

From Pop

SELECTIONS FROM THE

Sonnabend Collection

to Now

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Charles Ashley Stainback

SELECTIONS FROM THE SONNABEND COLLECTION

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NO IDEAS HAVE ENTERED THIS INTRODUCTION¹

“Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.”

—Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library”²

“I am not really a dealer; I am an amateur, a word I use in the French sense: ‘one who loves.’ In this case it’s a love of art.”

—Ileana Sonnabend³

To visit a museum exhibition of the Sonnabend Collection is to experience the life of Ileana Sonnabend. Contemporary art is, and has been for almost half a century, central to her life. The studio visits, the gallery exhibitions, the enduring friendships with artists, the ongoing business, the white walls, the openings, the press, and the ever-changing cast of museum curators, collectors, aspiring artists, and gallery visitors are the substance of her memories. They are also part of each and every artwork in the collection. And while her gallery has been instrumental in launching and shaping the careers of many artists, it is Ileana Sonnabend’s collection that has been called her most impressive legacy.⁴

With the fortieth anniversary⁵ of the Sonnabend Gallery’s first exhibition in Paris just a few months away, “From Pop to Now: Selections from the Sonnabend Collection” celebrates this remarkable life’s work with eighty-one artworks by fifty-four artists. This memoir-as-art-collection is illustrated with iconic works and constitutes a veritable who’s who of the contemporary art world from the late 1950s to the present. But even as it features many stellar artworks, it is nonetheless defined by the implicit framework—focused and inherently personal—of one individual’s aesthetic. Throughout the curatorial process, a dialogue became evident—between recent art history and the distinct eye of the individual—that forced my own reexamination of the history of the avant-garde and recent artistic innovation. The already difficult challenge of making discerning aesthetic decisions was compounded by the desire to accurately convey a vision that has been at the vanguard of artistic activity. To reflect the true spirit of this important collection without letting one’s own prejudices, vision, or understanding of contemporary art interfere isn’t easy. The trick was to select the best of the best.

Pop art, Conceptualism, Minimalism, neo-geo, postmodernism, *arte povera*, video, performance, and photography are the signposts of avant-garde activity of the past four decades, and in ways both large and small, Ileana Sonnabend has provided greater visibility and appreciation for this new art.

Viewing, let alone collecting, contemporary art in the past few decades not only has challenged most museum or gallery visitors, but the viewing experience is also continually being reinvented by its authors. Since the 1960s, a variety of artistic activities—including Happenings and performance art, Conceptual art, and Earthworks—have run counter to the notion of the collectible object and, in turn, the economics of the gallery and private and institutional collections. Undaunted by this shifting landscape, Ileana Sonnabend has been drawn to those ideas and artists and the subsequent debate and discussion that has defined art from Pop to now.

It is difficult to pinpoint when Sonnabend's passion for contemporary art began. Clearly, it occurred well before she became a dealer—or “amateur”—and serious collector. Sonnabend emigrated to the United States during the turmoil of World War II with her first husband, Leo Castelli, and their five-year-old daughter Nina in 1941. She enrolled at Columbia University in 1942 to study psychology. There she met Michael Sonnabend. The Sonnabend Collection as it exists today began in earnest in the late 1950s when, with Castelli, she visited Jasper Johns's studio and immediately bought a painting, *Figure 1*. But this was not the first artwork Ileana had acquired. A Matisse watercolor (purchased on her honeymoon with Castelli) and paintings by Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Jean Dubuffet had once been part of her collection but had been sold just as that first Jasper Johns eventually would be.

After her breakup with Castelli and marriage to Michael Sonnabend in 1960, Ileana's unique dialogue with contemporary artworks and artists intensified with a move to Paris. The Sonnabends' notion of opening a gallery in Paris was meant to showcase the American artists who were little known at the time in Europe—Johns, Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, George Segal, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Morris, Lee Bontecou, and Bruce Nauman. The gallery was a sensation but also created much consternation among the cultural elite. French critic Otto Hahn referred to Ileana as the “ambassador of American art”⁶ for her seemingly endless support of “her” artists. Soon she was buying works by many of the artists shown in the gallery. But by the early 1970s, it became clear that the focus of the international art world had shifted to New York, and the couple decided it was time to return to the United States and open a gallery there. Showing many of the artists in New York with whom they had established relationships in Europe, including Gilbert & George, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Anne and Patrick Poirier, and Christian Boltanski, as well as younger American artists—Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Mel Bochner, to name a few—the Sonnabend Gallery quickly became a major force in the international art world.

