalytical rationalizations and placed them in a visual realm, one that can be likened only to the technological feats of special effects cinematography. Using the fairly simple means of combining body parts ordered from medical supply catalogues, she creates bodies, at once frightening and humorous, to explore theoretical combinations and crossovers of sexuality that break down, confuse, and complicate earlier, more essentialist understandings of male and female. Sherman does not abandon the foundation of her own imagery in the mass media, such as her photographs based on *film noir* stills, but she is now exploring the cinematic world of science fiction, a world of cyborgian possibilities, reminiscent of the creation of the animated characters in David Cronenberg's film of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*.[7] Sherman's photograph of a woman(?) with a "borrowed" bib of breasts, suggests the imaginative distortions at the base of the "invented" sexuality that is the artist's own brand of science fiction.

The psycho-technological mapping of the body is accomplished in close up in Sherman's photographs. Shu Lea Cheang's *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, another technological mapping of the body, uses

technology's quotidian presence as both the friend and foe of a sense of community. In this installation, the telephone and the TV screen (paradigms, of a sort, of our technological landscape) appear both for and against a more traditional view of community, the community here being the collective relationships of women. Reflecting bell hooks' positive emphasis on "the confessional moment as a transformative moment,"[8] the spectator may dial a telephone and hear a text written by one of a number of women (all women of color who are performance artists or writers) whom Shu Lea Cheang invited to participate. They also appear on TV monitors talking about sexuality in a confessional mode. The telephone is the tantalizing instrument of communication. At the same time, the director, by forcing the confession to take place on the private connection of a telephone, also undercuts the more public quality of confession in a traditional oral culture, where we are in a physical relationship to the people with whom we speak. As bell hooks remarked, "I think the telephone is *very dangerous* to our lives in that it gives us such an illusory sense that we are *connecting*."[9] Underscoring the critical reading of the technology is the link viewers-listeners may make to the realm of pornography—to the peep show and 900 telephone numbers. Nonetheless, this collective of women's voices and images talking about their various sexualities, their bodies, has a positive power, resembling the congregation of women in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, with the significant difference that the *auteur* of *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire* is herself a member of the community of women she portrays.

Janine Antoni, *Lard Gnaw*, 1992

Hill, Ray, Sherman, and Cheang exploit the dynamic relationships of technology and the imaginary in representations of body and community. Two other artists focus attention on the body—here on the woman's body—in its social and political sphere as well as its biological condition. Janine Antoni and Kiki Smith may be said to share a certain critical orientation, although their work speaks for the different positions that the woman's body has come to represent. Both envision a body that is not idealized in the classical sense. Whether the body is fragmented or connected (or not even present, as with Antoni), what is important to both artists is the emergence of the repressed or the abject, that stuff about the body that the mother must clean up or teach

Kiki Smith, *Mother*, 1992-93 (installation view)

the child to overcome. Julia Kristeva has called the maternal the "trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body...."[10] The abject body is the body as substance—bile, tissue, excrement, blood, vomit—and it has emerged in the earlier work of Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, and Kiki Smith.

Janine Antoni's contribution to the Biennial broadens and humorizes the relation of body and substance, moving away from a strictly psychoanalytic to a cultural base. The culture her work represents is the consumer fetishism of female youth and beauty, and she explores that fetishism by establishing a performative relationship between raw material and the commodity. Antoni critiques a patriarchal community where eating is transgressive and the fat woman is an obvious taboo. Antoni's performative gesture is to progressively bite away, chew up, and spit out chocolate and lard from large, modernist-looking geometric cubes, the sculpture of the Minimalists. The masticated lard is then mixed with pigment and remolded into lipsticks which are placed in packages, resembling large candy boxes, fabricated from the recycled chocolate. These "cosmetics" are displayed in a mirrored cube that in this context reads as something between corporate architecture and modernist sculpture.

If Antoni presents a critique of a particular subculture—let us call it the stereotypical female of mass-media magazines —then Kiki Smith represents another feminist identity—the woman of connection, the woman who defines her difference through her relationship with others. Connection is the structural metaphor that links the work here. Smith presents not the single body, but the relations among bodies, as for instance in her untitled work of three lightboxes, which display overlaid photos, taken in 1982, of parts of her body and the body of David Wojnarowicz coated in blood. The overlay of the photos fuses the two bodies, which are further connected by a tangle of electrical cords that suggests veins or lymphatic systems. This theme of connection is reinforced in the plaster sculpture of a body in a fetal position attached to a representation of the mother's body by the umbilical cord. A separate sculpture places casts of a pair of female feet (Smith's mother's) on a shelf above a field of broken glass, meant to recall the tears one supposes were shed over the interrelated issues of connection, rebellion, and loss, emotions at the base of the mother-daughter relationship.

