

Beaver College Art Gallery

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Rona Pondick

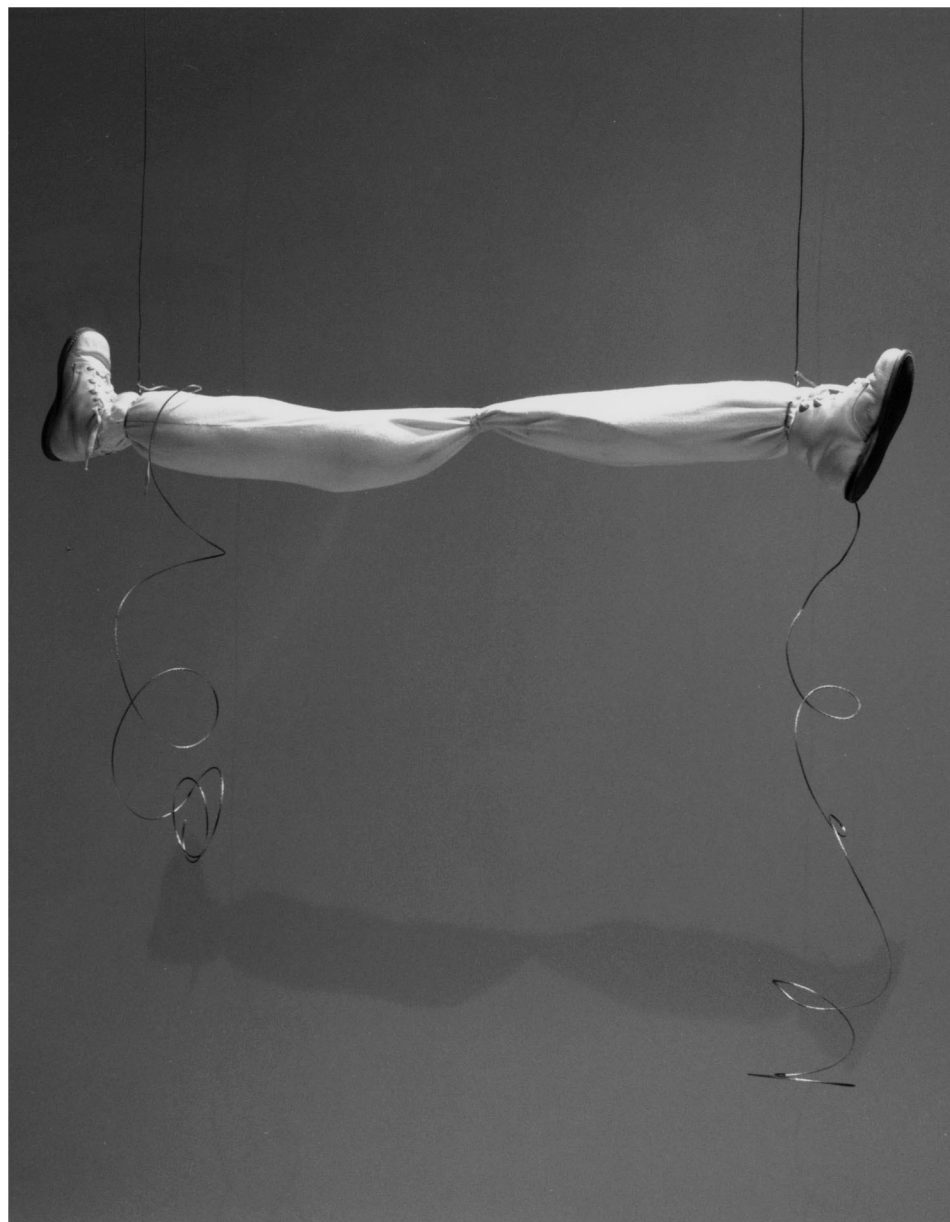
Rona Pondick

S C R A P

DARK OF HEARTNESS

Rona Pondick's *Scrap* and Other Symbolisms

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C h r i s t i a n L e i g h



To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the joy of the poem, which consists of guessing it little by little; to suggest it, that is the dream.

– Mallarmé

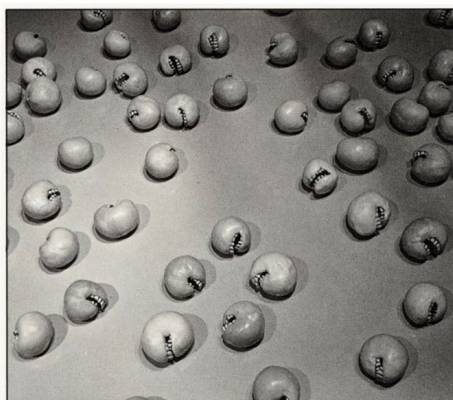
We live, communicate, operate, and create in a linguistic world, but the arts are contingent on perception: the relationship between the body's senses and the brain. Once we understand the role of perception in visual art, we can also understand that it is pre-linguistic. There is no vocabulary of picturing as there is of verbalizing. Moreover, an observer always sees more properties than can be described.

