

# WORLDART

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**Sailor Moon**  
TEEN TOONS

**Greil Marcus**  
ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES

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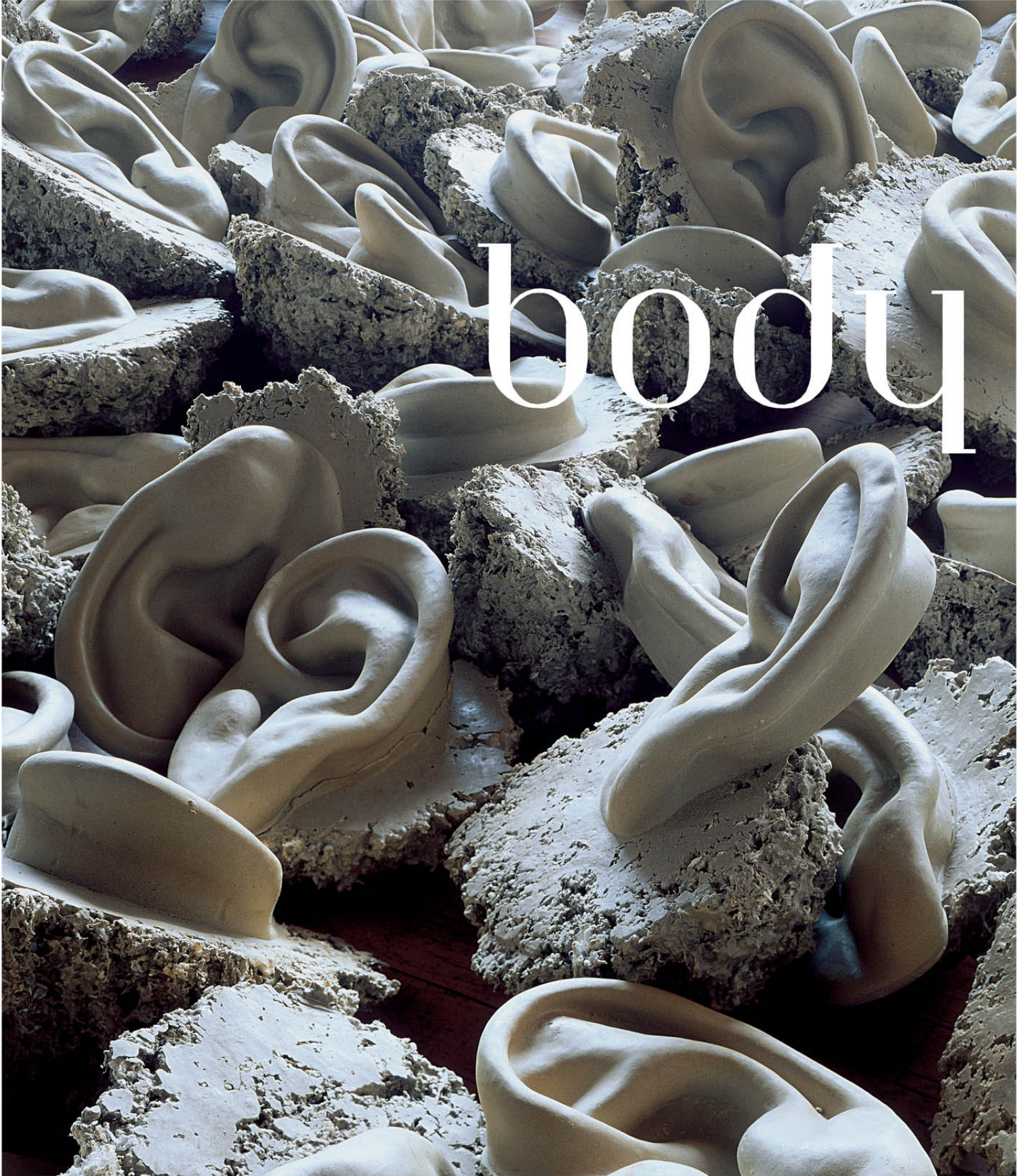
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TROY INNOCENT: SYNTHETIC SPLENDORS



body

RONA PONDICK's artistic games play

with the infantile, the desirous and the

linguistic. Dena Shottenkirk enlists

Wittgenstein to decode the rules.

# language

There is a jumble of ears on the floor. Big ears. Beautifully modeled of urethane, each is molded from a composite of Rona Pondick's own ear and a friend's. A truly perfect smooth ear, laid into a roughly textured, shapeless mound, which, although made of urethane and paper pulp, resembles the texture you'd imagine of matted hair and brain.

It is true that they are larger than life – probably 50 times larger – yet that doesn't make them less disturbing or visceral, for these ears are extremely realistic: The outer ear gradually disappears into the inner ear, allowing the orifice to be revealed as an orifice, which means denied as a revealed entity. The invisible inside is not there. We don't see it. It simply disappears. That's one of the many unsettling things about orifices.

But that is not what is essentially disturbing us about this little mountain of ears. A pile of dismembered body parts does not usually whet the appetite or soothe the soul. Cambodia comes to mind, or Rwanda, or the Nazi Holocaust, or... We have learned how such fragments end up disassociated from their owners and, correlative to our ability to identify with the misery of others, we cringe.

