

# Hair Piece Art

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issues.

"Civilized men today . . .  
are clearly embarrassed by anything  
that reminds them too much of their animal origin."

—Sigmund Freud  
(from the preface  
to J.G. Bourke's  
*Scatological Rites  
of All Nations*, 1913)

What about hair? It seems to be a kind of evolutionary leftover one is compelled to address. Its continuous growth, its incontinence, requires regular attention in the form of cleaning, cutting, binding or willful neglect. People articulate themselves on the social stage with a hair vernacular. Its uselessness and plasticity help it to sustain complicated and highly evolved meanings asserting sexual identity, age, status, ethnicity and role. These meanings are usually expressed by the way hair is cut or bound up: the ways in which its growth is repressed. Hair dramatically enacts, on the body's stage, relations of the public to the private and the irrepressible to the repressed.

We can find fruitful analogies between the production of art and the body's production of solid material, illuminating some of the links between peoples' drives to make, exhibit and acquire art. Hair and feces, the two most obvious examples, sit on opposite sides of our bodies' public and private selves, and both sit at the limit of our ambivalent claims of authority over it. While defecating is periodic and inspired, hair growth is continuous and absolutely involuntary. Feces and hair acquire symbolic associations with power through our efforts to regulate them. Young children partially work out the limits of their emerging power over themselves and their parents during toilet training. Later, hair becomes an important signifier of one's conformity to or rejection of social norms. Art is a kind of speech that is used by individuals and institutions to articulate the nature of their power. Think of art as hair on the body politic.

Rona Pondick is known for her sculptures made of turd-like forms treated in a variety of ways. By drawing out into the public what is essentially private or internal, she caricatures traditional accounts of the expressive act and echoes the process by which hair becomes a social discourse. Pondick's work has proposed a kind of myth of origins for sculpture as articulated feces. The compressing and squeezing of the intestinal system is atavistically present in the impulse to make and is mimetically rendered on to her materials. Metaphors for hairdressing, sculpture and cloaca coexist in *French Knot*, in which she celebrates hair and feces as the twin gods of the plastic impulse. This "hair piece" is emblematic of the psychological underpinnings of a body-oriented art practice that we



Rona Pondick  
*French Knot*, 1986  
Wood, steel wool, wax  
38" x 21" x 21"  
Photo: Jennifer Kotter  
Courtesy fiction/nonfiction



**Frida Kahlo**  
**Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair, 1940**  
 Oil on canvas  
 15-3/4" x 11"  
 Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Sue Williams**  
**See Price List, 1989**  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 42" x 58"  
 Courtesy Loughelton Gallery



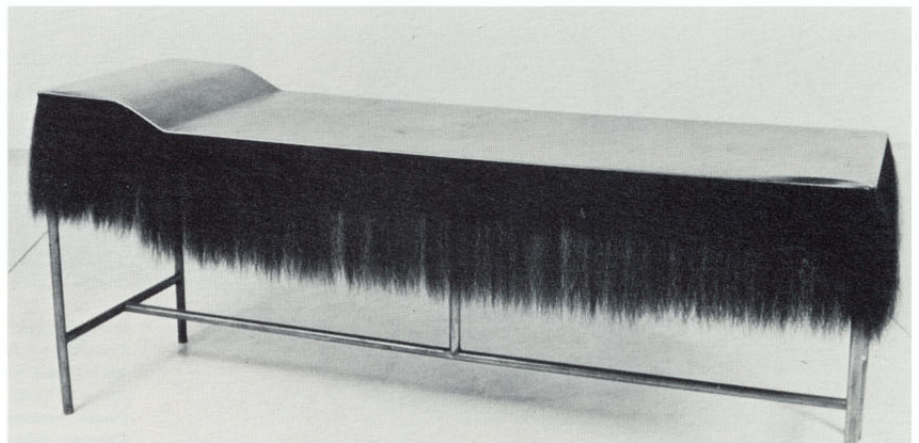
**Jeanne Dunning**  
**Head 7**  
 Laminated Cibachrome mounted to plexiglass  
 36" x 21"  
 Courtesy Feature, New York

**Patty Martori**  
**Untitled, 1988**  
 Steel, human hair  
 31-1/8" x 72-1/2" x 21-1/2"  
 Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery

find in the work of a variety of other artists. I explore, in this essay, the current resurgence of the use of hair as an important instrument in this practice.

All individuals live their lives within hair codes, in a fantastically complicated history of hair from early man onwards. Brooks Adams has called the history of hairdressing a "ritual celebration of the durability and growth of a body substance [that reflects] the cosmetic and symbolic supremacy of the head." The relation of hair to sexuality, cemented by the appearance of new hair at puberty, compels cultures and individuals to address its strange power. Religions have evolved codes designed to regulate the unruly power of hair. Forbidding women to show their hair, requiring or forbidding men to cut theirs, seems to bear witness to the braiding of sexuality and power. The association of hair and power, and its relation to the cut, we see in the mythological stories of Samson and Delilah or Medusa, and historically during a period in Europe when women suspected of witchcraft were routinely shaved of all hair in order to weaken them.

