

CAST

Art and Objects

Made Using Humanity's Most Transformational Process

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CASTING

Unbounded in an Expanded Age

by Elaine A. King

Rosalind Krauss was one of the first critics to map the shifts occurring in Postmodern art and what would continue to evolve into this era. In her seminal essay, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (1979), she theorized that in this expanded field, the critical operations that have accompanied postwar American art have largely worked in the service of this alteration. The categories of sculpture, painting, and craft have been transformed in past decades in an astonishing manner, demonstrating that art as a cultural manifestation can be just about whatsoever and made from anything.

The tolerance for multi-faceted approaches and media is expressed by Dipti Desai: "Many contemporary artists, who have blurred the boundaries between not only high art and low art, but also art and other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, have challenged both artistic process and artistic authority."¹ This recognition of mixing art forms was demonstrated in the exhibition *Cast From Life* held at the Skarsted Gallery in the fall of 2014. It showcased works by an assortment of artists including George Condo, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Isa Genzken, Robert Gober, Mark Grotjahn, Rachel Harrison, Mike Kelley, Martin Kippenberger, Jeff Koons, Juan Muñoz, Cady Noland, Ugo Rondinone, Thomas Schütte, Rebecca Warren, and Franz West. Its organizers stated, "*Cast From Life* loosely interprets the process of casting and examines the ways that sculptors use various forms to mold meaning. Delving into the materiality of contemporary sculpture, the exhibition creates juxtapositions between a wide range of today's sculptors, drawing comparisons in their methodology."²

Today, artists make ambitious works through a combination of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects that test conventional boundaries and defy easy definition. Varied and wide-ranging, contemporary art is famed for its very lack of a homogeneous unifying principle or dogma. In our diverse world, artists impart ideas through whatever techniques they deem appropriate; this includes video projections, text, found objects, debris, blood, wrecked furniture, live body performances, multi-media casting, community intervention, and beyond.

Nevertheless, many artists continue to embrace and employ methods connected to time-honored materials and techniques. Many working today share a crucial link to traditional modern art that can be traced back to Auguste Rodin and the technique of bronze casting. In the late nineteenth century, he brought sculpture into the modern age and "restored an ancient role of sculpture—to capture the physical and intellectual force of the human subject."³

Rodin preferred working with the foundry established by Alexis Rudier to sand cast his work rather than carrying out that process in his own studio. Today, many artists use independent foundries to materialize their ideas. Two prominent facilities are Polich Tallix in Rock Tavern, New York, and the Modern Art Foundry in Astoria, Queens. Both have become hubs for artists to create ambitious cast objects or works fabricated in metal. The works of Matthew Barney, Ashley Bickerton, Frank Benson, Louise Bourgeois, Eric Fischl, Rona Pondick, and Ursula von Rydingsvard illustrate the varied spectrum of what these foundries produce. Although their works are produced at the foundry, artists play a hands-on role in the production of their sculptures, working closely with superb craftspeople who understand not only material and process, but the artists' concepts as well.

Throughout her career, Rona Pondick has used traditional sculptural techniques including carving, hand-modeling, mold-making, and metal casting, as well as 3-D computer technologies, to fabricate sculptural hybrids. She remains an artist continually experimenting with materials and forms to widen the parameters of sculpture in unforeseen and startling ways. Pondick's phantasmagorical creations are a marriage of disparate components that metamorphose the human body, fusing plants or animals that result in bizarre unified mutations. Concurrently, her morphed creatures evince a comical yet eerie presence inducing two highly articulated realities and imparting an unnerving psychological sensibility. In 1998 she began melding parts of animals and flora with fragments of her own body. Pondick merged old-style hand sculpting with casting. An early example of this is the piece *Marmot*. For this piece she started with a lifecast of her own limbs and head. Pondick then sculpted an animal body and attached the human parts. She laboriously reworked the lifecast by hand in order to construct a seamless new creature that is hairless and smooth. From a mold, she cast the bizarre new form in silicone rubber.

