

Rogello Lopez Cuenca, Real Zone, 1990. Enamel on metal, 511/4" × 411/2". Courtesy Marta Cevera Gallery. Dan Cameron's article begins on page 72.



Unknown sculptor, Baule Group, Akan people, Female Figure with Snake (Maml Wata), c. 1960, Enamel on wood, 141/2" high. Private collection. David Hecht's article begins on page 80.



Rona Pondick, Angel, 1987-88, Wax, plastic, nylon, pillows, 291/2" × 20" × 20". Courtesy fiction/nonfiction. Terry R. Myer's article begins on page 90.

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> Cover: Annette Messager, Mes voeux (My wishes), 1989, Mixed media, 783/4" × 55" Courtesy Crousel-Robelin Bama, Paris. McGourmelon's article begins on page 66.

## Pressing Pleasures

## **The Urgent Sculptures of Rona Pondick**

## **Terry R. Myers**



Rona Pondick, Heel, 1990, Shoes, wax, plastic, newspaper,  $19" \times 18" \times 14"$ . Courtesy fiction/nonfiction and Asher-Faure, Los Angeles.

he discordant bodies of loaded information—visual, verbal, or unspeakable—that Rona Pondick willfully piles onto and squeezes into her sculptures allow her work to be simultaneously hilarious, deadly serious, and true to life. Like Freud, Pondick investigates not nature, but the natural. Manipulating traditions in sculpture and in psychoanalytic theory, Pondick aggressively interjects both respect for and skepticism toward both disciplines into her work by subjecting all decisions of form, technique, conception, and content to the strange rigor and the coercive danger of a series of impulses. Her work is about searching for (or, more precisely, remembering) the things that gratify us. Now that it is becoming increasingly clear that our most serious concerns should be about protecting our diminishing ability to express desires, Pondick can be seen as applying worthwhile pressure against the unhealthy restraints currently being forced upon our minds, while remaining subversively attached to the boundaries of the traditions in which her work functions. Through the referential use of viscous substances and the exploitation of the standardized "props" of psychoanalytic theory, Pondick's pieces release the things that have been repressed by reactivating them in shapes that exploit the formal in order to present the primal. Integrated into considered installations, her work resists the seduction of the fetish by explicitly advocating that all urges be accepted as the primary requirements for health.

Pondick's training in art had an overwhelmingly minimalist flavor, and her work continually shows its influence. She does believe in the importance of history in sculpture and has a strong desire to integrate herself into it. Early on, however, she realized that the vocabulary of minimalism was deficient in its ability to accommodate her concerns with extreme subject matter. Turning to surrealism, Pondick found the preverbal material she needed and reinvested it in her sculpture. For her, all periods of the sculptural tradition exist to be freely and repeatedly mined, even twisted; this becomes an invigorating, respectful activity that extends into her auxiliary investigations of the conventions of psychoanalytic theory. Learning from art that espoused the superiority of the preverbal and the unconscious, Pondick also sought out the strongest psychological theories available on such inarticulate matters, uncovering Freud's work on the pre-oedipal and its generational elaborations in the writings of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott; the latter most clearly articulates the predicament in which artists often find themselves:

... in any cultural field it is not possible to be original except on the basis of tradition. Conversely, no one in the line of cultural contributors repeats except as a deliberate quotation, and the unforgivable sin in the cultural field is plagiarism. The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union.<sup>2</sup>

Pondick's sculptures deal on many levels with the paradoxical connections between separateness and union, not only in terms of their complicated love/hate relationship with the sculptural tradition, but also in terms of the dichotomies created within the



Rona Pondick, Beds, 1988, Installation view, The Sculpture Center, center room of three. Courtesy fiction/nonfiction

pieces themselves as ambivalent parts and wholes.

Most of Pondick's works from 1986-87 use the customary materials for sculpture-wax, wood, and bronze-and they are presented quite like conventional sculpture as autonomous objects set upon bases. The imagery, however, falls outside the tradition. In an important piece titled French Knot (1986), steel wool stands in for hair, but it does not stand alone. Lumps of brown wax clot the steel wool and blur the imagery-hair and shit merge effortlessly into a hybrid form of dead matter extruded from life. Later works from these years turn more completely into nasty accumulations of what appears to be authentic fecal matter. Mine (1987) was made by tossing elongated, turdlike segments of hot wax from across the studio, creating a powerful clump of droppings that appear to be both selfish and potentially explosive, thereby doing justice to both meanings of the title. Excrement as a pure form becomes a central motif in Pondick's later beds, which present it in an even richer context,