The importance of connection that Kiki Smith makes eloquent in the language of the body is a theme taken up by other artists in this exhibition. Nancy Spero, Ida Applebroog, and Jimmie Durham deal with connection (or its opposite) by addressing the reinvestment or reinsertion into memory, through image and text, of what is viewed as forgotten, overlooked, or lost. In their Biennial works and others before, they exhume images and information from history and the media and transform them into innovative formats of sculpture and installations of printing and painting. What unites Applebroog, Durham, and Spero is that their revisionism and tinkering with the canons have been consistently expressed through dissent, eroticism, parody, and humor. Spero connects the unknown and the forgotten with the celebratory or Dionysian. Her Biennial wall installation is based on a *New York Times* article of 1987; the hanging body of a woman is derived from a 1941 photograph of a previously nameless Jewish woman from the Minsk ghetto, finally identified half a century later as Masha Bruskina, active in the partisan resistance to the Nazi occupation of the Soviet Union. Through an iconic reinsertion, Spero reclaims for collective memory a moment in the history of radical women's political action. She reinforces this concept with a second wall installation devoted to the imagery of the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta who, like Masha Bruskina, died a violent death at a young age. Spero willfully counters martyrdom (political and artistic) with Dionysiac female figures printed on the museum walls, which interact subliminally with the violence of her other works.

HOMMAGE TO ANA MENDIETA

Nancy Spero, *Homage to Ana Mendieta*, 1991 (installation at Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal, Germany)

Applebroog and Durham allow the ridiculous and the absurd to fragment and mediate the violence and horror of the histories they want to foreground in our collective memories. Key images of Applebroog's recent art are drawn from the historical reservoir of illustrated books—some meant particularly for children. Among these are fairy-tale volumes which, in the days before TV and films for the youth market, formed the collective and influential behavior models for many children raised in Europe and America. Applebroog's images reveal a funny, erotic violence that lurks in the so-called diversions and pleasures of childhood. In her Biennial work, she expands on the family relationships and the stories of forgotten people that formed her earlier

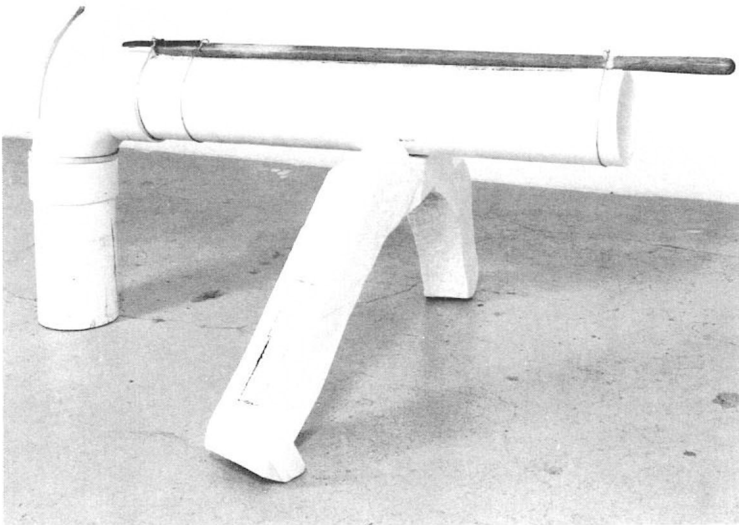
Ida Applebroog, *Kathy W*, 1992

narratives—always fragmented and distorted by non sequiturs. Some of the focal points of her 1993 pieces—Hansel and Gretel, Santa Claus with a child on his lap—are rendered in a style lying somewhere between cartoon and classic illustration. These are joined by painted images, transformed from photos culled from magazines and newspapers, which in Applebroog's sculptural painting installations appear absurd and carnivalesque.

Jimmie Durham, by contrast, revises the canon by subverting it, by showing its artificiality. His way of insertion into collectivity is to reveal the absurdity of national history or cultural identity as universals, when in fact they are actually constructed. Attached to pseudo-primitivist sculptural objects are texts acknowledged to make up "Western civilization"—an excerpt from Homer in Greek, an excerpt from a Shakespeare play, a paragraph in German from a Thomas Mann novel. Stripping these texts from their original narratives defamiliarizes them, estranging them from the idea of a common culture just as, by analogy, the language of the Native American is estranged from non-Native culture. (Durham is a Cherokee.) Durham's collectivity of literature, much of which is assumed to be, like the Bible, the basis for the development of culture, gives out hints of literary delight, but does not cohere into the transcendent uplifting, monolithic tradition that a modernist like T.S. Eliot assumed as a universal in the first half of the century.

