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Eros Presumptive

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LUCY R. LIPPARD

## Eros Presumptive

IDEALLY, EROTICISM IN THE VISUAL ARTS is a curious combination of specific and generalized sensation. Universally understood rhythms or symbols become meaningful only to the individual viewer. In this sense, the erotic is always particular, but its very particularities alter depending upon who views them, when, and how. Recognition of obvious erotic subject matter, or any subject matter at all, can be beside the point. The broader the framework within which the erogenous forms or surfaces occur, the greater its appeal to a greater number of people. The possibility of abstract eroticism may seem far-fetched, but with few exceptions, the best erotica being made today is abstract to a greater or lesser degree, concentrating on a purity of sensation which in turn engenders a stronger response. It can be argued that abstraction is by definition an intellectualized perception and hence removed from the immediacy of the sensual, and there will be connoisseurs who will cry pedanticism! and castration! at the very mention of a totally abstract eroticism. Yet it would seem that an audience visually sophisticated enough to appreciate and at times prefer non-objective works of arts as concrete objects in themselves, rather than associative look-alikes, will also prefer the heightened sensation that can be achieved by an abstractly sensuous object.

The following remarks are general, but they were inspired in part by two recent and entirely unsatisfying (on every level) art exhibitions purporting to expose contemporary erotica. The first opened the fall season at the Sidney Janis Gallery, and consisted largely of pop and quasi pop art; the second, which took place in December at the Nycata Gallery, eliminated with its title ("Hetero Is") the homosexual segment of the Janis show, but was esthetically speaking still more indiscriminate. Also last fall, the Fischbach Gallery held a group sculpture show entitled "Eccentric Abstraction" in which sensuous and broadly erotic qualities were far more conspicuous than in the unprurient peep show up the street at Janis, which received an exaggerated amount of journalistic attention. Many observers noted with lip-licking anticipation that this was going to be the "Erotic Season", like the Pop, Op, Primary Structure Seasons past. For at least two years rumors have been rife of wickedness stored up in the studios waiting for the Trend to break. It never has, and won't, for the simple reason that subject matter without style does not make a trend. And most of the erotic art that has appeared so far is bad art, inept art, trite art, even dull art—third rate Pop and warmed over neo-Surrealism for the most part. Both the Janis and the Nycata organizers showed a distinct concern for titillation, but it remained

unfulfilled because of lack of either courage, taste or material—perhaps all three. The former was attended, incidentally, by a surprising, and amusing, number of clearly non-art visitors—well-dressed men whose occasional snickers belied their apparent sophistication, but who were obviously disappointed, like the reviewer who observed that it was more hard-edge than hard-on, or more put-on than take-off.

Obviously the individual nature of the erotic response precludes any conclusions on the subject, but in this day of obscenity trials and 42nd Street stag movies, the contradictory effects of the erotic arts are worth investigating. For instance, why have so few art shows been raided, while books and films are constantly banned? Perhaps because one picture can *not* replace a thousand words? Sexual stimulation, response, and activity are sequential. A book, proceeding in time, is more likely to provoke the rhythms of this sequence than a single painting or sculpture, viewing of which is more vulnerable to outside distractions. A book even has the additional advantage over film (the most potentially potent erotic art form) in that it permits the imaginative reader more scope for personal fantasy, substitution of faces and settings drawn from the reader's own experience or subconscious, while the picture is a finished and self-contained object complete in itself; one detail might destroy the attraction for any single viewer. On the other hand, pornography or a genuine erotic art intended primarily to arouse, is perhaps best served by painting, or rather by illustration, since it is more "instructive," conducive to imitation, like the pillow books. One of the problems of current figurative erotica is the fact that it so rarely transcends illustration, and when it does, it tends to lose its sensuous appeal in the process. Illustration, and to some extent any figuration, is easily exhausted in evocative terms. The abstract artist has an advantage in that he can focus and expand, in several simultaneous directions, the sensuous element that may be submerged in anecdote or decoration within a representational context.

I wrote recently that because of its abstraction there was no such thing as pornographic or truly erotic music. But I may be mistaken. Music sets a mood in the same manner as a picture of a scene, or a scene described in a book. The least tangible of the arts, it nevertheless has as much hold on the emotions, and therefore the senses, as any other, and it is, of course, the rhythmic and sequential art par excellence. Plato worried about "lascivious music," equating it with "vulgar and lawless innovation," and spoke of music freeing men from fear: "the absence of fear begets shamelessness" (*Laws* II, 700-701). There is today a dominant group of abstract painters and sculptors equally opposed to the sensuous, the Dionysian, or for that matter any reference to life, biology, anthropomorphism in art. Stylistically, the artists working in abstraction with sensuous and erotic overtones, some of whom were in the Fischbach show, are allied to the "neo-platonic" structurists. But by refusing to rule out all instinctive

and sensuous effects, they take a position sympathetic but basically opposed to the structuralists' conceptual rigor and literalism. Many makers of sensuous abstraction are wholly uninterested in eroticism per se, but their work includes general allusive factors that recall aspects of non-literary Surrealism and, indirectly, of sexual activity. When Keith Sonnier made two identical triangular forms, one of white cotton duck, one of white painted wood, and connected them by an accordion-like tube, he presented geometric and organic form without departing from geometry. The soft shape inflates and deflates very slowly, and while the implication is forcibly understated, the process of distention and release are easily associated with the erotic act.