The Sonnabend Collection naturally reflects a long-term commitment to artists who have been featured at the Sonnabends' galleries in Paris, Geneva,⁷ and New York. (Most but not all of the works in the exhibition are by Sonnabend artists.) The association with the so-called cutting edge of the art world continues today with a still-growing roster of new artists and additions to the Sonnabend Collection. The move of the Sonnabend Gallery to Chelsea in 2000 marks the sixth iteration of the gallery and the continuation of a tradition that to date has featured the work of more than two hundred artists.



Installation view of the exhibition "Pop Art Américain," Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris, 1963. Artists include **Lee Bontecou**, **Andy Warhol**, **Claes Oldenburg**, **James Rosenquist**, and **John Chamberlain**.

To collaborate with Ileana Sonnabend and Antonio Homem (director of the Sonnabend Gallery since 1968) on the selection of works for this exhibition was not unlike the experience of unpacking one's library. With each question, each request, every binder of transparencies, every visit to New York during the two years of planning, it became clear that it would be impossible, in one exhibition, one catalogue, and one medium-size museum, to even begin to reveal the true scope of the Sonnabend Collection. Acutely aware of how little could be shown (for instance, there are dozens of Anselm Kiefer paintings in the collection and we had space for only one), the challenge was to find a logical premise linking artists to decades and decades to the collective whole. Like any library's organizational system for shelving books for easy retrieval, a museum exhibition requires a narrative logic for the visitor to follow from object to object, gallery to gallery. The answer was to feature artworks that symbolized the artist's move off the easel, out of the studio, away from the unique handmade object to works that increasingly were mechanically reproduced, namely photographs.

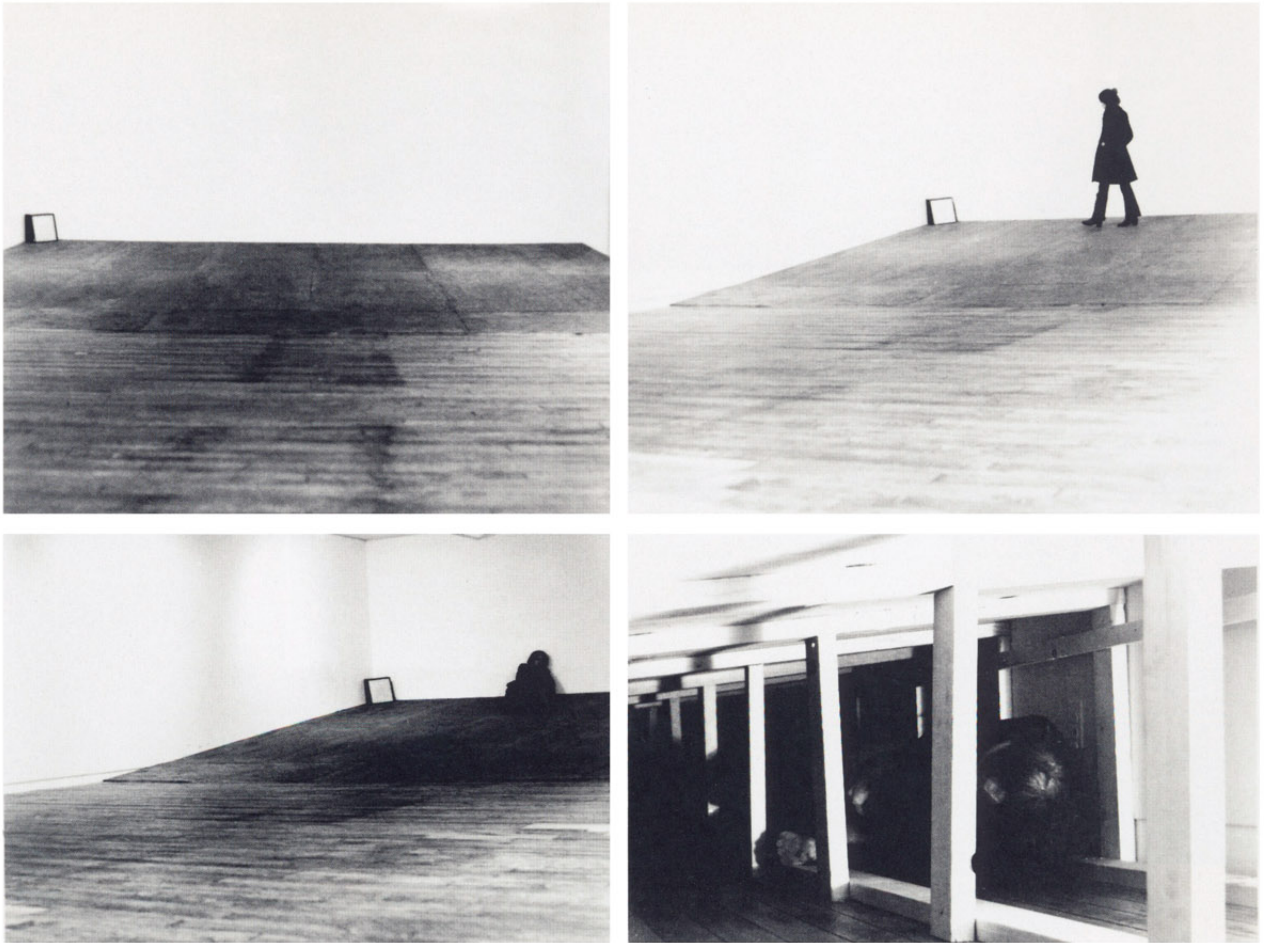
Ever since Pop artists—Warhol and Rauschenberg among others—began to appropriate photographic imagery for their paintings, the photograph has assumed a central role in the contemporary art world. Try imagining any part of daily life without photographic or video images and it is easy to understand why they have become critical in recent aesthetic practice. The notion that photographs



