

kunstmuseum basel

# Sculpture on the Move

1946–2016

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1980s

# The Body as Commodity and Utopia

Markus Klammer

If, historically speaking, there were one aspect to be highlighted from the diverse sculptural practices of the nineteen-eighties, it would undoubtedly be the return of the human body. This movement takes place not only on the level of the motif as a resurgence of the more or less life-size figure, as in Charles Ray's *Male Mannequin* from 1990 (cat. 54), Martin Kippenberger's *Martin, ab in die Ecke und schäm dich* from 1989 (cat. 57), and Jeff Koons's *Kiepenkerl* (1987). The body also serves as a support for complex allegorical meanings relating the individual work of art to economic, political, and social contexts in a late-capitalist society that were negotiated thirty years ago under the now discredited term "postmodernism."<sup>1</sup>

In this regard, the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who moved to New York in 1979, can be seen as paradigmatic. Gonzalez-Torres's work was profoundly shaped by the AIDS crisis of the nineteen-eighties, which claimed thousands of victims in the gay communities across the East and West coasts, but was seen as a kind of divine retribution by conservative circles. The political administration of the booming Reagan era did not credit the epidemic with a single mention. For the rightwing traditionalists of those years, homosexuality, AIDS, left-wing activism, feminism, and an allegedly amoral art world were placed more or less in the same category, as became clear not least in the controversy surrounding the exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* in June 1989 in Washington, D.C., only a few months after Mapplethorpe's death from complications arising from AIDS.<sup>2</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*" (*USA Today*) from 1990 (cat. 58) is part of a series of works begun that year consisting of candies wrapped in paper or cellophane and poured into a heap in the corner of the exhibition space. Usually, the total weight or, more rarely, the number of candies is predetermined in this series. During the exhibition, they are intended to be taken away by the visitors and eaten. Although with their reduced forms and simple parameters, it is not difficult to make out references to Minimal Art and Conceptual Art, many of the "candy pieces" are defined as portraits. Not, of course, in the sense of a figurative representation of a person's appearance, but as a reproduction of their body weight. A work such as "*Untitled*" (*Ross*) from 1991, weighing 175 pounds, thus refers to the ideal weight of Gonzalez-Torres's partner, who in the same year had died of AIDS-related complications. This symbolic weight represents an aesthetic counterpart to the actual, massive weight loss of Gonzalez-Torres's dying partner. At the same

1 The *locus classicus* on the problem of the allegorical remains Craig Owens's "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring 1980), pp. 67–86.

On postmodernism as a cultural manifestation of late capitalism defined by advertising and consumerism, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina, 1991); see also Jameson's "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *idem.*, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London and New York, 1998), pp. 1–20.

2 Cf. Diedrich Diederichsen, *Politische Korrekturen* (Cologne, 1996), pp. 27–33.

time, Ross's decrease in weight is repeated on an allegorical level via the process of the removal of the candies by the visitors. The individual body disappears, but the bitterness of its death is turned into the sweetness of the taste of candies. Hence, the dead person lives on, not merely metaphorically in memory, but literally embodied in the form of the candies dispersed in the bodies of the museum visitors.

The dissolution of a unified, hierarchically organized body is also addressed in "*Untitled*" (*USA Today*). Here, the subject is not only individual bodies—the work having an ideal weight of 300 pounds—but the body politic of the United States. The candy wrappers adopt the colors of the American flag. The red, silver, and blue candies are not, however, arranged to compose a homogeneous design dominated by "Stars and Stripes," but are preserved in their particularity and heterogeneity. The dispersion of the unified design of the flag becomes an allegory for a free society of minorities.