Jean Linder's six and a half foot high booth of soft white and clear vinyl, shown this winter at the Whitney Annual, is painted with rhythmic patterns overtly sexual in origin. It takes little imagination or knowledge to translate the labyrinthine images on the sloping wall and floor; they have been common since neolithic times. Nevertheless, the labyrinth is not central to the sculpture's attraction. The booth is an abstract environment that produces unmistakably familiar sensations attachable to, though not necessarily interpretable as erotic. Its combination of open and closed space provides a concrete analogy, full scale, of sensuous experience. Because of its physical presence, sculpture is a more suitable medium for erotica than painting. The Surrealists, with their objects of affection and disaffection, were among the first to apply Freudian object identification to works of art, though they were anticipated to some extent by Ruskin, who noted that "sculpture is essentially the production of a bossiness or pleasant roundness". Younger artists today, however, no longer depend on symbols, dream images, and the "reconciliation of distant realities"; they minimize the allusive factor in an attempt to fuse formal and evocative elements. Ideally, form and content are an obsolete dualism. Union of the two is particularly important to erotic art, and in this regard McLuhan's "medium is the message (massage)" can be swallowed whole. Materials, or medium, become more important when pure sensation is stressed over interpretive symbolism or the realistic portrayal of recognizable objects. Don Potts, at Fischbach, has employed fur and leather—traditionally evocative materials—in such a formally valid manner that the luxury surfaces lose their literary connotations and are fused with the understated ebb and flow of the sculptures themselves. By eliminating reality as an intermediary, sensuous immediacy is intensified.

The most effective erotica of the first half of the 20th century already depended upon mood, supported by strong esthetic/formal devices, and upon generalized association rather than realistic rendition. Balthus and Max Ernst, for example, rarely found it necessary to be anatomically graphic in their erotic fantasies of the 1930's. The *ambiance* of the former's pantomimes of adolescent sexuality and the

latter's exotic collage novels are more erotically charged than the endless and graphic procession of lurid neo-surrealist collages and paintings by which current erotic art shows are sustained. By the 1950's, a new attitude emerged which took the blatant representation of supposedly erotic subject matter to extremes of the absurd. Mere representation of genitalia, breasts, thighs, sado-masochistic paraphernalia, new positions, have little erotic or even pornographic force in an era of topless nightclubs and girlie advertising. In 1951, Marcel Duchamp, who had already exhibited an ordinary urinal in 1917, made a totally realistic (but unfamiliar and consequently abstract) cast of the imprint of a vulva in bronze (*Feuille de vigne femelle*) and some ten years later, Robert Morris imprinted penis and vulva in lead reliefs, as well as making a box relief which opens a door to reveal a photograph of the artist—expressionless, stark and frontally naked. Comparison of these works and Giacometti's *Disagreeable Object* of 1931 clarifies the change. *Object* is Surrealist, consciously subconsciously inspired, bristling, literally, with erotic violence and hostility. There is nothing erotic about Morris' objects, nor was there about a still more radical gesture he made in a dance piece where he and Yvonne Rainer, both nude, and in close but dispassionate embrace, moved mechanically across the stage, neutralizing nudity into a condition like any other condition, embrace into an act like any other act. By such isolation and de-mythologizing of conventional ideas about erotic subject matter, Duchamp, Morris, and others questioned the effect of such subjects. Any residue of sexual stimulus remaining is a strictly cerebral, rather than an emotional or sensuous response.

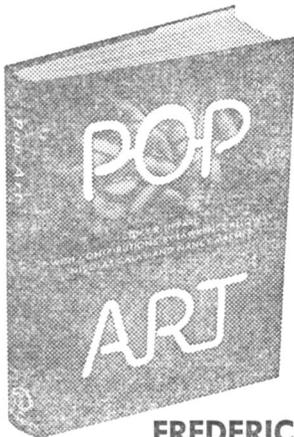
The abstracting Surrealists (Miró, Masson, Ernst, even Tanguy), and the Abstract Expressionists after them, utilized biomorphic forms for their sexual inferences. If there is nothing definitely erotic in such twining, embracing, swelling and relaxing shapes, there is, nevertheless, a sensuous character inseparable from the broadly understood erotic experience. Visceral shapes do induce a physical identification in most viewers. "Body ego," and narcissism, are implicit in the erotic. Isolation of the caressability, the sensuous attraction (or repulsion) of a form from its particular biological function or anatomical placement frees that form from limited meaning. A bag-like or spherical shape can be read as uterus, breast, testicle, or simple non-allusive form responded to on a purely sensorial level. For a Freudian, of course, such correspondences are endless and omnipresent. As Norman Brown (whose approach to the subject must be taken with a pillar of salt) has suggested: "a penis in every convex object, and a vagina in every concave one" (*Love's Body*, p. 250). From an esthetic point of view, abstraction is capable of broader formal power, since the shapes are not bound to represent any particular thing or coincide in scale with other forms. The experience provoked may relate to, but is not dependent upon the realistic or symbolic origins of the form. This is