– John Coplans

Rona Pondick's peculiar installation *Scrap* takes as its leitmotiv darkness – of body, mind, and soul. It is like a ghost story told by Rilke ("I am as one who would remind you of your childhood . . .") to an imaginary pair of twins (reference: the Diane Arbus photograph Stanley Kubrick uses as his inspiration in the film *The Shining*). *Scrap* has a candor that bespeaks *Baby Swing*, installation detail.

intimacy, a complexity that intimates reticence, and an aggression that suggests fear. It is also narrative – picturesque, lyrical, sublime – like a nightmare with close-ups, arpeggios, and endnotes. *Scrap* reminds me of the deepest, most heartfelt, and intelligent passages in a Delville. It has at its center an emphatic symbolist reflex pervading each and every stanza.

Installed at the Beaver College Art Gallery, in near darkness *Scrap's* two rooms and passageway (it is Pondick's bridge rather than the architecture's) immediately tell us that we are not intended to be experiencing a reality but, rather, a spatial construct of the mind (imaging a film noir by Fritz Lang). Pondick does not deal in the myth of creative realism (as if such a thing exists); hers is never an oeuvre of essential truth. Her art is always abstract, and although the issues it explores tend toward a variety of truth operating concurrently (and often contradicting one another), Pondick's project makes no pretense at knowledge. Many important artists of the last decade – Jenny Holzer, Dennis Adams, and Louise Lawler, among them – make sanctimoniously noble attempts to see the way through what they are critiquing, all the while practicing within the parameters of an outmoded, documentary-style social realism. Pondick though, is more concerned with



Little Bathers, installation detail.

the obliteration of the existence of any parameters, as if their existence itself were the problem notated.

Pondick's iconoclasm runs deep. Looking at *Scrap*, one sees what amounts to a veritable postmodern lexicon; stylistically and conceptually, she gives us all that has come before. Her antecedents shine through. It would be difficult to miss the references to Beuys, Guston, Long, Lichtenstein, and Arman (in itself, quite a darkness hall of fame). Beneath the surface, we detect an even more divergent list running the perpetual gamut from symbolism to surrealism, nouveau realism, minimalism, conceptualism, and popism. Similarly, Pondick's use of effects – spotlights, for example – allude to a history of "theatrical" installations. Pondick's approach to installation easily conjures up Kiesler, Duchamp, and Lissitzky, or, more

recently, Warhol, Kosuth, Boltanski, and Rebecca Horn.

Yet, it is crucial to differentiate Pondick's interest in and use of these motifs from the *modus operandi* of appropriation and, even more so, from the tendency in recent artmaking and other theoretical practice pertaining to the culture industries in which tropes are used reverentially, as if to reify and/or reconsecrate in the guise of deconstruction. Pondick does neither. She uses preexisting information in her work in the same manner as Coplan's pre-linguistic. In essence, she is returning it to perception, structuring her project so that this information exists most clearly in the mind. We see the art-historical references and place them within the postmodern trajectory in our minds while Pondick uses them as if she were confessing; she gives us a thought-track to accompany our own, in the manner of Richard Rorty's brave interface between self and other.

The first chamber of *Scrap* centers on the dislocated or displaced limb. On a bare, spotlit wall, we see only *Comic Limb*, a long black wax leg (it's hard to tell exactly where it's been cut off or how) covered over in a "tattooed" collage of color images taken from Spider Man comic books. The strangely twisted foot is adorned with a light-pink satin pump. Despite the (omni-)presence of *Comic*

T R A N S F O R M A T I O N S

Organized for Beaver College Art Gallery
by Paula Marincola, Gallery Director.

Limb, Pondick gives us a claustrophobically cramped empty room. What is always clear in *Scrap* is that we are being confronted with both more and less than meets the eye (so there, Frank Stella). It's as if Mies's "less is more" has been coupled with Venturi's "less is a bore". Pondick's minimalism is maximal, and her maximalism is minimal.

For a while, we tend to see *Comic Limb* as the entire contents of this oddball initiation area; in time, though, once our eyes begin to adjust to the darkness, we take note of another shoe, this one lying on the floor and attached to a pink, lace-covered, fat polyester tube that swings around the corner like a Dali snake, hiding its other end there. This "foot" wears a man's brown shoe. Pondick places this work so that it slyly beckons us toward another chamber ("Follow the yellow brick road . . ."). In this other space, we somehow suspect the presence of a ray of white light only hinted at from this vantage point. Although the light beckons us on, neither *Comic Limb* nor this initial darkness have released us yet from their hypnotic grip (it's Lang again, but this time *Dr. Mabuse*); we are not ready to let go of the darkness, a dark we seem to have claimed, nor of this (possibly) fractured leg that we know has no business being mounted on a wall.