In the history of twentieth-century sculpture, the overcoming of the anthropomorphic paradigm is seen as a crucial development. According to Clement Greenberg, under the influence of Cubist collage, sculpture began to emancipate itself from the "carving and modeling"<sup>3</sup> of a monolithic block of material with the goal of representing a "torso and head"<sup>4</sup> (cf. cat. 5). Sculptors such as David Smith broke up the closed monolith into an open and transparent structure made up of lines and surfaces (cf. cat. 14).<sup>5</sup> Greenberg's essays on sculpture, written in the late forties and the late fifties, are bound to the art of their time. They set out the paradigm for a modernist logic of medium specificity. Beginning in the mid-sixties, in dialogue with Minimal Art, the scope for sculptural practice was radically opened up. Rosalind Krauss describes an "expanded field" of sculpture, abandoning the closed space of the gallery to situate itself between the opposing poles of architecture and landscape.<sup>6</sup>

With the beginning of the nineteen-eighties, however, the repeatedly expanded sculptural field increasingly consolidated around the human body. Should this be seen as a nostalgic return to an obsolete mode of figurative representation, or rather as a new aesthetic and political urgency announcing itself in the guise of earlier forms? The question cannot be answered in general terms.

3 Cf. Clement Greenberg, "Sculpture in Our Time" [1958], in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London, 1993) pp. 55–61, here p. 57.

4 Cf. Clement Greenberg: "The New Sculpture" [1949] in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2: *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1946*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London, 1986), pp. 313–19, p. 316.

5 Cf. Clement Greenberg, "Sculpture in Our Time," in Greenberg 1993 (see note 3), pp. 55–61.

6 Cf. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 30–44. As exemplary works of the "expanded field," Krauss names among others Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* from 1970, Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* from 1969, and the *Video Corridors* that Bruce Nauman likewise began to produce in 1969.

Both possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and were combined in the works of the decade to produce specific constellations.

Considering the social, political, and cultural situation of the eighties, the return to the body in sculpture is only logical. In Michel Foucault's trilogy *The History of Sexuality*, first published between 1976 and 1984, the individual body is described as a battleground for biopolitics, being exposed to subtle ideological, disciplinary, and technological interventions on the part of corporations and the state.<sup>7</sup> The body should be beautiful, long-living, and healthy, but above all consumer friendly, fit for work, procreative, and compliant. In the two concluding volumes of the trilogy, taking examples from Greek and Roman antiquity, Foucault discusses strategies of resistance against the biopower of late capitalism that are rooted in practices of moderation, asceticism, and self-mastery.

That the Foucauldian ideal of "care of the self" can all too easily come under the guardianship of biopolitics, and thus turn into phantasms of self-improvement and self-construction through aerobics, cosmetic surgery, genetics, robotics, and the immersion in digital spaces, can be seen from the catalogue to the exhibition *Post Human*, which dealt with important sculptural positions of the nineteen-eighties. It was curated by Jeffrey Deitch and shown first in Lausanne in the summer of 1992. With unmitigated optimism, art and especially sculpture were granted a supporting role in the creation of new forms of corporeal existence: "In the future, artists may no longer be involved in just redefining art. In the post-human future, artists may also be involved in redefining life."<sup>8</sup> What Deitch is advertising with the catchword "post-human," however, is nothing other than a technological anthropocentrism taken to its limits.

With *Bourgeois Bust—Jeff and Ilona* (1991) from the series *Made in Heaven*, and *Bear and Policeman* (1988) from the *Banality* series, Jeff Koons was prominently represented in the exhibition. For Koons, the world of commodities embodies the realm of a new, affirmative spirituality.<sup>9</sup> His sculptures not only blend aesthetic appearance and the luster of the commodity, they also reify the human body. Alongside a billboard-sized lithograph and further large-scale paintings, *Made in Heaven* consists of a large number of sculptures showing Koons and his then wife, the porn actress Ilona Staller, in different sexual positions or in an affected embrace. Several of the sculptures are produced of colored glass, and are conceived, with a height of around forty centimeters, as oversize bibelots. There

7 Cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *The Will to Knowledge* (London et al., 1998); idem., *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure* (London et al., 1992); idem., *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *The Care of the Self* (London et al., 1990).