not to say that figurative art cannot be as formally and erotically successful as the abstract, but simply that such distillation is today far more rare in figuration, where erotic subject matter rather than erotic effect tends to dominate the attention.

One of the purest erotic artists working today never deals in abstraction. Claes Oldenburg, though he is represented by Janis, was not included in that exhibition, because, I assume, his utilitarian inanimate objects are not literally sexual. They are, in fact, the contrary of the deadpan anti-eroticism of Morris' reliefs, or Warhol's banana. His capacity for fantasy and the purity of his sensuous approach endow rough cloth or vinyl orange squeezers, Dormeyer mixers, baseball bats or bathtubs with rich and inescapable organic and sexual implications. As eroticism, Oldenburg's works are abstract; the stimuli arise from pure sensation rather than direct association with the objects depicted. His soft sculptures—flexible, kinesthetic, passive, but potentially arousable, potentially dynamic—have a few minor precedents in Surrealist objects from the thirties, but their scale, and wholeness, is uncontestedly contemporary in spirit. Oldenburg asks for his objects "no standards, no values. I wish to be like Nature—creative but unphilosophic, mindless, machine-like . . . setting an example of how to use the senses."

Mindlessness, and systematization, are characteristic of the art of the mid 60's. Despite its detachment, an aggressive vacuity can es-

An authoritative  
introduction to  
a widely debated  
art movement



## POP ART

By LUCY R. LIPPARD

with contributions by

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY, NICOLAS CALAS  
and NANCY MARMER