Installation view of **Christian Boltanski's** *Detective*, 1972–73, from the exhibition "Christian Boltanski," Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1973.

were little more than mechanical reproductions of conventional subjects began to change dramatically in the 1960s and '70s. Artists such as Ed Ruscha, Baldessari, the Bechers, Boltanski, Nauman, Bochner, and William Wegman began using cameras to make images that often confounded previous notions of appropriate subject matter—water towers, parking lots, found and rephotographed vernacular photographs, a pet dog. For these artists, the camera-made image—photography as well as video—could address broader and more complex issues than those with which traditional media, and especially traditional "photography," were engaged. The subtle visual thread of photographically based works throughout "From Pop to Now" allows maximum exposure of many of the great artists and artworks in the collection while foregrounding a medium that has been pivotal to the artistic landscape of the past few decades.

Though art historians and critics disagree on the seminal artistic achievements since Abstract Expressionism, the impact of Ileana Sonnabend and her gallery on the contemporary art world is indisputable. And the Sonnabend Collection itself has remained virtually unseen and little known. Not until "From Pop to Now" has the collection been shown in such breadth or depth in the United States.⁸



Installation views of **Vito Acconci's** *Seedbed* performance at Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1972.

Given Ileana Sonnabend's search for innovative and "outlandish"⁹ artists, it seems fitting that this major survey is being organized and shown initially at a young museum dedicated to the new and challenging.

As any art historian will tell you, time is the truest test of artistic achievement. But forty years is an eternity when one considers what has transpired in the contemporary art world. Ileana Sonnabend has been remarkably prescient in perceiving the early genius of an artist long before he or she has fully emerged in the art arena. Johns's use of iconic images and symbols; the appropriation of mundane consumer images by Lichtenstein, Warhol, and Rauschenberg; early uses of the camera by Wegman, Nauman, Boltanski, Boyd Webb, Bochner, the Bechers, and Baldessari; performance pieces like Acconci's *Seedbed*¹⁰ or Gilbert & George's "Singing Sculptures"¹¹; the Italian *arte povera* artists Mario Merz, Pier Paolo Calzolari, and Jannis Kounellis, who embraced an artmaking process of open-ended experimentation; and the work of Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, who appropriated consumer culture even more directly than the Pop artists of a generation before—all share a remarkable commonality: Ileana Sonnabend and the Sonnabend Collection. In much the same way that the artistic activity of