Nan Goldin wants to preserve what she has known, what she has lived through, what she has lost as documenter of and participant in an extended family, a community spread across continents, some living, some now dead. Returning to her ongoing subject matter—her widespread group of friends—she has assembled a collection of photographic portraits. Goldin began this work in the 1970s with

Nan Goldin, *Jimmy Paulette and Tabboo! in the Bathroom, NYC*, 1991



Jimmie Durham, *Untitled*, 1992

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, a slide show installation accompanied by a sound track of songs. This signature work is a "document" or "diary" of her life, whose themes of sexual dependency, sexual love, and transgression resonate with the desire not to see sexual longing as deviancy or transgression, nor to fix it within more socially acceptable "romance." Sexuality is faced honestly in all its many permutations. Goldin's work for the Biennial contains similar ideas, here dealing more with the subjects of birth, death, and loss. Her photographic project documents a community in a quasi-cinematic vein, paralleling in style and format the aesthetic and environment of its subject and location.

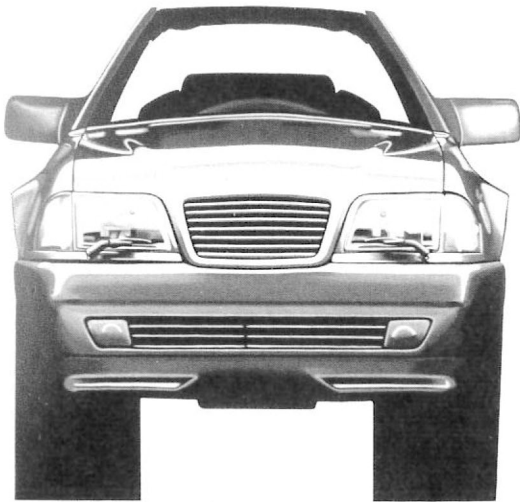
The works of painters Kevin Wolff and Peter Cain are also specific to a particular time and to a configuration of specific communities. Both represent images familiar to male groups, groups obviously as heterogeneous and multiple as groups of women. In fact, the work of both artists is coded. Cain replicates a Mercedes 500 SL #1 taken from a car advertisement. Although presented as a fetishized symbol—the meaning of which is known to particular groups (or markets, in advertisers' language), it becomes in the artist's hands a cipher. Similarly drained of its original meaning is the hand gesture of the gang member that is the starting point for Kevin Wolff's paintings. Both artists allude to the meanings encoded in images related to the subcultures they observe, and both allow these messages to initiate abstraction. Cain's and Wolff's paintings are analagous to the sculpture of Charles Ray: for all three, the psychological impact emerges from the coexistence of the image's alteration and its high-definition realism.

Chris Burden and Allan Sekula move from the subject position contained in an analysis of many cultural viewpoints to a broader collective view, not unlike the work of Gober and Hill, but focusing instead on the physical world. Burden ironicizes the technological utopia of complete control by power; Sekula exposes the incompleteness or arbitrariness of the so-called documentation of historical fact. Burden's *Fist of Light*, a cube filled with the highest intensity of light (and perhaps, therefore, impossible for the viewer to enter) is a homemade model of fission or nuclear reaction. The miniaturization of a totalizing concept is a leitmotif of Burden's work. This phenomenological method (similar to that of Ray and Hill) makes understandable but also parodies the idea of a larger-than-life terror—nuclear power. The

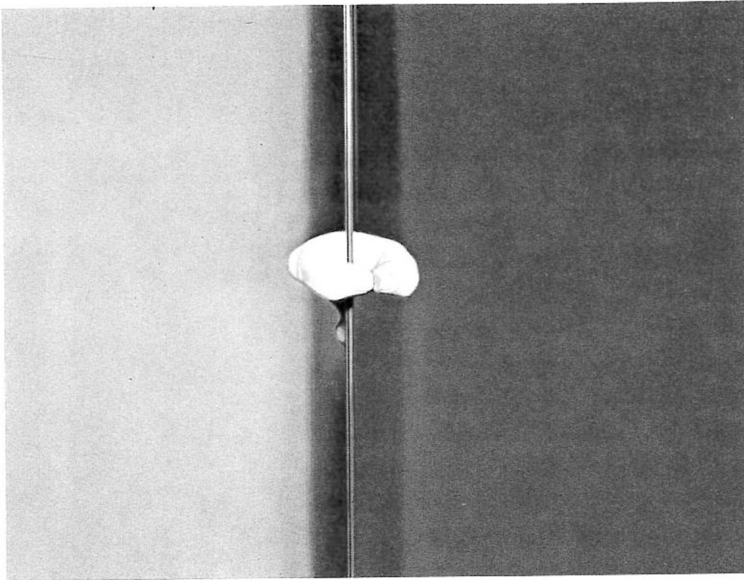
reduction of this monumental concept makes it just one more model that must interact with many others in a collective consciousness. Burden accomplishes this interaction without sacrificing the terror of what he is dealing with.