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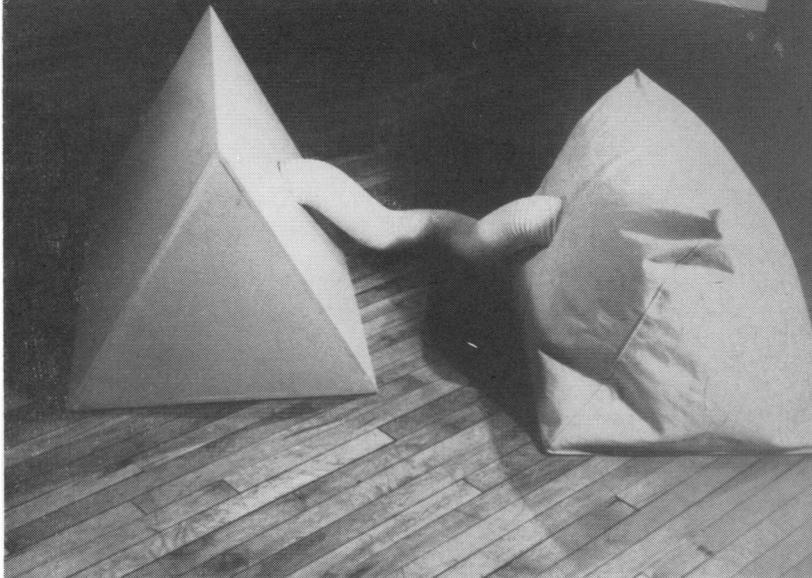
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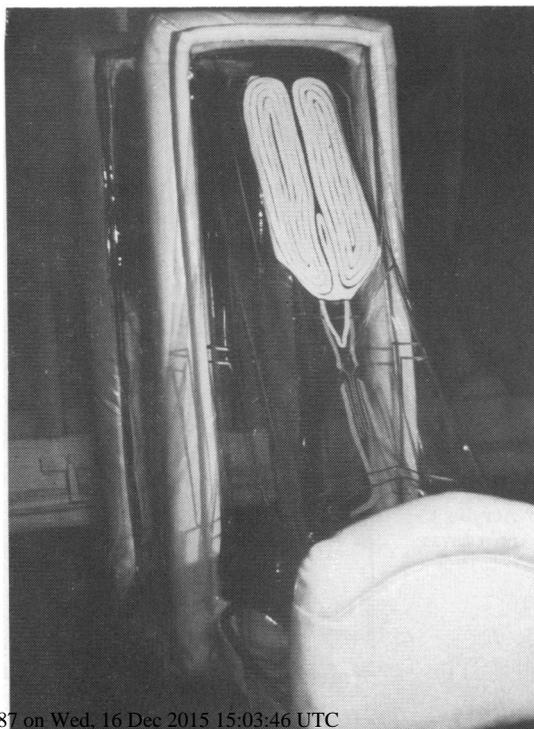
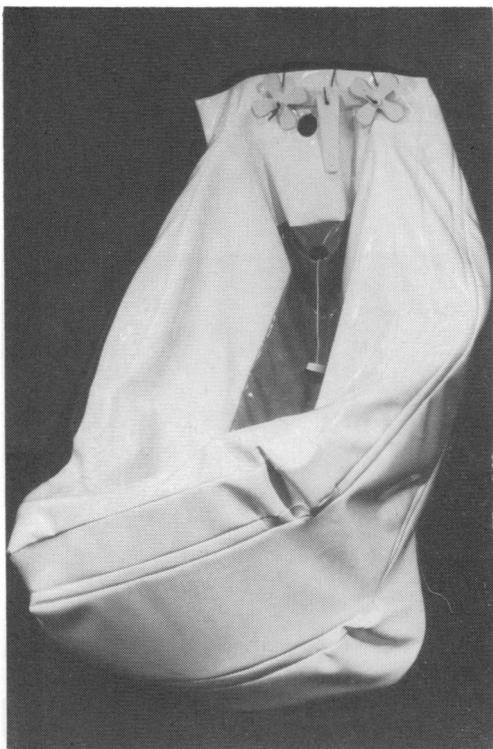
establish a tremendous intimacy with the patient viewer. Sex is, after all, the fundamental mystical experience, and the cool tone—deceptively near neutral—of current eroticism is also that of the mainstreams of traditional erotic art. The great precedent is ancient Hindu temple sculpture, the yab/yum of Tantric yoga in which opposites are not conceived as active and passive male and female, but as an incorporation of the two: dynamic male and welcoming static female as well as passive male activated by the dynamic female. On the temple facades, obsessive but precisely constructed pattern is fused with an ineffable sense of volume, physicality, substance. Everything seems in slow motion, the figures freed from an everyday into a timeless reality. While there is no question of direct influence or even interest, analogies can be made with contemporary attitudes, as well as with the purely ornamental arts of the near and far east. Repetition, inactivity, simultaneous detachment and involvement, understatement and self-containment are qualities shared by these arts. Emotive or expressionist energy is foreign to the makers of sensuous abstraction. Artists like Sonnier, or Gary Kuehn with his inactive contrast of a box-like structure and a “melted” fiberglass puddle forming a separate but related section of the same piece, confront opposing aspects of the same form or surface and systematize the resulting concept of change. Facts before and after action are presented unemphatically. As in the classic Indian yoni and lingam sculptures, momentary excitement is omitted in favor of a double-edged experience; opposites are witnesses to the ultimate union or the neutralization of their own opposing characteristics. Hannah Wilke’s androgynous terra cotta at the Nycata show, though conceptually less advanced than other works mentioned here, might also serve to illustrate this principle.

The danger is that the decrescendo and crystallization of baroque activity, total union or wholeness applied to the accepted dynamism of sex, can simply drain it of all empathic interest. Yet the rhythms of erotic experience can be slowed to a near standstill and convey all the more effectively a languorous sensuality. In contrast to the expressionist viewpoint—the spontaneous imprisonment of the moment of ecstasy in which paint, form and color are sent spinning in Wagnerian approximation of orgasm—the cool approach depends on pervasive mood, the electric stasis of sexual attraction, the roots rather than the results of desire. The cool sensibility that approves understatement, detachment, the anti-climactic in art, tends to approach the erotic non-romantically, non-subjectively, often even non-metaphorically. Such an approach may be the consequence of something as radical as a change in morality and sexual ethics brought about by the generation now in its twenties and thirties, but sociology aside, it is well served esthetically by an anti-dynamic or at least post-dynamic sensuousness characteristic of provocation, fore or after play, rather than of climax. A controlled voluptuousness, as concerned with the ebb as with the flow of energy, is manifested formally by the predominance of a long