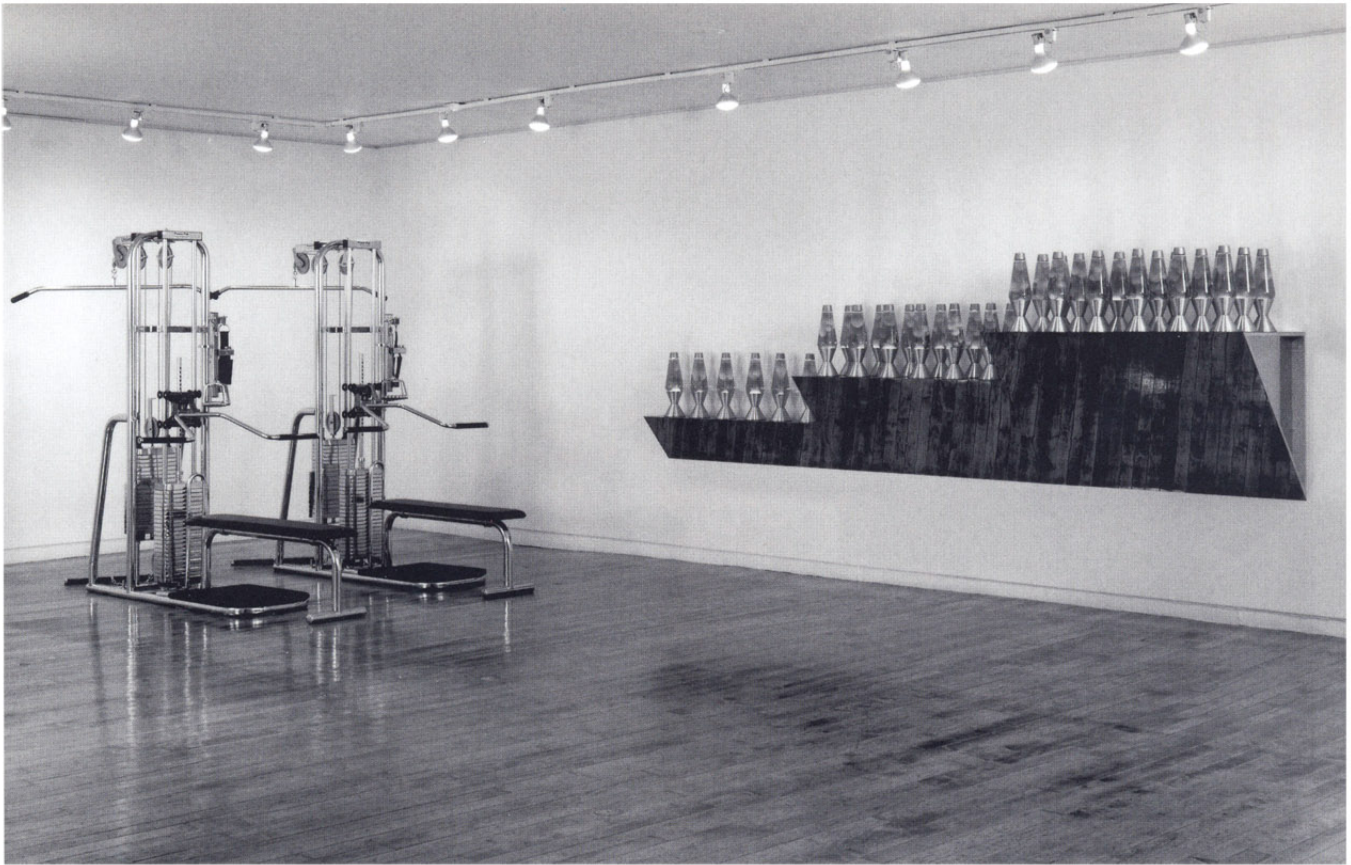


Installation view of **Gilbert & George's** *The Singing Sculpture* performance at Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1971.

Marcel Duchamp's time influenced much of the art of the 1960s and '70s, the era of Pop, Conceptualism, Minimalism, performance art, video, and the emergence of the use of the photograph—all in the 1960s—has shaped the art of today and what is yet to come.

