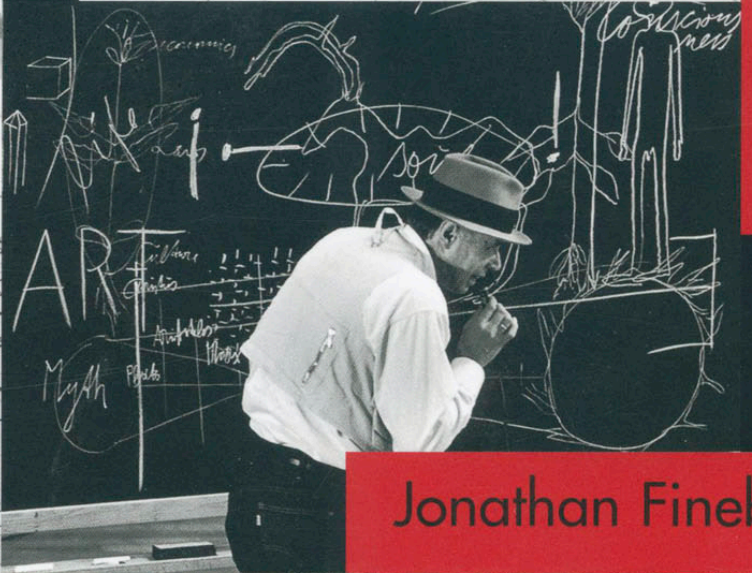
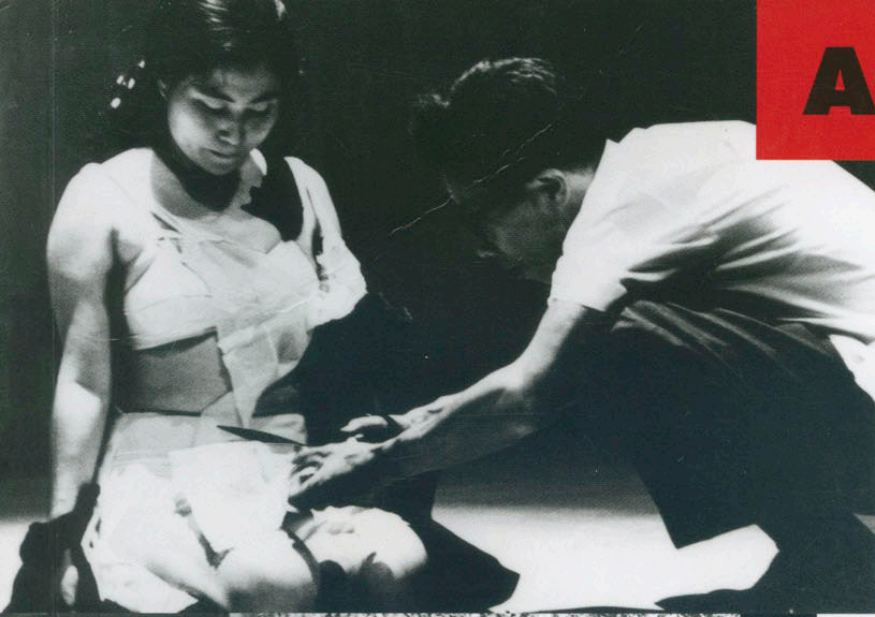


# ART SINCE 1940

Strategies of being Third Edition



Jonathan Fineberg





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**15.1 Rona Pondick**, *Little Bathers* (detail), 1990–1. Wax, plastic, and rubber teeth, 3½ × 3 × 4in (8.9 × 7.6 × 10.1cm) each (500 pieces), dimensions variable. Collection, Marc and Livia Straus. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York.



# 15 UNSTABLE DEFINITIONS

Any attempt at a traditional survey of the art of the last two decades is doomed to fail, because after 1990 the global art-world began to reconfigure itself into micro-ecologies of art—each with its own local concerns and discourse. There has continued to be a broad conversation across the increasingly porous boundaries that once defined isolated cultures, but the dominance that New York enjoyed roughly from 1940 to 1970 over the global art world dissipated and the electronic dissemination of information made it (among other things) possible to have an influential voice from anywhere. The instability of definitions of nations, of individuals, of cultures, of the self have made the last two decades of art extraordinarily dynamic and diverse. So here we will attempt to identify some important issues around which some of the most important innovations in art seem to coalesce.

## KEEPING IT REAL

In the United States the nineties began as the decade in which the easy millionaires from the leveraged buyouts and junk bonds of the eighties lost their fortunes and started looking for real jobs. There was hope in the art world that art would also become less about fast money and careers and more about ideas again. But the voracious herds of Wall Street were soon replaced by a new generation of overnight millionaires, and the apotheosis of global consumerism continued. Marketing all but eliminated issues in both news reporting and political campaigns; television reporters stopped challenging even blatantly false claims by candidates on “the news,” which had turned into an entertainment product in the U.S. There was so much manipulation of information by powerful interest groups from the eighties onwards that the average American no longer had enough reliable information to cast a responsible vote and the once

vaunted public school system of the United States had by the last quarter of the twentieth century declined so precipitously that only the privileged had the analytical skills to evaluate the news anyway. The value of a stock portfolio soared, but the buying power of a schoolteacher’s salary went down. Huge corporations got even bigger, local businesses disappeared (as did the American Main Street) in favor of global sameness in the shopping malls, airports, and commuter traffic jams where people increasingly lived their lives. The nineties became the decade in which everyone bought a cellular phone, logged onto the Internet, and found themselves endlessly on hold, listening to medleys of prerecorded menus and Muzak.