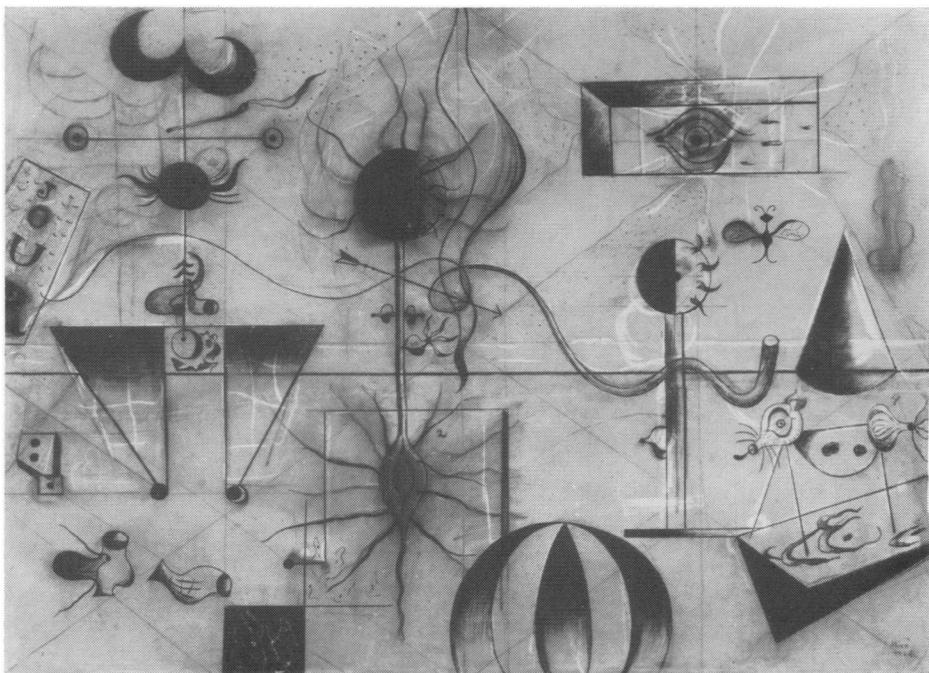
Keith Sonnier  
UNTITLED  
1966  
42" high  
Mixed media



Claes Oldenburg  
SOFT TUB  
1966  
80 × 30 × 30"  
Vinyl, plexiglas and kapok  
*(courtesy of Sidney Janis Gallery)*



Jean Linder  
BOOTH  
1966  
6'5" × 5' × 34"  
Vinyl fabrics and clear vinyl painted



**Joan Miró**  
**THE FAMILY**

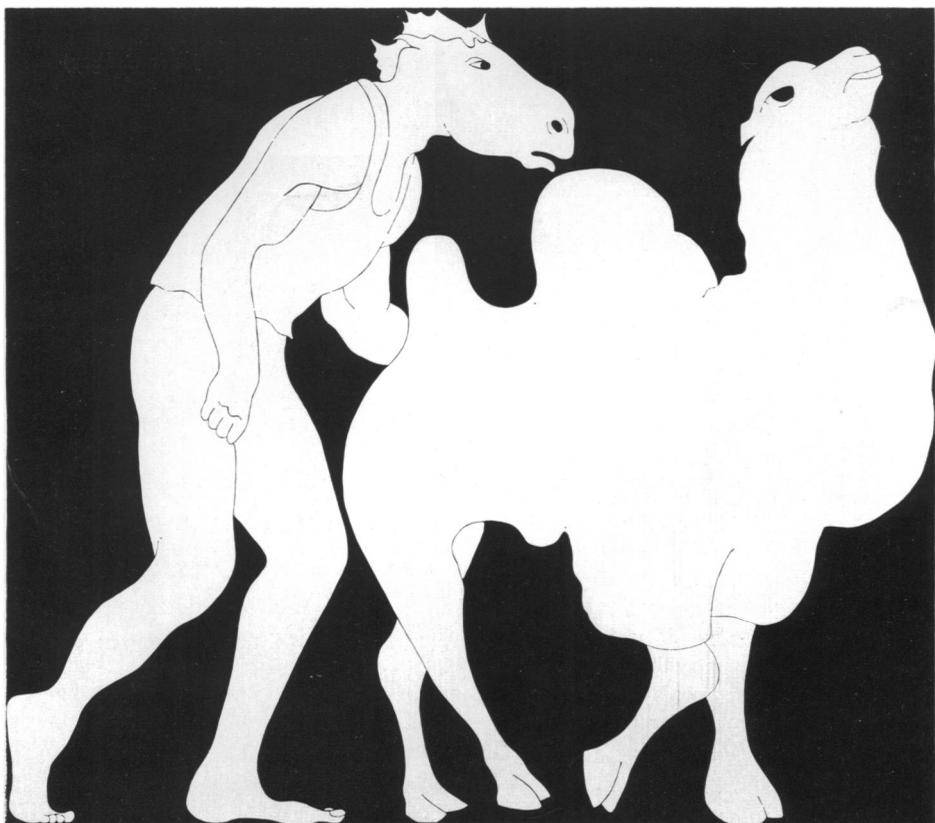
1924

29½ × 41"

Chalk on brown paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jan Mitchell

(courtesy of *The Museum of Modern Art*)