most likely due to the fact that she has now become conscious of its specific psychological interpretations and ramifications. Freud has equated excrement with money in "Character and Anal Erotism,"3 and with the baby in "On the Sexual Theories of Children."4 Phyllis Greenacre suggests that Pondick's choice of medium should not be seen as unusual: in "The Childhood of the Artist" she tells of the gifted child who will play with mud or another feces-like substance when he or she is toilet trained;<sup>5</sup> but more importantly, in her paper "Woman As Artist," she claims that "the greatest blocking in realization of talent arises at the anal and oedipal levels. In the former it arises in connection with anal functioning which is the prototype of productivity in general."6 Not only is shit a gift, but with Pondick it also represents hard work. Another piece, Puddle, from 1987-88, is a castlead sculpture of a spill/ejaculation that fully embodies the idea of build-up and forceful release as a mandatory repetitive component of the creative process.



Rona Pondick, Velvet Bed, 1988, Wood, bronze, pillow, 26" × 36" × 118". Collection High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Courtesy fiction/nonfiction.

ondick also makes small sculptures that focus more directly upon the different potential uses of a suggestive object. Calling them "hand things," she is reluctant to exhibit them in the accustomed manner—her preferred method of showing them is to unwrap them and place them directly into the viewer's hands. In Pondick's studio they operate quite like "transitional objects"—a term popularized by Winnicott in his research on the first object used by an infant to initiate his or her separation from the mother, a required step for strong self-development. These pieces - often modeled like body parts - give Pondick the ability to share the unarticulated aspects of her work with the viewer on an intimate level and a personal scale. He or she is asked to enter into a physical relationship with each piece, to touch, caress, and fondle it. Pondick seems to be following Greenacre's statement in "Play and Creative Imagination" that "What I would emphasize . . . is not especially the intermediate quality of the object but the playful comforting rhythmic use of it which is also significant." In addition, the making of such objects seems to illustrate symbolically Pondick's own shifting perceptions of her standing in the sculptural lineage. Consider Greenacre again:

The transitional object serves as a faithful protective escort.... In its softness, pliability, and potentiality for assuming many different forms and shapes in actual fact and in the infant's changing perceptions of the outer world in general, the transitional object is the carrier of magic and lends itself to symbolic representation.8

Pondick's "hand things" model the known into suggestive shapes that spur artistic development—whether in terms of form or content—and break barriers between viewer and artwork. Unlike the fetish, they promote health.

Angel, from 1987-88, functions as a link between Pondick's earlier works and her later beds. No longer supported by a wooden base, this piece consists of five dingy white stacked pillows upon which rests an animate ganglia of white, hairy feces/worm/penis forms. The whiteness of Minimalism, the gallery space, or whatever else has been deemed pure, is unequivocally and slanderously defiled, despite the piece's cherubic title. Pondick is obviously not Minimalism's "little angel," even though the stacked nature of the piece keeps it at least within warped sight of the tradition. Its pillows also lead Pondick to the bed.

n her bed sculptures Pondick has more fully exposed her desire to thwart the minimalist tradition while maintaining some semblance of its formal rigor. Beds readily reveal their central positions as psychological battlegrounds, and Pondick has worked the image in several seductive directions. Many of the beds are disturbed by some type of fecal/phallic object. Velvet Bed (1988) takes the form of lush, black pillows resting upon a rough section of a wooden beam, which would look like a remnant from a Carl Andre sculpture if the pillows and the fecal form atop them were removed. The bed appears to be limp, spent. Lead Bed (1987-88) confronts minimalist conventions head on, turning a sheet of rolled lead, which is almost a signa-



Rona Pondick, Foot, 1990, Shoe, wax, plastic, tissue paper, 32" x 9" x 4". Collection Michael Finney, Courtesy fiction/nonfiction and Asher-Faure, Los Angeles.