Pondick went on to produce an eccentric series of work including *Dog*, *Fox*, and *Monkey* cast in stainless steel. Realizing that she wanted to dramatically change the size of her body parts, she turned to utilizing advanced computer technology to assist her in making the scale changes, either enlarging or shrinking those components of her hybrid sculptures which incorporate depictions of her heads and hands with handmade animal parts. Working with Polich Tallix for more than ten years, she cast these hybrids in stainless steel. The stainless steel flows seamlessly from a sleek shine to a meticulously textured surface, creating natural evolutions amid human and animal forms. However, this was no simple casting production, since stainless steel is three times harder than bronze and bringing its surface to a mirror finish is infinitely time consuming. Pondick also uses yellow stainless steel, an unusual alloy which, when carefully heat-treated, develops a unique golden color. In creating her eerie menagerie of animal-human hybrids, she meticulously merged, using modeling and carving techniques, her own head and hands (matte stainless steel likenesses derived from lifecasts) onto stylized, highly polished stainless-steel animal bodies of disproportionate sizes. A significant work in this series is *Dog* (see page 26), which combines a human head and hands with the body of a dog, resulting in a sphinx-like creature.



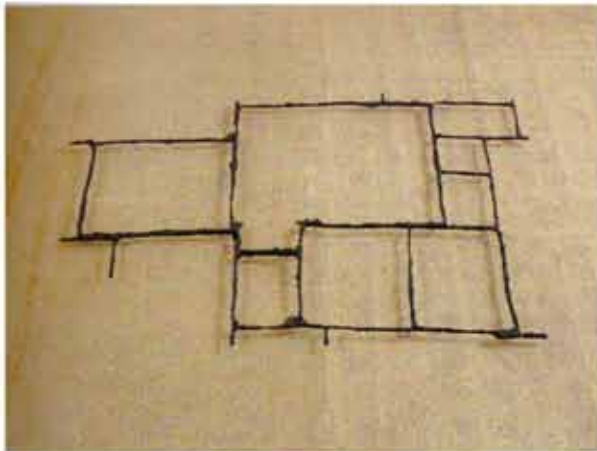
Rona Pondick, *Marmot*, 1998–1999. Silicone rubber; edition of 6 + 1 AP; 6" × 29.25" × 21".
Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London/Paris/Salzburg and artist.

Another noteworthy work, *Monkey with Hair*, is also a hybrid composed of human parts and animal, covered with fur. Here her own face glistens in stainless steel, with eyes closed and a downturned mouth portraying a solemn look; it is fused with wild gray-black monkey hair glued to its surface, emanating a fluid, animated presence.

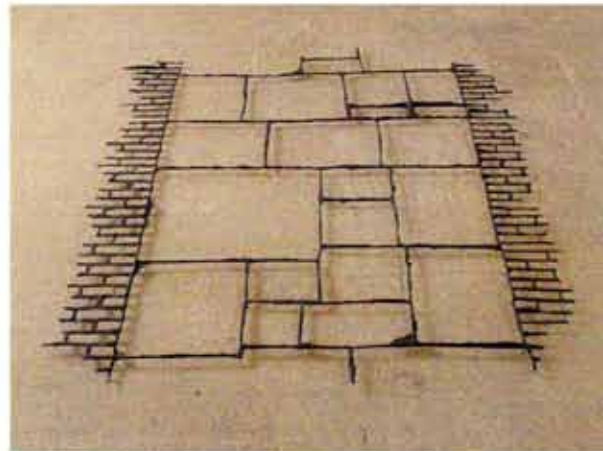
This artist's work is an amalgamation of interesting, exciting, and terrifying qualities. Although her sculptural freaks tend to resemble uncanny inventions, they nonetheless reveal the artist's concern about science's ongoing labors in genomic creation and manipulation. For Pondick, current biological and genetic experimentation with the human body raises significant ethical and philosophical questions. In an era of cloning and body experimentation, Rona Pondick's production for nearly two decades exemplifies the type of horrific monsters that could become a reality should something go wrong scientifically.

Cornelia Parker is a versatile artist whose art spans a spectrum of medium, and, in 1997 she was one of four women artists nominated for the Turner Prize. In recent years, she has made several cast pieces, both traditional and alternative. For the 2011 Folkestone Triennial, Parker produced a statue inspired by a well-liked tourist attraction, Copenhagen's *Little Mermaid*. Her life-cast bronze sculpture, *Folkestone Mermaid* (see page 139), celebrates the local and the everyday.