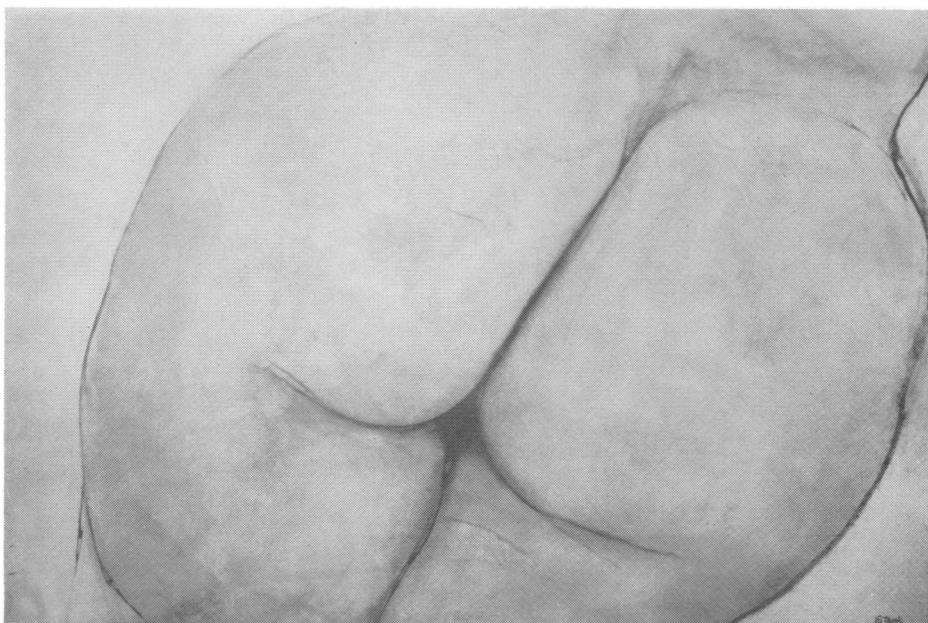


**John Wesley**  
**CAMEL**

1966

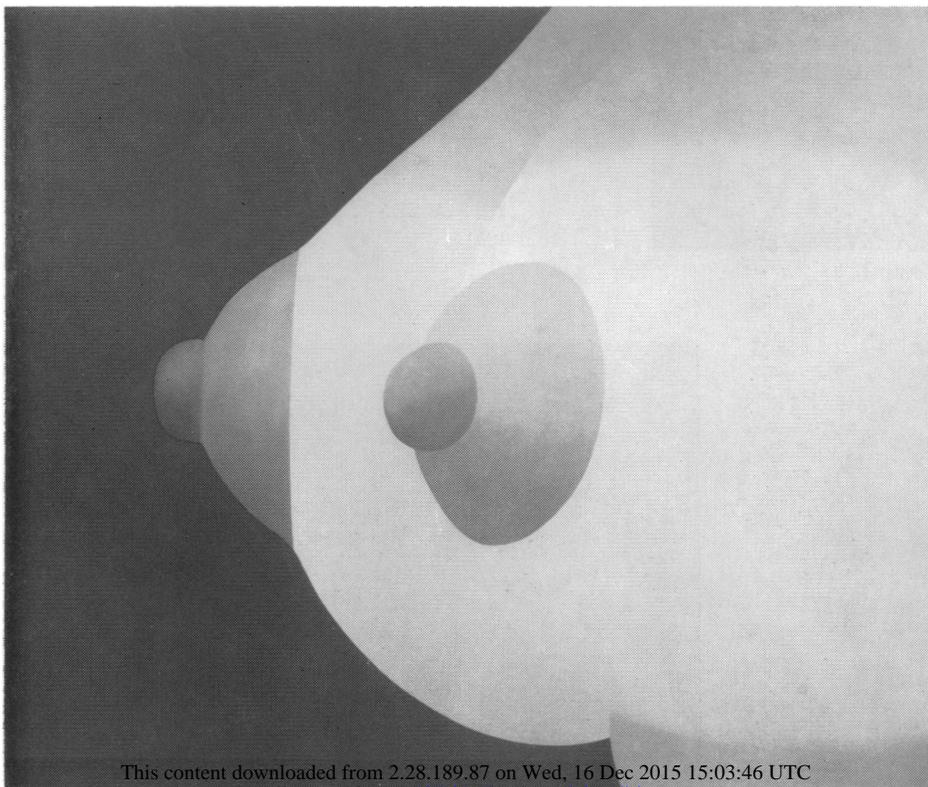
40 × 46"

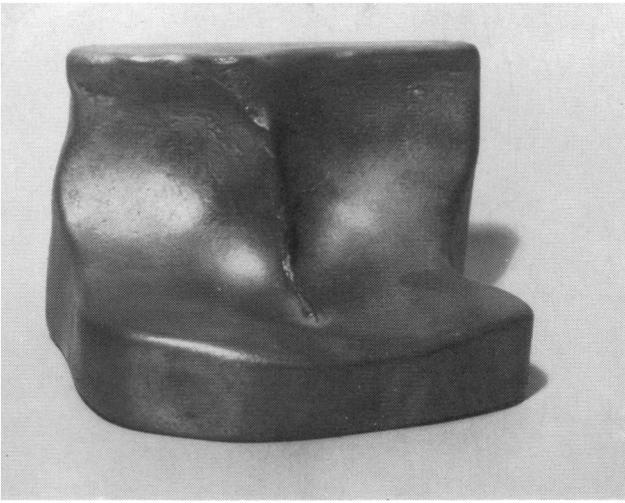
Acrylic  
on canvas



Charles Stark  
**THOMPSON STREET 5**  
1965  
14 × 21"  
Oil and polymer on panel