8 *Post Human*, ed. Jeffrey Deitch, exh. cat. FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain, Pully/Lausanne; Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli (Turin); Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens; Deichtorhallen Hamburg (Amsterdam, 1992).

9 Cf. Pamela M. Lee, "Love and Basketball," in *Jeff Koons: A Retrospective*, ed. Scott Rothkopf, exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (New Haven and London, 2014), pp. 219–24, here pp. 222–23.

are also life-size painted sculptures—some made of plastic, others of wood—and two likewise life-size marble busts. All works are placed on a pedestal, marking them out as commodities and at the same time lending them a classical air (fig. 15). Here, the private act of



love and public erotica have become indistinguishable. For Koons, the body is only desirable to the extent that it is perceived as a commodity. And conversely, late-capitalist sculpture, for which Hal Foster has coined the term “commodity sculpture,”<sup>10</sup> must be given the appeal of copulating bodies.

In an essay from 1981, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh interpreted the return of the figurative in Neo-Expressionist

painting beginning in the nineteen-sixties as a symptom of a reactionary longing for the time of historical Expressionism as an art in which figurative representation and highly individualistic facture are combined to form an auratic work. The figurative, according to Buchloh, promises relief “from the daily experience of alienation resulting from the dynamic reconstruction of postwar capitalism.”<sup>11</sup> Something analogous can be said of the commodity sculptures by Koons. The latter, however, proceeds in a considerably more cynical fashion than the Neo-Expressionists. The alienation of the commodity world is not repressed through the deceptive appearance of a long-lost aura; rather, commodity sculpture itself is invested with an aura and libidinally charged.

A key element of this enchantment is represented by the use of color, not only in the oeuvre of Koons, whose sculptures from the late eighties are fabricated from a wide range of materials—such as plastic, wood, and porcelain—although frequently colored in such a way that the difference of the supporting material largely disappears. This new polychromy affected a broad range of the sculpture of the eighties. Mike Kelley lucidly analyzes its function in the introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition he curated at the Gemeentemuseum in Arnhem in 1993, *The Uncanny*.<sup>12</sup> According to Kelley, the painted, figurative works by Koons, Ray, Paul McCarthy, and Robert Gober break with the modernist paradigm of natural color and monochromy, whose aim is to insert sculpture into a timeless,

Fig. 15  
Jeff Koons, *Made in Heaven*,  
1991, exhibition view in the  
Sonnabend Gallery

10 Cf. Hal Foster, “The Art of Cynical Reason,” in idem., *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2001), pp. 99–124, here pp. 107–16.

11 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority. Cyphers of Regression,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 39–68, here p. 62.

12 Here and in the following, cf. Mike Kelley, *The Uncanny*, exh. cat. Gemeentemuseum Arnhem (Arnhem, 1993), pp. 1–27.

almost Platonic realm. Rather, he sees them as signs of a “low modernism” extending from the Surrealism of the thirties to the post-modernism of the eighties, which feeds on industrially produced kitsch of mannequins, wax figures, stuffed toys, and superhero statuettes, and pays homage to an everyday culture of cheap makeup and hair dye. Like the sculptural trumpery, the polychrome sculpture of postmodernism operates directly on the level of desire. It lures the viewer on an emotional level through an excessive liveliness and the obscene haptic quality of the colors. Corresponding to the false “more-than-liveliness,” however, is the stiff, dead reification of both the kitsch figures and commodity sculpture. This dialectics produces a deeply ambivalent aesthetic impression, which Kelley, drawing on Freud’s concept of *Das Unheimliche*, describes as uncanny.