In 2012, Parker moved away from traditional casting methods when she became fascinated with street cracks as a result of her child's game of avoiding stepping on pavement cracks. Pouring liquid rubber between the large paving stones and their brick areas and letting them set, she then cast the results into a lattice of black bronze. Parker traced the geography of the city that had been, years prior, mapped out in stone, in her *Pavement Cracks* series. Her attention to such banal urban elements cleverly transformed the prosaic street cracks into evocative charged shapes that are liminal, capturing space that is both above and between. According to Parker, "When I pulled the rubber off, you got the worm holes and everything. So really it's casting the very thing that you're superstitiously trying to avoid."⁴ The solidified rubber cracks were inverted and cast in black bronze and the subsequent shapes were placed on steel pins. Each minimal configuration suspension, hovering so slightly above the floor, with its play of shadows results in an eye-catching form, evinces a semblance of a petrified line drawing.



Cornelia Parker, *Pavement Cracks (City of London)*, 2012-2013. Black patinated bronze, 69" × 5' × 3.5". Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.



Cornelia Parker, *Black Path (Banhill Fields)*, 2013. Black patinated bronze, 11'2" × 8'2.5" × 3.5". Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.

Unlike many artists who fabricate large-scale works in foundries, Moira Marti Geoffrion is a hands-on maker who assembles her cast sculptures in her studio. Geoffrion is a seasoned artist working in an interdisciplinary spectrum of art making. She has lived in Tucson, Arizona, for the past three decades and draws inspiration from her immediate milieu. A type of primordial energy appears to pervade her emblematic work that evokes intense sensations and associations about the natural cycles of life and death. Creating arrangements that both fuse and hold their dissimilarities, Geoffrion mixes order and chaos. Moreover, a heightened silence permeates Geoffrion's contemplative work filled with symbols, metaphors, and splinters of real-life objects. The resulting art pieces often appear to be a conglomerate of painting and casting, melded with found and sculpted forms.

Two excellent yet disparate works include *Close Relations* and *Rusted Reach*. Geoffrion makes flexible rubber molds of hands and also of found decaying desert branches in *Close Relations*. Forton (a mixture of liquid polymer, Gypsum, bronze powder, catalyst, and fiberglass) is poured into the flexible mold and solidifies. In the case of *Close Relations*, Geoffrion used a flexible rubber mold to make the wax model that fuses waxes of hands with elements of nature. Then she cast the final sculpture in bronze in a lost wax process using the ceramic shell process. *Rusted Reach* is cast in Forton with rusted steel that is embedded in the Forton while it is still in a semi-liquid state. She used patinas in a painterly manner, and the bonding of the Forton to the rusted steel creates a compelling and modern combination of materials. These materials are lightweight, can be patinated or painted, are less costly than bronze, and evince a distinctly contemporary attribute.



Moira Marti Geoffrion, *Close Relations*, 2013. Bronze, found desert plant parts, bronze paint, 21" × 4" × 5".
Photo: Robin Stancliff from Stancliff Photography, Collection of Drs. Vreneli and Paul Farber.



Moira Marti Geoffrion, *Rusted Reach*, 2014. Cast FORTON®, rusted steel refuse, 20" × 24" × 6".
Photo: Robin Stancliff, Stancliff Photography.



Janine Antoni, *Eureka*, 1993. Bathtub, lard, soap, Corian.
Soap: 22" × 26" × 26", tub: 30" × 70" × 25".
Photo: Jodi Nueva at Fundació "la Caixa," Barcelona.
© Janine Antoni, Courtesy of the artist and Luhring
Augustine, New York.

Janine Antoni also employs unusual methods of casting. As an artist, she believes that her body is the most important tool in the making of her art. The actual casting of her body has yielded several unconventional pieces, including *Lick and Lather* (see page 399). Antoni produced fourteen busts; seven were cast in brown chocolate and another seven in white soap. She took a mold directly from her body using alginate (a mold-making substance commonly used by dentists to take impressions of teeth). Modeled on classical antiquity, the dimensional portraits were intended to be transformed by the process of licking the chocolate and lathering the soap. The initial cast busts are not significant in and of themselves; rather they serve as vehicles for the intimate interventions of licking and bathing that complete the work.