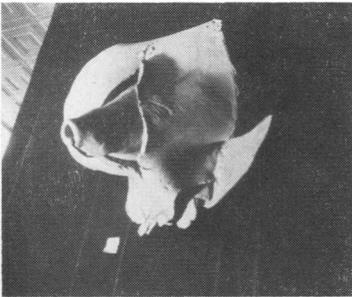
Tom Wesselmann  
**SEASCAPE #17 (TWO TITS)**  
60 × 72"  
Oil in canvas  
*(courtesy of Sidney Janis Gallery)*





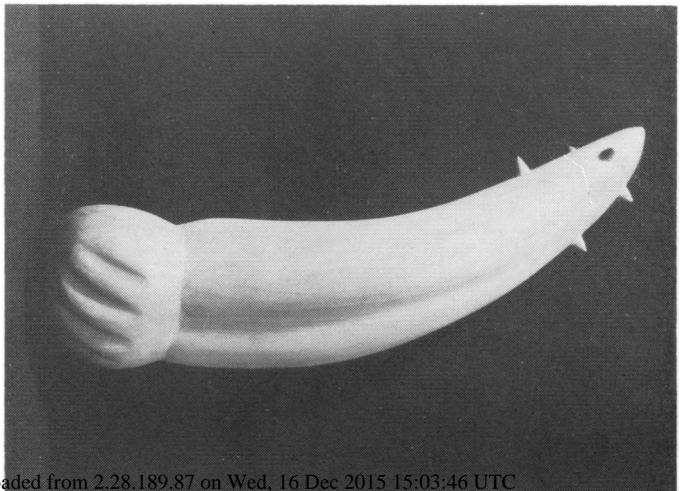
Marcel Duchamp  
**FEUILLE DE VIGNE FEMELLE**  
1951  
4¾ × 3¼"  
Galvanized plaster

Lindsey Decker  
**PLASTIC CONSTRUCTION NO. II**  
1965  
3½ × 13 × 16"  
Acrylic and polyethylene



Hannah Wilke  
**UNTITLED**  
1966  
13" high  
Terra cotta

Alberto Giacometti  
**DISAGREEABLE OBJECT**  
1931  
Wood, 19" long.  
Collection Mr. and Mrs. James Johnson Sweeney  
(courtesy of *The Museum of Modern Art*)



slow, deliberately regular curve, bulky parabolic forms, exaggeratedly luxurious or obsessive surfaces and patterns, all presented within a framework of simplicity and even austerity eminently suitable to the static nature of the "frozen" arts.

Figurative art is at a great disadvantage in the erotic arena when TV commercials, lascivious girdle ads, Hollywood movies, girlie and nudist and fetish magazines are available to any American with a couple of dollars in his pocket. Life has literally outstripped art. The camera and the film rendered invalid a majority of figurative painting, and eroticism was as strongly affected as any subject. It is notable that a good deal of the supposed erotic painting seen in galleries and studios today imitates photographic techniques. For this kind of erotica, detail and particularity of description are of the utmost importance. But it is only effective if executed in absolute imitation of photography, or else in some degree of abstraction. For pictorial reality, the camera is unbeatable, and when the camera is manipulated with esthetic skill and sensitivity, sensorial reality can be equally well served. The Nycata accepted a quite beautiful multiple print photograph of a girl masturbating by Arthur Bardo, though it was not hung at the opening, photography being considered a bit too graphic. Because of its high quality, and because of its unquestioned reality, this small black-and-white photograph was the most erotic (or read pornographic if you think serious art capable of pornography) single item in either one of the exhibitions. When photography imitates painting, on the other hand, it is usually negligible, as in the wozy "impressionistic" color photographs by Emil Cadoo which contributed to the confiscation of an issue of *Evergreen Review* two years ago. Speaking of which, parenthetically, the sensuous properties of color are largely neglected in erotic painting, though less so in sculpture. One of the few painters to use harsh, bold, vibrating color to great effect is Richard Lindner. His brutal amazons in leather jackets, cat-eyed sunglasses, purple gloves, their metallic flesh inviting, insatiable and perhaps impregnable, are greatly diluted when reproduced in black and white.