Despite all the money in the art world, serious artists persevered in trying to make sense of their experience in their work, and the variety of what they created reflects the many different complex issues that came to the fore all at once—not least, the overwhelming information flow itself. For some artists, a focus on immediate, bodily experience helped restore a sense of self in the increasingly anonymous culture. The particularizing features of one’s identity also became important as a force against dissolution. The art world became more multicultural and global with worldwide consumer marketing. Above all, the years from 1990 to 2010 were transformed by a breathtaking advance in communications and computer technology.

One of the corollaries of the electronic revolution that has taken place is that people have begun losing touch with simple realities. The entertaining distractions of hyperreality on computers, televisions, and in film has left us with less time to talk to our families and neighbors, and even grave threats to our very survival, like global warming, nuclear proliferation, and the desperation of poverty that breeds international terrorism, seem unreal, as though they are just another line-up of TV shows.



## RETURN TO THE BODY

A visceral preoccupation with the body was one way to make things “real” again. The performance work of Karen Finley, for example, relied on a raw, verbal evisceration of her audience. One writer described her performances this way:

Wafting onto the stage in some polyester good-girl get-up at one or two in the morning, Finley first showed the audience her stage fright or self-doubt—the prelude to holding nothing back. Then, the deluge: monologues that erupted out of the gross forbidden subtext of everyday where grannies soak in their own piss, men force-feed boys to produce the perfect shit, and daddy works “his daughter’s little hole.” The monologues were disgusting and cathartic—like pus escaping from some subconscious wound. This was obscenity in its purest form—an attempt to explore emotions too primal for words.<sup>1</sup>

The shockingly explicit content of Finley’s performances made her a target for censorship by the right wing of the

U.S. Congress, which correctly perceived that her work challenged its moral self-righteousness. Vehement censorship battles were fought in the U.S. courts and Presidents Reagan and Bush (senior) even attempted to dismantle the broadly popular National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities as a way of winning the approval of the religious right and silencing dissent in America. The most visible battles centered on Finley, Andres Serrano (who juxtaposed his own bodily fluids with symbols of his quite genuine religious devotion, as in his notorious *Piss Christ* of 1987), and on the homoerotic content in the works of David Wojnarowicz and Robert Mapplethorpe.

The disconcerting objects by Rona Pondick, with their strong evocations of the body, were not as vulnerable to such attacks since they are not overt references to issues of sex or religion. But they nevertheless draw on primal sensations that exist in the recesses of the psyche and elicit a profoundly disquieting effect. *Little Bathers* [fig. 15.1] comprises dreamlike transformations of fetishized human mouths, and the viewer cannot distance him- or herself



**15.2 Kiki Smith, *The Sitter*, 1992.** Wax, pigment, papier-mâché, 28 × 36 × 24in (71.1 × 91.4 × 61cm).  
Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, New York.



from an uncomfortable, simultaneously physical and psychic engagement with them.

Kiki Smith's work also centered on the human body, but in a more directly allusive manner. Like Wojnarowicz, a close friend and sometime collaborator, Smith had an intense involvement with the most intimate functions and internal parts of the human body. In the mid-eighties she made a row of glass watercooler jars etched with the names of different bodily fluids (urine, tears, sweat, milk, oil, mucus, saliva, blood, vomit, semen, puss, diarrhea). Another piece consisted of eight jars of blood. She cast a stomach in glass, rendered a heart in plaster and silver leaf, cast bronzes of the uro-genital system (male and female), and made an iron cast of a digestive system from the mouth to the anus that has an odd resemblance to an old radiator. In the nineties she turned to the whole body, often rendered in fragile paper or in muslin and wax. The modest materials of Richard Tuttle (who had been a studio assistant to her father, the minimalist sculptor Tony Smith) and the organic use of latex, fiberglass, and rubber by Eva Hesse seem to have informed her choice of materials. In *The Sitter* of 1992 [fig. 15.2] Smith sliced into the back of a very lifelike wax figure to reveal an internal cross-section of raw tissue that elicits an empathic bodily discomfort.

## Ann Hamilton

Ann Hamilton's work is always a powerful bodily experience—whether her medium is photography, video, installation, or even text—and it always arises from the artist's own desire for personal discovery. Hamilton wants “people to be absorbed into the physical experience of a piece.” She creates “situations which implicate you as an active participant,” she explained, “. . . letting the work work on you up through your body instead of from your eyes down. So that you allow yourself to experience something before you try to name it.”<sup>4</sup> Hamilton's work taps directly into a preverbal level of thought that has deep emotional roots in early childhood; it is the world of tactile reasoning and affective logic.

In *Malediction*, an installation of 1991–2 [fig. 15.3], for example, the viewer entered a gallery strewn with stiff rags. Stepping carefully through this field, she or he then came

**15.3 Ann Hamilton, *Malediction*, December 7, 1991–January 4, 1992.** Installation and performance: gesture of filling, molding, and emptying the mouth with raw bread dough; filling the wicker casket with the molds of the mouth, as performed in two rooms of the Louver Gallery, New York.

Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