Another example of Antoni's highly personal approach to casting is *Eureka*. Inspired by Archimedes' principle of displacement, Antoni (wearing a harness) was gradually lowered into a bathtub full of lard and soap, from which her body supplanted an amount of lard equivalent to her person. She was then lifted out of the bathtub leaving a cavity in the lard where she had been. Here, her body became part of the performance and a tool to create an impression in the tub of lard. The displaced lard was then cast into a large cube of soap showing a volumetric equivalent to that of her body. The magic of this piece is made possible by the casting of unconventional materials and Antoni's stretching of sculptural traditions.

Dario Robleto works on a small scale to produce a variety of arresting cast objects. An examination of Robleto's work evinces his fervent interest in music, popular culture, American history, memory, and war. Robleto is a type of bricoleur artist who incorporates both banal and highly personal found objects/artifacts in his work, transforming them into enigmatic layered creations that echo elements of history. In a significant installation titled *A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle* he recycled eccentric materials from dinosaur fossils to pulverized vintage records, from swamp root to cramp bark. It includes a pair of World War I cavalry boots cast from Skeeter Davis's "The End of the World" melted vinyl records. The mysterious boots appear to have slid through a snow patch made from white rose petals, rice, and ballistic gelatin. One of the boots contains a casting of a hand-carved wooden and iron prosthetic leg that a wounded Civil War soldier constructed for himself. The leg is cast in the Shirelles' "Soldier Boy" melted vinyl records and femur bone dust. This haunting piece echoes the horrors of war and is an apt metaphor for our current era of violence.

Artists continue to experiment with myriad materials and employ new casting technologies. The selection of works discussed here corroborates the extensiveness casting has taken on over only a few decades. Today, casting continues to expand, as does the entire realm of art. Cultural theorists Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen introduced the term "metamodernism" in the volume *Notes on Metamodernism*. They proclaimed that "the 2000s are categorized by the advent of an openness that oscillates between, and must be situated beyond, modern positions and postmodern strategies."⁷ Furthermore, "just as modernism and postmodernism expressed themselves through a variety of often competing strategies and styles, the metamodern also articulates itself by means of diverse practices."⁸ One could write volumes about the array of limitless works being made by artists choosing to engage in inventive casting in a time of abounding alternatives.



Notes

1. Dipti Desai, "The Ethnographic Move in Contemporary Art: What Does It Mean for Art Education?," *Studies in Art Education* (Summer 2002): 320.
2. Skarstedt Gallery, press release for the exhibition *Cast From Life*, September 18-October 25, 2014.
3. Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, "The Hand of Rodin," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series* 15 (9), May 1957, 200-204.
4. Liz Jobey, "Cornelia Parker," *Financial Times, Life & Arts sec.*, May 17, 2013, www.ft.com.
5. Robin van den Akker Vermeulen and Timotheus Vermeulen, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2010, 5-6, <http://aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677/6304>.
6. *Ibid.*, 6.

Elaine A. King is a professor of art history, criticism and museum studies at Carnegie Mellon University. King is a freelance art critic and curator who has organized over 35 exhibitions. She coauthored the book *Ethics in the Visual Arts* with Gail Levin.

Opposite page Dario Robleto, *A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle*, 2004. Cast of a hand-carved wooden and iron leg that a wounded Civil War soldier constructed for himself, made from The Shirelles' "Soldier Boy" melted vinyl records and femur bone dust, fitted inside a pair of WWI military cavalry boots made from Skeeter Davis's "The End of the World" melted vinyl record, oil can filled with homemade tincture (gun oil, rose oil, bacteria cultured from the grooves of Negro prison songs and prison choir records, wormwood, golden rod, aloe juice, resurrection plant, Apothecary's Rose and bugleweed), brass, rust, dirt from various battlefields, ballistic gelatin, white rose petals, white rice, 21" x 80" x 20".

Photo: Robert Wiedemeyer, Courtesy of the artist and the Inman Gallery.

Right Pendant, Iron Age I-II, ca. 1350 to 800 BCE. Northwestern Iran, bronze, 3.25" x 3.75".
Courtesy of LACMA, Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation, www.lacma.org. LACMA public domain.



Below Rona Pondick, *Worry Beads*, 1999-2001. Bronze, edition of 6 + 1 AP; 1.5" x 2" x 24".
Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London/Paris/Salzburg and artist.