But is this what disturbs us? Do we only respond to Pondick's work on the same level at which we respond to the grisly photographs shown in medical textbooks or on the signboards of anti-abortion groups? Is this just "Oh, *gross!*"?

No. That emotion is only the entrance into the larger emotion of befuddlement. Real befuddlement. How does our emotional life



Left: *Ear* (detail), 1995–96, urethane, paper pulp, from *Mine*, an installation and performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music & Brooklyn Museum.

Above: *Night Light*, detail from *Mine*.

All photos courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery.

begin? What are the infant desires that propel the human race? Underneath that epi-phenomenon of rationality – that very thin epi-dural level that we wear like an easily removed coat – what forces are propelling us to go on? What are the mechanisms that give us the urges, the desires, the reasons to make our next move? These are deep disquietudes – and the signposts into Rona Pondick’s aesthetic.

A recent artwork, *Bottom Drawer* (1995), shows a chest of drawers, modern in style and cunning in deceit: “I Want” is written all over its exterior, with only the bottom drawer opened. It looked accidental enough, having the drawer left open. But there is a pillow in the drawer. People used to do that and put their new-born babies down on the pillow, giving both a cushion and protective sides, all without the clamor of the crib; I myself have done that with a baby or two of mine. But Pondick didn’t put a baby there. She put an ear.

The closer we examine “I Want,” the less we can define it. And the more worried we become. If I stop and *look* at the baby bottle, or the ear in the open drawer, I no longer know about my own emotional rules. The component parts have shown themselves to me in their naked, unrelated state, and the construct now vanishes before my eyes. What do they mean?

Wittgenstein asked a similar question in regard to language and logic, and his approach was not too different from Pondick’s, although her terrain is emotions and visual language. But the questions are quite similar: What is the basic component of the language, and how do we know to go on? What are the rules? And why is it that the closer we look at the situation, the more ephemeral and indescribable become the parts?

These are not easy questions to answer, although they are the natural ones to ask. Given any system of rules, any game, we want first to find out how to play it. This is true of language, emotions and games in general. Wittgenstein tells us that games are not understood by an

explanation of the rules as much as they are understood by playing the game. You learn it by watching others and playing it yourself, instead of by memorizing all the potential situations. In other words, it is not logically deductive but, rather, amorphously *inductive*, and very imprecise. And so it is with all human interactions, languages and emotions included. The rules are imprecise and the component parts vague. Definition is a false crutch.

“The question ‘what is a word really?’ is analogous to ‘What is a piece in chess?’” as Wittgenstein points out in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Each is the essential component of a larger enterprise

and it is impossible to give a circumscribed meaning to the roles of the components, since they shift with usage. To name something is to (provisionally) restrict the meaning of the thing. When we relate it to other things that are similarly restricted and named, we get what we call a game. The key point here is not the naming but the *relating*.

This is the point that Pondick also sees. We each get up in the morning. We decide to call someone or not to call that person; to ‘relate’ or not to ‘relate.’ How do we decide? What are the rules by which we are playing? What makes us say, in any given situation, ‘I want’? How do we go on? What tells us the next step to take if we haven’t had all the rules, past/present/future, spelled out for us? If meaning is tied up with usage, and usage is ever-developing, how do we know

how to go on? How do we know what to desire? What are the physical props, the orifices, the body parts that become the building blocks of our desires? In other words, what really are those ears doing?

In her recent installation at the Brooklyn Museum, which was conceived by Pondick and produced by the Brooklyn Academy of Music for the Next Wave Festival, Pondick shows us a narrow but very long – 28 feet long, to be exact – bed, over which is obsessively written “I Want.” To want what? Another person? To eat? To do the infant

Above: *No*, 1990. pillow, shoes, plastic, baby bottles, 55 x 42 x 56 in. Right: *Little Bathers* (detail), 1990-91, wax, plastic, rubber, 500 parts, 5 x 65 x 202 in.



made of materials laden with the pungent odors of our pre-verbal needs.



things like biting, sucking, crying; or the grown-up ones like hitting, fucking and killing? 'To want' is the foundation; it is like the word taken out of the sentence; the building block of human emotions. But once 'I Want' is taken out of the sentence, how do we attach meaning to it?

"A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense *unambiguously*," Wittgenstein says. "The actual use, compared with that suggested by the picture, seems like something muddled." We seem to have a picture in our heads that gives us a definition. Of 'game'; of 'desire': It doesn't matter what. And yet, when we *use* that word in everyday life, it never quite fits that picture. The picture is clear, but the application of it is 'muddy' in comparison.

"It is as if we could grasp the whole use of the word in a flash.' Like *what...?*" Wittgenstein makes this point earlier in his book, and it is much the same point. He's saying: You say you know what it means – oh yeah, so tell me. Pondick is saying this, too. You think you know what wanting is. But look closely. Do we really know? What are the objects of the desire? What is the desire itself? We play the game but we don't have a clue about the rules.