Because of the complex—or, for the uninitiated viewer, seemingly unintelligible—notions that many contemporary artists are trying to communicate, the contemporary art collector is most likely the least understood or appreciated of art collectors. Indeed, in 1964, Arthur C. Danto, the respected American writer and intellectual, patented a common theme that still resonates today for the public's thinking about contemporary art. In a review of a Warhol exhibition at New York's Stable Gallery, Danto stated: "Warhol brought the history of art to an end with his Brillo boxes by demonstrating that no visual criterion could serve the purpose of defining art: Why were these boxes art when their originals were just boxes?"¹²

Such questions ultimately arise when we think about the audience for contemporary art. Here, a lesson from Marcel Duchamp—himself an irascible poser of the unanswerable question—is worth recalling. It was Duchamp who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, gave modern art a slap on the behind shortly after birth, teaching us that it is the viewer who completes the work of art. Once the artist/author releases a work, it enters the realm of the art world, waiting to be completed.



Installation view of **Haim Steinbach's** *Spirit 1*, 1987, from the exhibition "If You Smoke," Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1987.

However, looking at an artwork, as even Danto later acknowledged in a review of the Warhol retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1989,¹³ does not guarantee full appreciation, understanding, or acceptance of the artist's intent.

That distinction is not unlike the chasm between living through history and reading about it—between what is or isn't art. The critic, scholar, or historian, I am sorry to say, ultimately does not define what art is—those who make it, the artists, define it. Arguments about the critical function of art and society's fixation on uniqueness and innovation will continue with the critics, scholars, and those individuals who can devote much more time (and ink) than I can here. Their written histories will agree, nonetheless, that any avant-garde art challenges, criticizes, and agitates the status quo, pushing, prodding, and eventually breaking down the boundaries of what is acceptable. Not surprisingly, the history of twentieth-century art will ultimately be measured by great moments of avant-garde activity. And in that survey it is no coincidence that Ileana Sonnabend's presence is always near.

"From Pop to Now" is not a definitive survey of the past four decades of artmaking—no single exhibition could claim to be that. However, it reveals much of Ileana Sonnabend's answer to the question of art's *raison d'être* while simultaneously representing one of the most important art collections of the last half century. The love of contemporary art is a passion that Ileana Sonnabend has brought to

her collection. No matter how the works are “completed” in Duchampian terms, as the Sonnabend Collection they complete an important part of recent art history. Even today, almost four decades after Mr. Danto proclaimed “the end of art”¹⁴ with Warhol’s agitation of the status quo, viewing contemporary art can be difficult. At its best, contemporary art demands that one think, question, relinquish preconceived notions of what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, intelligent or dumb, and ultimately consider “what is the purpose of art?”

Art from Pop to now, if nothing else, is about change, redefinition, experimentation, and an ever-expanding notion of what constitutes the avant-garde. And while the avant-garde by definition fights against established notions of tradition—collector, museum, gallery, audience—it is reassuring to be reminded that this frequently strained relationship has fostered many of the past century’s most important artistic contributions. If we accept Walter Benjamin’s logic, the passion for collecting contemporary art therefore must rely on one’s ability to decipher an ever-changing chaos of change. Far from resisting, Ileana Sonnabend has embraced change. In the process, she has preserved a crucial piece of history and, more important, her memories.