The evolution of the hairdresser's art has always been associated with the uses of fashion by the privileged. Portraiture throughout the history of art—depicting bobs, wimples, tresses, zazzera, beehives, bouffants, pompadours, hedgehogs, flips—bears in its visualizations of hair the imprint of these elite. The dramatic feats of engineering periodically found in hairdressing stand as a perverse expression of a superiority over lower classes, by crippling the owner's ability to do little else but socialize. Some eighteenth-century European hairpieces rose many feet above the head, requiring elaborate support structures and occasional alterations to doorways and carriages. Men from the Mashukuluma group in East





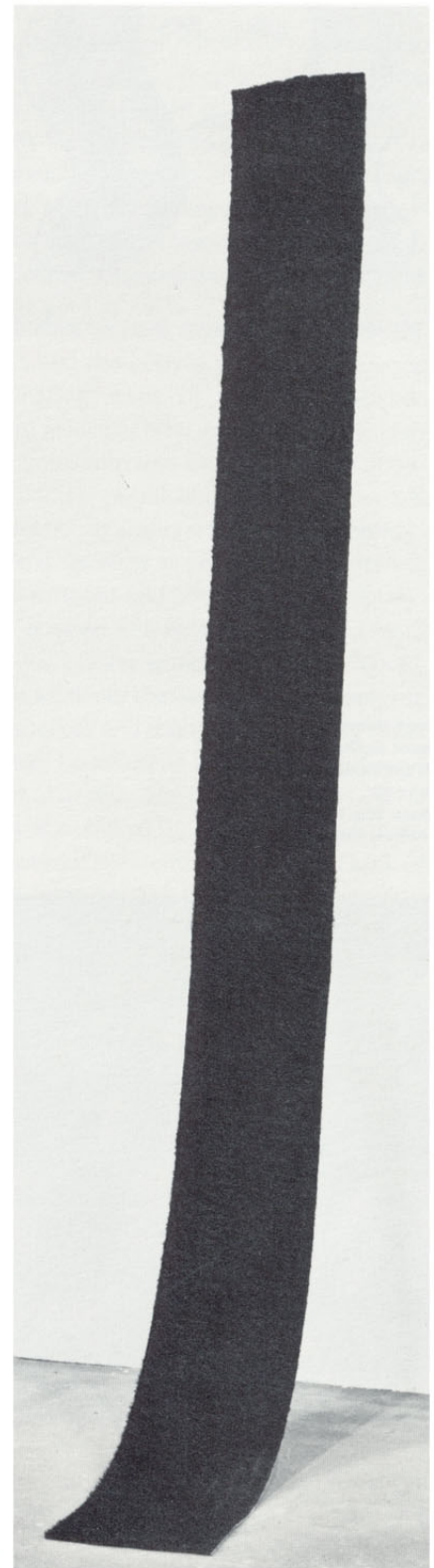
Africa are known to have tapering ornamented hairpieces a yard long. By severely circumscribing its field of discourse, and by commanding towering prices, much contemporary art similarly reduces itself to a badge of social prowess. Some current work concerned with the body, however, has tried to give this badge the embarrassment of unwanted hair. The seeming omnipotent capacity of the market to coopt any art practice has helped renew interest in the body as a subject which figures in that process. The increased potency of medical science and the legislative questions it raises turn the body into a battleground in which rival interests confuse the already tenuous claims people have over themselves. Recent drug-testing procedures, for example, use hair to discover chemical traces of substances that have passed through the blood stream. Hair's rate of growth has its own cycle that is influenced by psychological states. The cylindrical filaments become an indexical diary of one's life with clear forensic uses.

Artists like Jeanne Dunning, using photographs of hair, or Liz Larner, with an object made of actual hair, have explored these relations of power to the body. By withholding an authorial voice and the facial identity of her subjects, Dunning's photographs of hair become an occasion to examine the subtle exertions of power between artist, subject and viewer within the conventions of portraiture and advertising. Larner's *Lash Mat* consists of a collection of short hairs attached in a row to a long, narrow support. The clinical detachment of the arrangement leaves a sinister void in our knowledge of the hairs' origins. Anonymous subjects each relinquished a part of their bodies for the piece—that part which both ornaments and protects the eye—who then look back at us as powerless ghosts.

It is easy to see how anxieties about our identity play themselves out in hair. Hair is often the focus for narcissistic fixation. People work out the terms of a symbolic mastery through the freedom or obedience they effect in their hair. Just as wigs are used to disguise gender or identity, haircuts and hairdos are our medium for the creation of a willed identity. Sue Williams, in her painting *See Price List*, uses extreme and dated hairdos to twist a social context around the lascivious action on her characters' mouths. Sexual stereotypes are savagely mocked with lurid innuendo. The amateur directness of her style creates a fiction of the artist as naïf that skews the work's oddball sophistication. Mike Kelley's drawing *Double Lapping Tongue Brunette* charts the relations between mouth and hair by substituting two oversized tongues for a woman's flip hairdo. After freeing the tongue from its tasting, articulating and erogenous cavity, he displaces onto the coiffure its drooling power of speech. In another piece, *Male and Female Brain Halves*, hair grows directly from the brain. Making one hemisphere male and the other female, he uses hair to lampoon the idea of simple gender dualities.