Pondick's art traffics in *déjà vu*: You know you've seen it before, but you just can't quite remember when. There is a subliming and a sublimating of our emotional building blocks. The connection between these two words, 'subliming' and 'sublimating,' is interesting: to sublime, as a verb, means to purify a solid by changing it into a gaseous state and then condensing it back into solid form. To sublimate is to purify by subliming; the more figurative definition is to "express (socially unacceptable impulses or biological drives) in constructive, socially acceptable forms, often unconsciously."

Pondick does both. She takes the solid facts of our social intercourse – desires, loves, wants, angers, disappointments and, by looking at them extremely closely, turns these into vaporous substances. What is an isolated ear, really? Conceptually, its meaning has vaporized before us, and yet



we remember some meaning. It has meant something before, in another time.

At the same time, she reveals how our infant urges, those ones we hoped we had sublimated, are in fact as socially unacceptable as they always were. We all still *want* in that excessive, indiscreet, selfish way that infants do.

The long bed is near the pile of ears. Behind them is a door leading to the outer room. The door is an architectural membrane between outer and inner spaces; like the inner/outer physiologi-

cal divisions of which the ear is the door. There are inner rules and outer rules. From which side are you seeing things? And which language game are you in?

Many of Pondick's earlier pieces were made of similar materials, laden with the pungent odors of our pre-verbal needs. Things like baby bottles, bared teeth, adult shoes, dirty bed pillows. In *Double Bed* (1989), Pondick shows us a large raft-like bed, in which has been constructed a blanket made up of upright and tightly connected baby bottles. In *No* (1990) a pair of Mary Janes has been planted in the middle of a large and dirtied oval pillow: adult Mary Janes to be sure, but out of each of these shoes jutted a baby bottle. The positioning of these objects is not only disconcerting. It also, and more profoundly,

makes us think of our basic vocabulary of wants. What does this wanting mean?

A favorite of mine is *Little Bathers* (1990–91), which presents itself to the viewer as a pile of objects on the floor. Pink, they are, and seemingly harmless until one looks closer. (This 'looking closer' is always the hook under the wiggly worm.) This small mound is a pile of gnashing teeth, each embedded



Top: *Double Bed*, 1989, plastic, rope, plastic pillows, baby bottles, 9 x 75 x 162 in. Left: *Hump Chair*, 1992, wax, plastic, lace, shoes, 18 x 27 x 36 in. Right: *Bottom Drawer*, 1995, wood, plastic, lace, shoes, 18 x 27 x 15 in.

in a spherical shape stripped of its related facial features, thereby making the whole mound resemble a voracious riot by a herd of fetal vagina dentate. Or there is *Untitled Shoe* (1995), where a single very female, very high-heeled, black shoe has extruding out of the fabric ankle – about at the point where the shin should be – a tightly clustered mob of five or six of those fetal vagina dentate. It's more than terrifying. I suddenly remember why it is we wear high heels.

Wittgenstein notices our nervousness when we look closely at the language game. "In order to see more clearly," he says, "we must focus on the details of what goes on; look at them *from close to*" (Wittgenstein's italics). We see a chair, and we use the word 'chair.' When we use the word 'chair' in a sentence, we "*see component parts.*" But do we always see the *same* component parts? No, not always. A chair with three legs is still a chair; a chair without a back is still a chair. What picture, then, do we have in our minds? Or do we rather have a loose assortment of usages, which overlap and share a few characteristics? These words also connect, somehow, to meanings, and these in turn somehow relate to words, and then pictures of these words, which flash on and off in our heads. Wittgenstein promises a "family resemblance." It's a comforting phrase, but we are still nervous.

It is the same nervousness that Pondick has shown us when we look closely at our primitive body parts. Dissociated from relations, they cease to function because they cease to mean. Or in fact, it's the other way around. They cease to mean because they cease to function. We experience the meaning of bodily orifices, or bottles, or teeth, or props like beds and doors through their relation to other things. We know a word in a sentence, which is in a grammar. If we look closely, and sublime it, it vaporizes. The solid has become gas.

Pondick's work is about the pre-linguistic. But it is not about the pre-linguistic defined as a stage that we outgrow: Our emotions, our language, our very existence is always pre-linguistic *if looked at closely enough*. This was Wittgenstein's point, too. We feel we know the rules, but the real mechanics of the engine eludes us.

But this is all right. We don't need an exact definition to go on. Wittgenstein was right about this, and Pondick seems to point to the same thing. In the performance/installation at The Brooklyn Museum, *Mine* (1996), the dancers (choreographed by Sara Rudner) play the parts of our individual desires, which easily run amok in this world of ego boundaries and definitional territories. Created in collaboration with her husband, the artist Robert Feintuch, this piece is about establish-

ing boundaries that define amorphous urges. Drawing a line around something and calling it 'mine' has the same complexities as drawing a line around an object and calling it 'this': Where does the meaning intersect with the use? It must be vague if the rigidity in language would lead to confusion; the rigidity in emotions to chaos. When we look closely at these things, we find it perplexing. How do I know something is really mine? How do I get you to agree to it? "We find

the component parts have shown themselves to me in their naked, unrelated state.

certain things about seeing puzzling, because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough." Wittgenstein said this. But I think Pondick could have said it, too. ©