Sekula undertakes the documentation of a global system: the flow of goods, people, capital, and arms through the ports of the world. His somewhat mock-burlesque title for his photographic project is *Fish Story*. Using the sea as a realist base capable of allegory (in the manner of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad), Sekula, in this still uncompleted project (he will show two sections of it in this Biennial) intersperses images with texts from many sources, some written by the artist, others quoted from widely varying sources (Aristotle to Ronald Reagan). The images break down roughly into two sequences: one is essentially shot around the port and harbor of Los Angeles and is thus local. (Sekula was brought up near the harbor of San Pedro). The other sequence, *Loaves & Fishes*, shot mainly in Poland, Rotterdam, and Barcelona, is meant to be more global, and contains an isolated reference to the Persian Gulf War. Of course, the local and global are seen as interrelated, and the allegorical underpinnings of the project are signaled by a photo in the Los Angeles sequence of an ancient Roman harbor. However, within these sequences photographs are out of order (no one sequence clearly covers any single site) as Sekula shifts from place to place. His work is a conversation with the romanticism of modernist photography (Alfred Stieglitz's *Steerage*, for instance). Sekula wants to redefine a form of reportage that is not constrained by the institution of photojournalism; his reportage marries incompatibilities (travel views, glimpses of popular experiences, working-class daily life,

Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, work in progress (detail)



Peter Cain, *500 SL #1*, 1992



Kevin Wolff, *Curled Finger*, 1992

cosmopolitan concerns) at the risk of the legibility that one expects from photojournalism and the documentary.[11] Sekula's project thus hovers between the descriptive and the allegorical in a montage of intuitively related facts. Ultimately, he undermines what appears to be collective —the controlled, organized, and purposeful international system of shipping—by suggesting sites of resistance, spaces of psychological complexity.

While Sekula's project represents a global collective, Andrea Fraser's subject is as local as one can get in this context. For her subject is the Whitney Museum, in which the "1993 Biennial Exhibition" has attempted to organize many subcultures or identities into a whole that reveals constant conflict among parts. Fraser has always treated museums and their various components as her theme, asking what these places are and, most important, for whom they exist, and what people want from them. (Her most famous work is a performance as a museum docent, attempting to interface between the museum and its public.) For this exhibition, she has written and produced an audiotape, gleaned from interviews with the curators and the director, the people who created the collective we call the Biennial. I am one of her subjects. In this process, Fraser has reduced to one narrative a group of voices that speak differently. By allowing unanimity, disjunction, and contradiction to simultaneously appear in a museum text, she offers a paradigm of the hopes and fears of community life.

Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989. Performance by the artist at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

1. See Homi Bhabha's essay, pp. 62-73, below.

2. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 16.

3. Paul Rabinow, "Artificiality and Enlightenment: From Sociobiology to Biosociality," in Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, eds., *Incorporations* (New York: Zone, 1992), pp. 249-50.

4. Hubert Damisch, "Six Notes and Some Queries Concerning a Phenomenology of So-Called 'Virtual' Images," in Peter Weibel, *On Justifying the Hypothetical Nature of Art and the Non-Identicality Within the Object World*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Galerie Tanja Grunert, 1992).

5. Donald Albrecht, "'Blade Runner' Cuts Deep into American Culture," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1992, p. 19.

6. J.G. Ballard, "Project for a Glossary of the 20th Century," in Crary and Kwinter, *Incorporations*, p. 273.

7. Jody Duncan, "Borrowed Flesh: Special Effects in Naked Lunch," in Ira Silverberg, ed., *Everything Is Permitted: The Making of Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992), p. 90. For instance, the Mugwump (Burrough's guide and nemesis) created for the film "as a tall, lanky creature with facial features being a cross between a wolf and Burroughs himself," is described by Cronenberg, who followed the Burroughs text, as "an old junkie—emaciated and with the 'look of borrowed flesh'...to emphasize its nonhumaness."

8. Interview with bell hooks by Andrea Juno, in *Angry Women* (*Re/Search*, no. 13 [1991]), p. 80.

9. Ibid., p. 87.

10. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 72.

11. Conversation with the artist, Los Angeles, January 1992.