1. John Baldessari’s 1967–68 painting, which reads EVERYTHING IS PURGED FROM THIS PAINTING BUT ART; NO IDEAS HAVE ENTERED THIS WORK was the inspiration for this title. I hope, however, that the reader can locate at least one idea before the end of the essay.
2. Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 60.
3. Laura de Coppet and Alan Jones, *The Art Dealers* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1984).
4. Calvin Tomkins, “An Eye for the New,” *New Yorker*, 17 January, 2000, 54–64.
5. Ileana and Michael Sonnabend opened Galerie Ileana Sonnabend in Paris on November 15, 1962, with an exhibition of Jasper Johns’s paintings.
6. Otto Hahn, quoted in “Les Galeries d’Ileana Sonnabend” by Michel Bourel, Collection Sonnabend (Bordeaux, France: CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain, 1988).
7. Galerie Sonnabend in Geneva at 14, rue Etienne Dumont was in business from 1974 to 1975. Galerie Sonnabend in Paris moved to larger quarters on the rue Mazarine in 1966 and continued until 1980.
8. Past Sonnabend Collection exhibitions in Europe and Japan: “Sonnabend Collection,” curated by Jean-Louis Froment and Marc Sanchez and organized by CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, toured from 1987 to 1991 at Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain, Bordeaux; Art Cologne; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome; Museo d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Trento, Italy; Musée Rath, Geneva; Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo; The Miyagi Museum of Art; The Fukuyama Museum of Art; The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. “*Sammlung Sonnabend: Von der Pop-art bis heute; Amerikanische und europäische Kunst seit 1954*” at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg was shown in 1996 at Bayerische Staatsgemaldesammlungen, Munich.
9. De Coppet and Jones, *The Art Dealers*.
10. A performance by Vito Acconci held in January 1972 at Sonnabend Gallery, New York. This was Acconci’s first solo show at the SoHo gallery. His goal was the production of “seed,” and the means to this goal was masturbation, continuing throughout the day, so that a maximum of “seed” was produced.
11. A performance by Gilbert & George held at the opening of the Sonnabend Gallery, 420 West Broadway, New York, on September 25, 1971. *The Singing Sculpture* consisted of Gilbert & George standing on top of a small table singing along to a recording of the Music Hall tune “Underneath the Arches.” This performance was replicated by the artists at the Sonnabend Gallery in 1991.
12. Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy*, no. 61 (1964): 571–584.
13. Danto, “Art,” *The Nation*, 3 April, 1989, 458–461.
14. Danto, “The Artworld.”

Installation view of the exhibition “From Pop to Now: Selections from the Sonnabend Collection,” The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2002.

Rona Pondick

Dog, 2000

Yellow stainless steel

28 x 16 1/2 x 32 in.

Rona Pondick's *Dog*, 2000, is one of the artist's recent sculptures that use extremely difficult technical processes to produce forms of breathtaking immediacy and surreality. Pondick uses three-dimensional digital technology to create works made of highly polished stainless steel, bronze, aluminum, and industrial rubber. The sculptures combine life casts of the artist's head and body parts with images of animals (as in *Fox*, *Marmot*, *Monkey*, and *Cougar*, to name a few). The unreal smoothness and seamlessly composite form of the pieces bear no trace of the reworkings that are essential to Pondick's uncompromising process. The outstretched arms of *Dog* are oddly out of proportion to the slightly undersize body. Even more jarring is the conjunction of these glistening limbs with the precisely rendered hands and the head, which stares unflinchingly into empty space. This wretched miscreation has been immortalized in sculptural form: *Dog*, a creature that should never have been, is now permanently, glowingly preserved for posterity.

One aspect of sculpture particularly stressed by artists of the Minimalist generation, with whom Pondick received her formal training, is its temporal nature. Traditionally, we perceive sculpture incrementally, its various dimen-

sions and details adding gradually to a bank of perceptual data. In the case of much Minimalist sculpture, however, the use of simple geometric forms allows perception to happen all at once. Either a sculpture distends in time, or it all but erases time. *Dog* does both: It presents itself with a shocking uncanniness, as if somewhere in our mind, we already knew that such a form existed. At the same time it seems to belong to a larger narrative or drama that slowly unfolds in the viewer's imagination. The sculpture looks backward, to the mythological half-man, half-beast hybrids of ancient and classical art and to the childlike visions that belong to our own fabulist infancies. Like a fragment of another world, *Dog* operates in a concentrated, metonymic manner, a part standing in for a whole that, unholy as it might be, feels strangely intimate. By recasting such atavistic visions in contemporary terms, Pondick asks us to consider the origins of culturally conceived fears and desires. Why do mythological beasts still hold a trace of their original power? Why do childhood fantasies recur in mature imaginations? In Pondick's work repressed desires and base impulses are let halfway out, with consequences as familiar as they are frightening.