The flipside of commodity sculpture, in this reading, is death. Essentially, commodity sculpture depicts nothing other than the reified subject of late capitalism, whose body has itself become a commodity among commodities. As a result, the difference, characteristic of Minimal Art, between serially arranged (and industrially manufactured) objects on the one hand, and the active perceptual process of a body moving freely in space around this object on the other, collapses as well. While the objecthood of Minimal Art could still serve as a basis for a reflective experience of bodily perception, all indeterminacy and openness has vanished from commodity sculpture. Viewers are offered a frozen mirror image of themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Martin Kippenberger’s series *Martin, ab in die Ecke und schäm dich* (cat. 57), begun in 1989, extends the theme of the reification of the human figure to include the artist himself. The series comprises six life-size sculptural portraits, each made of different materials and variously dressed, though always with shirt, suspenders, and heavy leather shoes. Included in the Basel exhibition is a version with unpainted wooden hands and head. The sculpture stands on a small metal disc facing into the corner of the room with its arms crossed behind its back. The series was conceived as an ironic riposte to an article by Wolfgang Max Faust in the magazine *Wolkenkratzer* denigrating Kippenberger as the epitome of a typically German petite bourgeoisie.<sup>14</sup> Aside from the specific motivation for the work, the sculpture expresses powerlessness and despair, as if the figure of the artist had reached a historical dead end that robs him of all social and aesthetic options to act, so that the only remaining choice is serial repetition. The role of a clown oscillating between irony and cynicism, having become second nature for Kippenberger in the eighties, can be interpreted with Buchloh as the melancholic emblem of the avant-garde artist, “who has come to realize his historical

13 Cf. Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents* (Oakland, Cal., 2003), p. 133. Here, one finds the following polemical remark on the cinema of the late nineteen-seventies: “and in the frozen mirror of the screen the spectators are not looking at anything that might suggest the respectable citizens of a democracy.”

14 Cf. Wolfgang Max Faust, “Der Künstler als exemplarischer Alkoholiker,” in *Wolkenkratzer Art Journal* 3 (May/June 1989), pp. 20–21.

failure. The clown functions as a social archetype of the artist as an essentially powerless, docile, and entertaining figure performing his acts of subversion and mockery from an undialectical fixation on utopian thought.”<sup>15</sup>

Charles Ray’s naked *Male Mannequin* from 1990 (cat. 54) is also an artist’s self-portrait, produced in an edition of three. Ray added to a commercially available male mannequin a hyperrealistic replica of his own genitalia, to some extent an “assisted readymade” in the sense of Marcel Duchamp. On the basis of Buchloh’s diagnosis one could argue that the supplemented sexual organ compensates for the real powerlessness of the artist, which is manifested in the rigid figure of the shop dummy with its detachable limbs. As with Ray’s three oversize female mannequins dressed in the business fashion of fall 1991, the body is supported by a gently curving metal rod screwed to a thin round base of glass that simultaneously serves as a platform for the figure. In this support, the pedestal of traditional sculpture is only present as a distant memory. It functions, first of all, as a reflective display structure for a commodity.

The early works by Katharina Fritsch likewise reinterpret the classical pedestal as a display and presentation structure. Her tables and display stands support—in careful, more or less geometric arrangements—stylized sculptural objects that recall the intimacy of a private household: trinkets such as vases, small Madonnas, cat statuettes; but also household objects such as pots, keys, boxes, plates. Fritsch’s display structures have an ambivalent quality that, in the same period, is also characteristic of the *Shelf* installations of Haim Steinbach in New York. On the one hand, they are bearers of a petit bourgeois collecting mania and self-representation, on the other, they act as public commodity display stands, thus exposing the serial order of Minimal Art as an order of marketing and sales. *Warengestell mit Gehirnen* from 1989/1997 (cat. 59) pushes the antagonism between private and public, between individual property and mass availability, deep into the human body.