In many ways, it is at this juncture that Pondick's work finds its strength.

Her work is about its own underside. A Pondick object is not only what we see it to be physically, it is also about what it does to the viewer. It's as if these works are the personification of their own essence in the world. In this way, we are held at attention by what we cannot see (like looking at a Redon) – the moment of realization being our own reluctance to avert our eyes from what they see and, even more so, from what they cannot see or don't see or won't see. Pondick seems to posit within darkness something almost magical (again, as in symbolism, spiritualism lives concurrently with its own mistrust of the spiritual) as if

Pink Leg, installation detail.



looking into the dark will unravel and reveal a brilliant secret lost to the light. This embrace of darkness is at the heart of *Scrap*.

Pondick's amputations (I do not use this work literally; I consider all her work metaphoric amputation) are an anti-formalist's dreamscape. In a similar way, as in the work of Tishan Hsu, Fariba Hajamadi, Michael Zwack, and Jeanne Silverthorne, Pondick's objects provide memory, projection, and transgression all in one sharp swoop. Pondick's work exists as a hyperreal suggestion of the polarity between intuition and knowledge – that which can be seen though not explained and that which can be explained but not seen. A seminal work of perceptual humanism such as Beuys's *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) exists in exactly the same dimension. That Pondick steers clear of over-involvement attests to the subjective objectivity of her generation.

A walk toward the installation's second room comes slowly and progresses slowly, as if this walk may be a mistake, the warm comfort of the darkness left behind having just set in. "Just follow the perverse pink tube with its brown shoes" we tell ourselves. "We've already seen part of it. It can't hurt us much since we – sort of – know it." Once on the other side, there's a second brown shoe, on the other end of



Scrap, installation view, rear gallery.

the tube, and somehow, this bathes us in a certain sense of security. And it's only a little bit lighter than it was on the other side of the wall. Relief and reassurance. Still, there is nothing that has come before in *Scrap* to prepare us for what comes next – for what we will soon see in the dark.

Scattered liberally within the center of the swirling pink tube (a giant two-sided leg it becomes, suddenly) are 148 pink "heads", each one about the size of a baseball (from Venus), rendered from pink plastic, roughly round, and each one fitted with a set of rubber rotten teeth (the kind kids wear at Halloween). The 148 heads are part of a larger work of Pondick's entitled *Little Bathers* (it has 500 heads). The reference to Renoir's bubble-gum flesh aside, the work is one of the most psychosexual I have ever experienced. Pondick's sensual aliens demand the utmost attention. Quite literally, each one demands as much as any other, and reactions to them tend to be highly individual. I have a friend who would like to bite into one, and another who wonders if they are gooey and soft

to the touch or hard and ice cold. Personally, I can imagine juggling eight of them (of course, I can't juggle) or maybe even dreaming about fucking one of them. I'm also not above wondering whether or not they have tongues.

What I see in *Little Bathers*, and in all of Pondick's work, is a dark mirror. The work reflects the viewer's insecurities (perceptually) while evoking birth, sex, death, love, consumption, pain, pleasure, relief, release, empathy, belief. At moments *Little Bathers* is like a 148-part vagina; it's positively generative and maternal, yet it's also terribly frightening. It's also strangely funny, like a prop from a David Cronenberg film, or something you may have read about in one of the dream sequences in D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*. As we encounter and get to know Pondick's work, somehow we get to know ourselves better in the process. *Little Bathers* reminds us suddenly and instinctively of where we come from, what we're doing, and where we're going. It's as if we're having memories that belong to someone else, which brings us back once again to

Rilke, whose poetic experience implicates all who encounter it. Contemporarily, this symbolism is seen in Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*, in which angels can feel the pain of others and help to heal them with an invisible hug. As in Pondick's work, these angels cannot always help, nor are their intuitive powers enough to vanquish their own pain, a suffering born of the wish to be more human – in effect, an ironic wish to be more vulnerable to one's own pain.

Hanging over the pink heads is a small work, very much like the double-shoed, fat pink tube, but skinny, like a swing, and suspended in midair. Delicate and wholly (holy) white (with the exception of two soles (souls)), it appears to be a trapeze made from the bottom half of a small child, two tiny shoes pointing outward. At this moment, Pondick has opened a duct that is no stranger to tears. This swing is as beautiful and resonant as *Comic Limb* is unnerving, the pink tube unsettling, and *Little Bathers* reflective. Like one of the gold-and-white cherubs in the late baroque Ansamkirsche in Munich, it is also touching in the way that we're told art is not supposed to be anymore, yet it is also intelligent in ways it is difficult, at first, to comprehend. The baby white swing holds within its grasp the promise of total redemption. It enralls, shocks, and thrills in the way that Kafka does. What is most impressive is that such suspense and restraint can come to fruition so rapturously.

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