Anne and Patrick Poirier

Anne and Patrick Poirier, born in Marseilles and Nantes, France, respectively, in 1942, studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris from 1963 to 1966 and married in 1968. The Poiriers began exhibiting in the early 1970s with solo shows at Galerie Sonnabend, Paris (1973, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1979); Galerie Sonnabend, Geneva (1974); Sonnabend Gallery, New York (1974, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1988, 1991, 1995); Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1978); Museum of Modern Art, New York (1978); and "Wandering into Memory," Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York (1989). Numerous group exhibitions during this time include "Project 74," Kunsthalle Cologne, Germany (1974); Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (1976, 1980, 1984); Documenta 6, Kassel, Germany (1977); and "Autoportraits Photographiques," Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1981).

More recent solo exhibitions were mounted at Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, Austria (1993); Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, Portugal (1996); Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Paris (1998); Fondation Mont Blanc, New York (1999); Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (1999); Fondation Européenne pour la Sculpture, Brussels, Belgium (2000); and Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg, Germany (2001).

Recent group exhibitions include "Contemporary Classicism," Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York (1999), and "Mitologie individuali," Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy (2002).

Anne and Patrick Poirier live and work in Trevi, Italy and Paris.

Selected Further Readings

Poirier, Anne, and Patrick Poirier. *A La Mémoire de Romulus*. Liège, France: Yellow Now Editions, 1974.

_____. *Les Paysages revolus*. New York: Sonnabend Editions, 1975.

_____. *Les Realités incompatibles*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Martin Berg Editions, 1975.

Anne et Patrick Poirier. *Domus Aurea: Fascination des Ruines* (exhibition catalogue). Paris: Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1978.

Anne et Patrick Poirier. *Voyages...et Caetera 1969–1983* (exhibition catalogue). Paris: Chapelle de la Salpetrière, 1983.

Lost Archetypes (exhibition catalogue). Bath, England: Artsite Gallery, 1986.

Poirier, Anne, and Patrick Poirier. *Wandering into Memory: Sculpture by Anne and Patrick Poirier* (exhibition catalogue). Mountainville, New York: Storm King Art Center, 1989.

_____. and André Ménard. *Anima Mundi: Lettres*. Montreal: S. Lallouz, 1991.

Anne and Patrick Poirier (exhibition catalogue). Milan, Italy: Electa, 1994.

Anne and Patrick Poirier: Fragility (exhibition catalogue). New York: Sonnabend Gallery, 1997.

Rona Pondick

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1952, Rona Pondick studied at Queens College, Flushing, New York (B.A., 1974) and at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (M.F.A., 1977).

Pondick's first site-specific installation, *Beds*, was presented at the Sculpture Center in New York (1988). Subsequent one-person exhibitions/installations include "Currents," Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (1989); "Bed Milk Shoe, Fiction/Nonfiction," New York (1989); Asher-Faure Gallery, Los Angeles (1990, 1991); "Pink and Brown," Israel Museum, Jerusalem (1992); "New Art 4," Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati (1995); "MINE," Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York (1996–97); "Tree Head Room," Sidney Janis Gallery, New York (1997); and Patricia Faure Gallery, Santa Monica (1996, 2001). Pondick recently mounted a solo exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery, New York (2002).

A selection of Pondick's numerous group exhibitions includes the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York (1991); "Power Play," Gallery of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago (1992); "Altered and Irrational," Whitney Museum, New York (1995); "Home/Salon," Institute of Contemporary Art (Clocktower Gallery), New York (1996); "Comfort Zone: Furniture by Artists," PaineWeber Art Gallery, New York (1999); and Sonnabend Gallery, New York (2001).

Rona Pondick lives and works in New York City.

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Pondick, Rona. *Rona Pondick* (exhibition catalogue). New York: Fiction/Nonfiction, 1991.

Rona Pondick, Pink and Brown (exhibition catalogue). Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1992.

Feinberg, Jean E. *A Conversation between Rona Pondick and Jean Feinberg*. Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 1995.

Kotik, Charlotta. *Mine* (exhibition catalogue). New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1996.

Deans, Jeanie. *Tree Head Room* (exhibition catalogue). New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1997.

Pondick, Rona. *12345*. Boston: Howard Yezerski Gallery, 1998.

Capasso, Nick. *Rona Pondick: New Work* (exhibition catalogue). Lincoln, Nebraska: De Cordova Museum and Sculpture Park, 2002.

Rona Pondick (exhibition catalogue). New York: Sonnabend Press, 2002.