The so-called *Passstücke* the Viennese artist Franz West began producing in the mid-seventies were not shown in Kelley’s *Uncanny* exhibition. Yet, they embody a particular type of the uncanny in an exemplary way. The *Passstücke* are misshapen objects roughly assembled from wood, plaster, wire, and papier-mâché, representing negative forms of parts of the human body (cat. 61–63). Their white paint evokes associations with hospitals and orthopedic aids. In a sense, they are portrayals of the human body, albeit distorted, fragmented, and *ex negativo*. West repeatedly described them as the sculptural equivalent of neuroses:<sup>16</sup> on the one hand,

<sup>15</sup> Buchloh 1981 (see note 11), p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Eva Badura-Triska, “Objekte zur Partizipation: Michelangelo Pistoletto und Franz West,” in *Musée à vendre pour cause de faillite: Werke und Dokumente aus der Herbert Foundation und mumok im Dialog*, ed. Eva Badura-Triska, Doris Krystof, and Gregor Stemmerich, exh. cat. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna (Cologne, 2014), pp. 227–47, here pp. 238–40.

the *Passstücke* objectify neuroses, lend them a tangible shape; on the other, they are intended to be used, to be tried out by the viewers, to be held by their bodies. This produces a twofold effect: the *Passstücke* force their users to adopt curious postures reminiscent of hysterical or obsessive-compulsive symptoms; at the same time, however, they encourage them to make a playful use of their limbs, transcending established body schemas and socially sanctioned poses. The *Passstücke* clearly stand in the tradition of Viennese Actionism. They exhibit the anarchic traits of partial objects in the sense of Jacques Lacan; they cannot be combined to build an organic whole. They do not supplement or complete the bodies of their users, but render them particular in a playful way, lending them a grotesque and humorous life of their own. Thus, the *Passstücke* can be understood as a direct attack on the reifying character of commodity sculpture, which fetishizes the totality of the “normal,” “complete,” and “healthy” body as an aesthetic surplus.

As a counterpart to commodity sculpture, Foster introduced the term “abjection,” borrowed from Julia Kristeva.<sup>17</sup> What is abject—on a bodily as well as on a social level—does not conform to an established order. It does not assume final, objective form.

It incarnates the useless, the particular, the superfluous, the residual. West’s *Passstücke* are as abject as Gonzalez-Torres’s “candy pieces” and the prostheses, limbs, and body fluids in Cindy Sherman’s photographic *Disasters* series (1986–89). For Foster the abject is closely linked to Robert Gober’s oeuvre, which in the eighties, just as the work of Gonzalez-Torres, was assigned to the trauma of the AIDS crisis. Gober’s sculptures, recalling dysfunctional sinks with bare holes instead of taps and drains, can be read as funerary monuments that are metonymically linked to the absent body of the deceased. The connotations of cleanliness and hygiene in these works represent a direct reversal of the homophobic discourse that stigmatized the illness as a consequence of “impurity” in both a metaphorical and literal sense.



The *Sinks* (fig. 16) were complemented by a group of works with Surrealist echoes, comprising, among other things, hyperrealistic human limbs projecting from walls, and brutally disfigured male and female or half-male, half-female torsos.

Besides Katharina Fritsch and Rosemarie Trockel, Isa Genzken is the third important German-speaking female artist, who in the nineteen-eighties made her way in the still male-dominated field of sculpture.<sup>18</sup> In 1985 Genzken began with a series of works consisting of raw concrete architectural models, which she produced

Fig. 16  
Robert Gober, *Untitled*,  
1984, plaster, wood, wire  
lath, aluminum, watercolor,  
semi-gloss enamel paint,  
71 × 83 × 57 cm, private  
collection

17 Cf. Hal Foster, “The Return of the Real,” in Foster 2001 (see note 10), pp. 127–68.

18 Buchloh even speaks, with reference to the sculpture of the seventies, of “the male-dominated and most sexist domain of visual production.” Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Isa Genzken: The Fragment as Model,” in Lisa Lee, ed., *Isa Genzken (October Files, vol. 17)* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2015), pp. 13–31, here p. 26.