Kelley's disruptive, illogical and erotically-charged images owe much to the Surrealists. Hair iconography, especially in its relation to gender, recurs frequently in Surrealist art. Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup or Man Ray's substitution of hair for Cello strings on *Emak Bakia* spring to mind. Framed by a full head of long hair, Magritte's *The Rape* reconfigures a woman's torso onto her face with bald pudendum articulating a terse mouth. In 1965, Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q. Rasé* [Shaved], a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* without his seminal graffitied moustache, audaciously claims the unaltered original to be a shaved version of his own masqueraded *L.H.O.O.Q.* Both Duchamp and Magritte use the image of a woman to give a strange, aggressive charge to the absence of hair. Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair* enacts a drama of power and loss through the use of hair. Under the cruel musical line "Look if I loved you, it was for your hair. Now that you are bald, I don't love you anymore," Kahlo sits in drag, her cut

Liz Larner  
*Lash Mat*, 1989  
Human hair eyelashes, leather  
120" x 11"  
Courtesy 303 Gallery





**Mike Kelley**  
*Double Lapping Tongue Brunette*, 1989  
 Acrylic on paper  
 102 x 81 cm  
 Photo: Douglas M. Parker  
 Courtesy Rosamund Felsen Gallery and  
 Jablonka Gallerie



hair appearing animated as it is spread on the chair and floor around her, with a pair of scissors opened near her crotch. The theme of castration is sent into a turbulence of cross-gendered images. She denies the lover's power over her by removing the loved part. Both Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q. Rasé* and Kahlo's self-portrait, through an ambivalence toward the power of their object, use the removal of hair to shift gender identification.

Curtis Mitchell, a contemporary artist, has with classic Surrealist disjunction woven hair into an *Untitled* braided rug piece. As in Kahlo's self-portrait, the hair appears strewn about recklessly. Mitchell transforms the vernacular handicraft rug into a feminized sportsman's trophy rug-hide by surgical graft. The suggestion that the rug is a skin from which hair grows is both comic and horrific, akin to the decorative ornaments fashioned from severed body parts in the cult movie *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Mitchell performs a kind of "surgery" in his art, cutting hair and grafting it onto a new dermas. Curiously, the jobs of surgeon and barber were also joined in the Middle Ages and as late as the early nineteenth century. Both jobs, mutually concerned with matters of hygiene and repair, required the same cutting tools. Patty Martori joins the two again in her sculpture *Untitled*. Updating Lautréamont's oft-quoted fragment, "Chance encounter of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table," she ornaments an examining table with a set of bangs running around its perimeter. The missing body is invoked by the hair while the imaginary dissection would be performed with Surrealist tools. In Martori's piece, the activity of cutting is the invisible link between the two terms (hair and lab table), just as it was for the surgeon-barber.

The taking of scalps, the use of hair in ritual, magic or voodoo, the fetish and the relic testify to the power of hair no longer attached to the body. The old tradition of lovers exchanging locks of hair can represent both a form of power over the other or a talismanic surrender to their power. Inverting the revulsion produced by material removed from the body, like feces or nail clippings, the lover's lock cues an imaginative reconstitution of the beloved's absent body. Like dreams, the meaning of the hair fetish is a condensation of memories, beliefs and desires. By having a part of a person be a kind of sacramental stand-in for the whole, the process of representation is cut loose into the psychological. Where a religious icon is considered by the believer to contain some part of the divinity, fetishized hair is more literally both a part of the person and a representation of them.

Symbolist artists, as diverse as Toorop, the MacDonald sisters, Beardsley and Klimt, found in long, streaming, unbound hair a sensuous blurring of the distinctions between the figure and its environment. Their work reflected a nostalgia for a lost era of enchanted spirituality. Baudelaire, in his prose poem *A Hemisphere in a Woman's Hair*, recounts an intoxicated reverie of oceanic associations triggered by the smell of the beloved's hair: "let me bite, a while, your ponderous black tresses; when I take your elastic, rebellious hair between my teeth, it's as though I were eating memories." Hair reminds us not only of the power our animal origins has over us but also of the strange and often perverse ways we conscript that power into the service of culture. Contemporary artists representing or using actual hair—such as Mitchell, Martori, Kelley, Lerner, Dunning, Williams and others—help to renew the body as an instrument with which to deepen a dialogue with the world. ■

**David Humphrey**  
*Esprit de Corps*, 1989  
 Oil and human hair on canvas  
 40" x 50"  
 Photo: Wm. Nettles  
 Courtesy David McKee Gallery