Rona Pondick, Milkman, 1989, Mixed media, 181/2" x 34" x 221/2". Collection Ruth and Jake Bloom. Courtesy fiction/nonfiction.

ture image for the minimalists, into a bed sheet. A realistic yet grossly oversized excremental form nests on an actual pillow, menacing both history and the viewer. An idea from Melanie Klein is appropriate here: "In phantasy the excreta are transformed into dangerous weapons: wetting is regarded as cutting, stabbing, burning, drowning, while the faecal mass is equated with weapons and missiles." Klein later states that excreta can be equated with poisonous substances. Not only are Pondick's beds thoughtful attacks upon the sculptural tradition, but they can also be read as disruptions of the primal scene; in fact, their use of an unpleasant substance in a threatening form is in keeping with the child's image or fantasy of intercourse as a sadistic act. Pondick's beds want to have it both ways-their ambivalence moves between the oral and the anal stage. (The oral stage is more directly expressed in the later beds.) In Freud's "Three Essays on Sexuality," he tells us that in the oral stage, sex has not yet been separated from the pleasure derived from ingesting food, while in the anal stage sexual life divides itself between active and passive components. 10 Pondick's beds continually shift between such ideas, presenting their scatological dilemmas as concentrated morality plays lying prostrate on the floor.

Beds, Pondick's first site-specific installation presented at The Sculpture Center in September 1988, created an environment that metaphorically and humorously documented the ravaging effects of the passage of time. Immediately inside the gallery's door, the viewer was confronted with an attenuated White Bed consisting of three oversize pillows on a wooden base. A white, elongated form that read as feces/phallus/umbilical cord rested on the top pillow, and was pointed directly at the viewer. On the other side of a barrier wall into the next room were three beds made of piled sandbags and covered with rolled sheets of lead. The pillow on the extreme left bed cushioned three fecal forms that were blatantly presented as a gift or offering. It's even possible that they could have been interpreted as being edible—a connection between feces and food that unites the oral and the anal. Behind another barrier was the last bed, made from two columns of purplish-black pillows. On the left, the top pillow was truncated, exposing a hairy version of a fecal/ phallic form that in this context read more like a tail wedged underneath it. The gap between the pillows was just large enough to walk into, and another fecal/phallic tail was waiting inside, forced between two pillows at approximately eye level and protruding just enough to be noticed either by sight or by touch. With this bed, Pondick created a large anus for the viewer to enter. By forcing the viewer slowly and deliberately to penetrate a space that became progressively darker—beginning with the whiteness and bright light of a birth bed, moving to a stacked, repetitive three-part life bed (with direct references to



Rona Pondick, *Milk*, 1989, Mixed media, left:  $22'' \times 35'' \times 32''$ , right:  $22'' \times 33'' \times 32''$ . Courtesy flction/nonfiction.

Minimalism), and culminating in a shadowed, puckered death bed that reinterprets the anal canal—Pondick metaphorically constructed a version of the human body by using one of the more psychologically powerful symbols for its visceral existence and significance.

Pondick's next installation, titled Bed Milk Shoe and presented at fiction/nonfiction in September of 1989, was not intended to be site-specific. Therefore, unlike the Beds installation, there was to be little sense of a progression in time; instead the feeling was of a labyrinthine interlacing of continually shifting psychological and sexual connections between pieces. The room was anchored by a raft-like Double Bed (all works done in 1989), a 13-foot bed made of vinyl on which is laid a minimalist rope grid that has been subverted at its junctions by baby bottles filled with white and—in a few instances—black liquid plastic. Obviously related to the primal scene, this piece also suggests the bed as a place of nourishment (whether orally or in the water state of the womb through the ubiquitous umbilical cord) and of possible danger. When the bottles reach the area of the bed reserved for the sexual organs, they become uncomfortable, physically threatening. Milkman conflates man with milk, and plays twisted games with sex, as penis becomes breast, semen becomes milk, and shoes—which are usually the ultimate fetish object—cruelly mimic the fetish by functioning as tantalizing receptacles for other potential fetish materials. Shoes, feet, fur, velvet, and underclothing are common fetishes, all becoming substitutes for the mother's missing penis, according to Freud in his essay "Fetishism." 11 Pondick's shoe sculptures are not fetishes since they often become mere containers for the missing phallus itself, as in Milkman or Ballerina, where Pondick has modeled phalluses out of wax, plastic, or baby bottles and stuck them forcibly into the shoes. Both of these sculptures are about the desires we feel to become something we're not—whether it's a little girl's dream to be a ballerina and/or a boy, or a man's dream to be a woman and a mother.

Pump and Soles are about the ability of shoes to be both part objects and whole objects. Shoes are part objects when they suggest the penis or vagina (or, of course, the foot), but they are whole in their ability to stand in for the identity of an entire person. They have a personality and they have a sex. Pondick deliberately uses old shoes in order that they be seen as having had a history, a prior owner. Manipulating form to denote each sex, Pump's accumulation of female high-heeled shoes is rounded, seemingly pumped up with air, while Soles mixes the brazenness of steel wool with a Guston-like gob of male black leather shoes. Their genders are standardized, yet it is unclear whether or not each piece is comfortable with the same-sexness of their respective situations.