Fig. 17  
Peter Fischli / David Weiss,  
*Plötzlich diese Übersicht*,  
1981, exhibition view in the  
Kunstmuseum Basel |  
Gegenwart

using molds of wooden boards. They look like bits of walls or fragments of larger architectural units—forever lost and impossible to reconstruct. These ruinlike models rest on delicate steel frames, as if the concrete and its reinforcement had split into two different sculptural registers (cat. 64). Comparable to Gober’s sink sculptures, the theme of the body is immediately present in Genzken’s architectural sculptures, even if human figures are absent. The artist creates inaccessible, dystopian spaces in which the humanist utopias of the interwar period—associated with the material concrete for architects such as Le Corbusier—have turned into “technological anonymity.”<sup>19</sup>

A shared public space has largely disappeared from the radically changing late-capitalist cities of the nineteen-eighties. Frederic Jameson diagnoses an alarming alienation between the individual body and built space:<sup>20</sup> “My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution.”<sup>21</sup> According to Jameson, the new postmodern “hyperspace” is primarily designed for representation through mass media. It is not conceived as an inhabitable place, but as a fragmented ensemble of reflective glass façades, of spectacular views and images. The complexity of the new urban space, which mirrors the complexity of global flows of commodities, data, people, and capital, surpasses the cognitive abilities of single individuals, and leaves them disoriented.

The pessimism of Jameson and Genzken is countered by the optimism of one of the most remarkable sculptural works of the decade: a group of sculptures begun in 1981 by the Swiss artists

19 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 28.

20 Cf. Jameson 1998 (see note 1), p. 16.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss, which has subsequently grown to around 350 elements, with the title *Plötzlich diese Übersicht* (fig. 17). Its individual parts, which as a rule are no more than twenty centimeters high, are formed by hand—some seemingly clumsily crafted, others with great technical mastery—and produced from unfired clay. The works consist of small scenes with human figures as well as animals, mostly on a base that is also made of clay. All scenes have titles that bear the character of sayings or anecdotes, and are occasionally inscribed into the base: “Theory + Praxis,” “Funny + Stupid,” “Construction + Deconstruction,”<sup>22</sup> and so forth. The sculptural group establishes a colorful, idiosyncratic cosmos comprising large and small historical events, scholarly allusions, grotesque everyday occurrences, comic-book jokes, episodes from pop culture, film scenes, worldly wisdom, and silly proverbs: “Two Romans raise their glasses to year one,” “Mr. and Mrs. Einstein shortly after the conception of their brilliant son Albert,” “Spock is rather sad that he isn’t able to have any feelings,” “Jacques Lacan at the age of two recognizes his mirror image for the first time.”<sup>23</sup> This creates a small, varied world full of surprises. Yet, despite its heterogeneity, it shows pervasive structural traits: the proverbial, which reduces confusingly complex relations to a witty slogan; the medium of clay, both cheap and dignified at the same time, which many viewers will be familiar with from their childhood; the handmade, which activates the viewers’ own experiences of modeling and renders the past and the present, the near and the far literally graspable; finally, the Biedermeier-style miniaturization, which reduces everything to the handy scale of toys. *Plötzlich diese Übersicht* (Suddenly this Overview)—the title has the quality of a speech act in the sense of John Langshaw Austin: the work does what its name says. In the mode of aesthetic appearance it offers the cognitive and bodily orientation whose loss Jameson laments. The sublime of globalization is countered with ingenious and quirky humor. The body can feel at home in the world again—albeit at a certain price: the anecdotalization of history and the expulsion of the political.

22 “Theorie + Praxis,” “Lustig + Blöd,” “Konstruktion + Dekonstruktion.”

23 “Zwei Römer stossen auf das Jahr Null an,” “Herr und Frau Einstein kurz nach der Zeugung ihres genialen Sohnes Albert,” “Spock ist etwas traurig, dass er keine Gefühle haben kann,” “Jacques Lacan erkennt im Alter von zwei Jahren zum ersten Mal sein Bild im Spiegel.”