Charles Stark's paintings of great soft buttocks at the Nycata are an exception to the general belligerence and intentional sterility of representational erotica. Seen close-up and squeezed into the framing edges so that flesh is form and form flesh, they have a delicacy that is in definite contrast to Tom Wesselmann's hard, flat pink breasts treated in something of the same formal manner. The Stark is personalized and approving where the Wesselmann is coolly anti-sensuous, typical of a certain perversity that exists in both erotic abstraction and figuration. This aspect of current art has been called the "esthetics of nastiness" and has some of its most radical exponents among the west coast assemblagists and the masters of "funk." Dissonant color, tasteless garish patterns, wild combinations of visceral form and tactile effects, more chaotically employed than similar devices in pop art, are

among the more "offensive" characteristics. Some of the cooler styles run dangerously close to the insistent neglect, or castration, of form as a life-giving force that epitomizes Art Nouveau. The *fin-de-siècle* artists used pattern to suppress, break up, and systematize, as do many of the contemporaries, but they also suppressed physicality—an element paramount today. Despite its ornamental attractiveness and superficial sensuality, art nouveau has in it a suggestion of death-like chill, a morbid confrontation of lust and death that can be found to a greater or lesser degree in much Surrealist poetry and painting, in Nora Jaffe's dark and fluid tunnel-forms, Lucas Samaras' elegant pin and needle fetishes—beautiful and deadly, Yayoi Kusama's phallus-studded chairs in which endless repetition commands the obsessive attention that is an integral part of eroticism, Eva Hesse's static gray to black frameworks, Lindsey Decker's putrescent plastic extrusions. Nevertheless, the opposition and eventual union of Eros and Thanatos is one more contradiction to be absorbed in abstraction. Metamorphosis is still the subject. Although quite different in effect, the dry and un-nuanced eroticism of art nouveau may be the product of motivations analogous to the firm-fleshed calm of the Indian sculptures, the slowed sensuality of Oldenburg's objects and the work of the abstract "eccentrics"—which are robust, not sterile. An eroticism cleansed of violence is not unsuitable to the pacifist orientation of younger artists today; by the same token it is difficult to assert a sunny, altogether life-affirming art in time of war.

Yet such perversity is also manifested humorously (now and then even wittily); there is pink popular humor, the black humor of sick jokes and sight gags, or Rabelaisian blue humor. A sophisticated or jaded audience is likely to find all erotic realism humorous rather than arousing, but Henry Miller's mood of ludicrous celebration, the euphoric spirit of the Indian "Great Delight," real ribaldry, or the idealistic tenderness of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were absent from the Janis and Nycata shows, although a combination of pink, black, and blue wit in deceptively mild guise could be seen in Jack Wesley's show at Robert Elkot this winter. Given the anti-sexuality of some so-called erotic art that is erotic in subject alone, one might ask where the line is drawn between "cool" and "cold," whether the two arise from the same or an altogether different approach. The decisive factor is, finally, the sensuous element. The distinction between pornography and eroticism no longer seems valid and can, in turn, only be judged in the context of the individual. The question is now merely a legal one, of interest to the general public only in view of civil rights and the hope of a more naturally oriented society. It is, for instance, doubtful whether an obscenity case could be made against an abstraction. Yet where pornography is generally defined as art intended to stimulate active sexual response and lacking any esthetically redeeming factors, the matter of personal taste on the erotic as well as the esthetic level immediately enters in. A painter whose work is often

called erotic insists that it takes intelligence to be erotic, intelligence and refinement which are lacking in the pornographic. (I would add that it is the intelligence to refine the instinctual rather than to destroy it.) On a more superficial level, what is titillating or offensive to a sixty-year-old Iowan may be unexciting to a thirty-year-old New Yorker, and personal taste in any case resists analysis.

I'm hardly recommending it, but there is no reason why abstraction should not be as subject to obscenity bans as any other style. Its oblique reference to the physical, sensuous, or symbolic is likely to have an erogenous effect on some viewers, sometimes, and that is, after all, the most that can be said of any erotic art in any context. The most blatant pornography arouses only a percentage of its viewers to action. Suppressed as the psychological and anthropomorphic elements may be in much recent art, the implicit power of such references is not imaginary, and it outdistances explicit references which time has exhausted esthetically. It seems important that the field of erotica no longer be limited to depiction of a narrowly limited sexual subject matter. What is needed is not new definitions but greater flexibility of visual response, and an art production that admits the personal and ultimately abstract quality of the erotic experience. As long as it is necessary to hold "erotic art shows" which businessmen line up to see, and to talk about a "Trend," everyone concerned is bound to be disappointed. A situation in which erotic stimuli could be perceived in a broad range of subjects and styles as a matter of fact and taste, in which such exhibitions were not publicised, but could be taken for granted like other art exhibitions, would be infinitely preferable to the present situation, in which voyeurism is the major concern and the spectators are unsatisfied because they seek specifically sexual rather than sensuous and sensual stimuli.

ANTHONY BURGESS

## London Letter

I CHRISTMASSED IN THE COUNTRY and did a lot of rather bizarre bread-and-butter literary work (God, how like *Fors Clavigera* this sounds already, except that Ruskin never had to do bread-and-butter literary work). I mean: fifteen thousand words on the Grand Tour; a popular essay on precognition; a study of the American Jew as Voice of the Nation; a little piece on Mark Twain and *Finnegans Wake* (Ph.D. thesis material there, lads); a short story about talking