Milk is Pondick's first sculpture that directly makes reference to the breast, and with the aid of the rubber nipples the piece reads in an outrageous yet not uncommon fashion that has been articulated in Renato Almansi's work on the "face-breast equation."12 Several viewers have remarked that it seems as if the two parts of the piece are talking to each other. Each half of the sculpture is a piling up of flaccid breast-forms with old, wrinkled skins of paper towels. The formal repetition of the falling breasts (and also the baby bottles in Double Bed) is a defense mechanism against their leaving, a fear not only of the loss of the actual breast, but also, according to Melanie Klein, an anxiety that the physical mother and the "good-mother" held within the child will also disappear. Klein continues by suggesting that such feelings come about from a fear that the child has destroyed the mother by eating her. 13 Pondick's sculptures often articulate equal amounts of this fear and the newly found freedom in the brutal (even biting), yet successful break from the mother, a type of separation anxiety that by extension can also refer to the ambivalent nature of her relationship to the paternal sculptural tradition.

In May 1990, at Asher-Faure in Los Angeles, Pondick brought her impulsive sculpture to the heartland of cool and collected conceptual art, in another non-site-specific installation, entitled mamamamama. With the title, Pondick revealed her interest in addressing the infantile language of our first utterances and its effects on our later willingness or refusal to accept our grounding in the primal. Secured once again by the presence of *Double Bed*, this installation extended Pondick's manipulations of psychosexual conditions into concerns that can be seen as more "conceptual" than those in Bed Milk Shoe. mamamamama also excluded the male in any explicit fashion, thereby creating an environment in which the communication between, and ultimate separation of, mother and child was expressed by a complete visual representation of language as an activity that becomes progressively more structured and less truthful. Heel (1990), which was alone in the first room, presses language more consciously against footwear than does Pump—a Village Voice headline within its surface of newspaper collage punctured by high heels reads "With Sex You Get Eggroll"-making a convincing claim for the equally dangerous malleability of text and (the female) form. The posture of this piece pointed the viewer to the next room, directly toward Baby (1989), a nasty agglutination of

## Frequently, things that are offensive to us actually recall healthy things that we have managed to successfully repress.

shit, baby shoes, and baby bottles placed at the intersection of the two parts of the L-shaped larger room. Baby is about the natural theories of birth that children concoct. Listed by Freud, they include: "Babies come out of the breast, or are cut out of the body, or the navel opens to let them through . . . People get babies by eating some particular thing (as they do in fairy tales) and babies are born through the bowel like a discharge of faeces."14 This sculpture recaptures the refreshing freedom in, and creativity of, such stories developed in the period immediately before the onset of the repressive language-games parents often play when they lie to their children about such things.

To the left of *Baby*, in the small part of the L-shaped room, sat No (1990), an outlandish reinterpretation of Milkman. No longer about man as woman, this piece is about the stubbornness that children usually develop and adults often perpetuate when the former's natural impulses begin to be challenged from the outside as being dirty, shameful, and immoral-no eating, no talking, and no trips to the bathroom. The patent leather baby girl shoes in this piece can barely contain the huge baby bottles crammed into them, and the gargantuan yet soiled pillow offers an almost lascivious protection.

Double Bed shared the larger section of the L-shaped room with the misleadingly titled Foot (1990), a pivotal sculpture for Pondick in which she has modeled not just a foot but a female leg wearing a sickly pink shoe. It is an important piece in her oeuvre because it demonstrates that her work has very little to do with the morbid. Frequently, things that are offensive to us actually recall healthy things that we have managed to successfully repress. Pondick holds the viewer's attention by making a mandatory distinction in her work between the found objects and what one could call the "body objects." Baby bottles, shoes, pillows, and even wooden bases can be the real thing, but shit, semen, or any other potentially repulsive body part is to be translated into traditional materials: wax, lead, bronze. The leg in *Foot* therefore is made of extremely seductive layers of glistening wax and is upwardly displaced upon the wall.

Pondick's interest in psychoanalysis leads to provocative speculation upon the special problems encountered in doing a psychoanalytical reading of artwork produced by an individual deeply and openly involved in the study and use of specific psychoanalytic texts to support and understand her work and her life in general. How much of the psychoanalysis applies directly and unconsciously to the artist, and how much remains external, studied theory? There are, of course, psychological reasons for the choices in theory that Pondick makes, but I am inclined to listen to Greenacre's warning:

The relation in the artistic product between the total (collective) and the specific personal problems and experiences of the artist's life must vary greatly. The inevitable imprint of the specific and conscious personal problems may be either great or slight, but the enduring and widely serviceable creative product is generally not so explicitly restricted to the personal. 15

Pondick's sculptures are highly rationalized formal achievements that symbolize the ideas on creativity that Winnicott found fundamental to Klein's and Freud's work: Klein's belief that the fusion of erotic and destructive impulses is a sign of health, and Freud's belief that ambivalence is a part of individual maturity. Both concepts are essential to a complete understanding of Pondick's work. Winnicott's own contribution to these earlier theories—that the baby's dependence upon the environment has a significant effect upon his or her development and must be taken into consideration 16 - assists in placing Pondick's installations fully within a rich psychological and social context. Pondick's sculptures do excavate much that makes us uncomfortable, maybe even some things that make us cringe; but in the end such impulses—whether to suck or gnaw, to love, hate, or destroy, and so forth - may very well be the ones to which we should feel most beholden.

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The underknown sculptures of Salvador Dalí are particularly relevant to an understanding of Pondick's work, even though she is unfamiliar with them. Specifically, Dalí's Aphrodisiac Dinner Jacket (1936-now destroyed), which consisted of a tuxedo jacket embellished with a grid of drinking glasses to be filled with crème de menthe liqueur, played with forms and impulses quite like those of Pondick's. Another unrealized sculpture, according to Dalí, was one cause of the Surrealist breakup. In his "I defy Aragon" (Art Front 3, no. 2 [March 1937], 7), Dalí relates the following anecdote:

1971, 71, Dait relates the tollowing a necodote:
In 1932 during a seance of surrealist experiment I described a complicated project for a surrealist object to be called "thinking machine," for which several hundred small goblets would be required, filled with warm milk and hung so as to conform with the structure of a large rocking chair. Louis Aragon, who was present at the seance and who still belonged to our group, took it upon himself to declare, with the greatest seriousness and to the stupefaction of all, "I protest against Dali's object—glasses of milk are not for the making of surrealist objects, but are for the children of the unemployed." That declaration, in my opinion, was the unequivocable announcement of our imminent rupture; sounding the note of intellectual and moral abjection to which Aragon was to descend, finally plunging ignominiously into that most servile of all conformity, Stalinist bureaucracy.

I would suggest that Pondick's sculptures should be seen in similar political terms, as objects that challenge conformity by addressing the potent urges that make us truly similar.

2. D. W. Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience (1967)," In *Playing & Reality*,

London: Routledge, 1982, 99.

3. Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Erotism (1908)," In James Strachey, ed., The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (cited below as S.E.), Vol. IX, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1959, 173-4.

4. Freud, "On the Sexual Theories of Children (1908)," In S.E., Vol. IX, London, 1959, 219.

5. Phyllis Greenacre, "The Childhood of the Artist: Libidinal Phase Development and Giftedness (1957)," In Emotional Growth, Vol. 2, New York: International Universities Press, 1971, 491.

Greenacre, "Woman as Artist (1960)," In Emotional Growth, Vol. 2, 584.
 Greenacre, "Play in Relation to Creative Imagination (1959)," In Emotional Growth, Vol.

2, 304.

8. Greenacre, "The Transitional Object and the Fetish: With Special Reference to the Role of Illusion (1970)," In *Emotional Growth*, Vol. 1, 342.

9. Melanie Klein, "The Importance of Symbol-Formation in the Development of the Ego (1930)," In *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works* 1921–1945, New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1975, 220-1.

10. Freud, "Three Essays on Sexuality (Part II: Infantile Sexuality) (1905)," In S.E., Vol.

VII, London, 1961, 198. 11. Freud, "Fetishism (1927)," In S.E., Vol. XXI, London, 1961, 155.

12. Renato J. Almansi, "The Face-Breast Equation," Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association 8 (1959), 43–70.

13. Klein, "Weaning (1936)," In Love, Guilt and Reparation, 295.

15. Greenacre, "Play in Relation to Creative Imagination," 567–8.

16. Winnicott, "Creativity and its Origins (1967)," In Playing & Reality, 70-1.

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