An Art of Missing Parts*

HAL FOSTER

Two Exhibits

Exhibit A is a black-and-white photograph. Burned at the edges, it is difficult to date, and its space is ambiguous—a spare studio, perhaps a hotel dive. A pensive man stands to the right, cut by the frame (we see only a profile of a head, a hand with a cigarette, a bit of a shoe); a wicker chair is turned to the corner; and a male leg extends from the left wall. Trousered, shod, and cut below the knee, it is inexplicable.

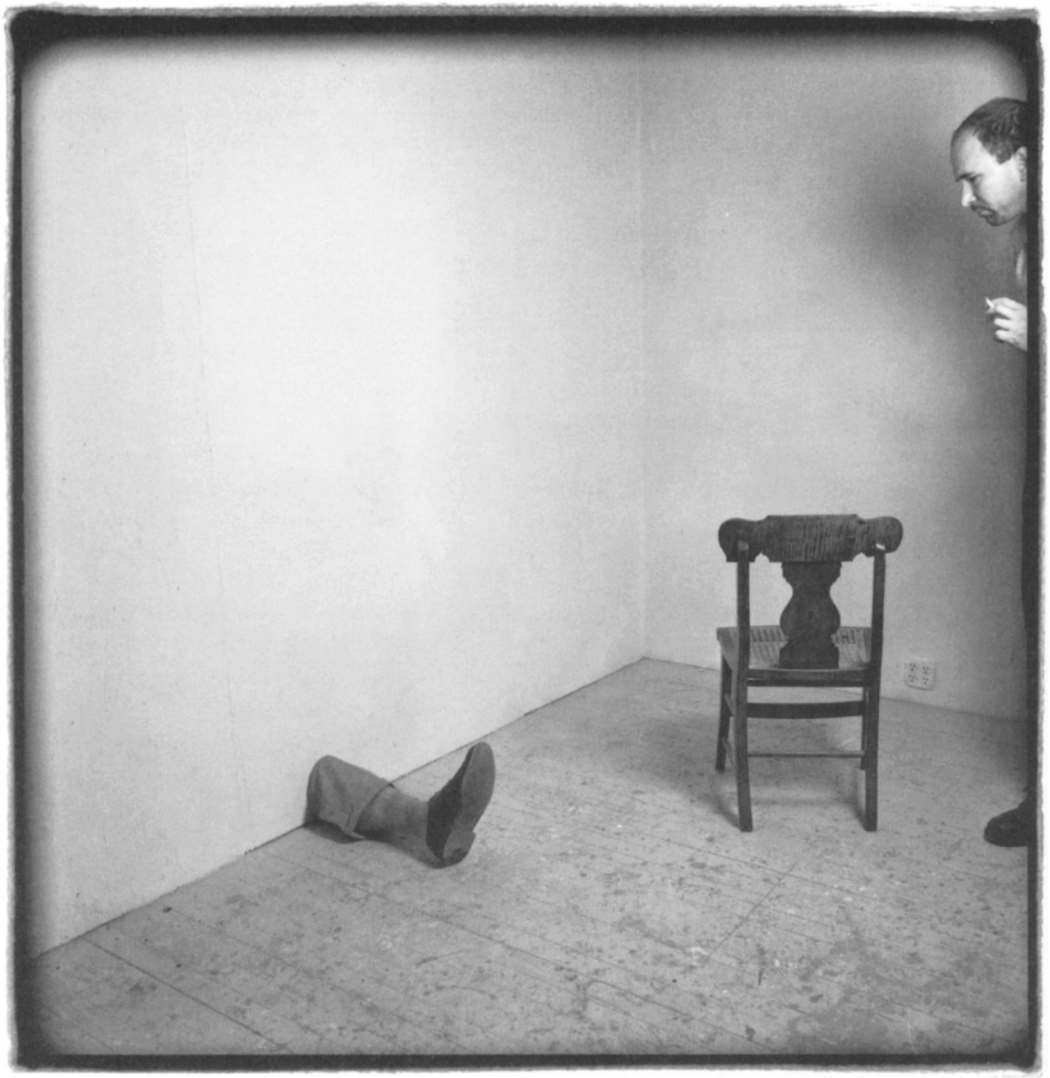
The man peers at the leg. Does he investigate a crime or revisit a deed of his own, ponder a work of art or hallucinate a body part? Is he the witness of the event? Its perpetrator? Its victim? Or is he somehow all three? Clearly the man is a voyeur; but, if the leg is somehow his, is he not an exhibitionist as well? To gaze so seems a little sadistic; yet, if this humiliated leg is somehow his, is he not a little masochistic too? This ambivalence of active and passive roles is performed in visual terms: both an active seeing and a passive being-seen are in play here, and they meet in a reflexive seeing oneself.[1]

The man is Robert Gober in 1991, and this is the uncanny thing about his art: before it or (more exactly) within it, one has the strange sense of seeing oneself, of revisiting the crime that is oneself.

Exhibit B is drawn from an interview in 1990/93. Asked about his way of working, Gober replies: "It's more a nursing of an image that haunts me and letting it sit and breed in my mind, and then, if it's resonant, I'll try to figure out formally, could this be an interesting sculpture to look at?" Questioned about his setting of

* This is a revised version of an essay that first appeared in the catalog *Robert Gober*, edited by Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997). I thank the several audiences of the lecture form of this text for critical suggestions.

1. Freud discusses these instinctual doubles and psychic reversals in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" (1915).



Michael Biondo. Robert Gober. *1991.*

scenes, he adds: "This seemed a wide open area to me—to do natural history dioramas about contemporary human beings."[2]

These statements are as paradoxical as the photograph. Each object, Gober tells us, begins as an image, perhaps a memory or a fantasy. Yet far from past, it is alive, an infant to be nursed (an odd metaphor for an image). However, Gober implies, it is not yet external: the image exists within its host too. Nor is it quite new: it haunts this host as well. Both inside and outside, intimate and alien (a Lacanian critic might call it "extimate"), the image is figured as a brood that breeds on its own (this is odder still). Perhaps it threatens its host; in any case he wants to objectify it, to get it into form—but only if it is "resonant" for others too (the share of the beholder, psychological as well as visual, is large in this work).

To this end Gober sets his objects in "dioramas." Developed in the nineteenth century, the diorama was a scenographic re-creation of an historical event or a natural habitat; part painting, part theater, it brought battle scenes to civilians or exotic wilds to industrial metropoles. Closer to peep shows than to pictures, the diorama was loved by the masses but scorned by the cultivated as a vulgar device of illusion.[3] Often the tableaux included actual things, but in the service of *illusion*, an illusion more real than a framed image: a hyperrealism that borders on the hallucinated or the fantasmatic. Gober conjures these effects as well: to make us eyewitnesses to an event (re)constructed after the fact, to place us in an ambiguous space (again, as in a dream, we seem to be within the representation too) that is also an ambiguous time: "Most of my sculptures have been memories remade, recombined, and filtered through my current experiences."[4] Here, then, the scene of the diorama has changed: neither public history nor grand nature, the backdrop of these memories is at once private and unnatural, homey and *unheimlich*.

Primal Fantasies

What do the dioramas stage? Whether alone or in an ensemble, the objects often look forlorn: a miniature house or church split, burned, or flooded; a wedding gown stripped bare of its bride; a cast male leg planted with candles or plugged

2. Robert Gober, "Interview with Richard Flood," in Lewis Biggs, ed., *Robert Gober* (Liverpool and London: Serpentine and Tate Galleries, 1993), pp. 8–14, reprinted and extended in Richard Flood, ed., *Robert Gober: Sculpture + Drawing* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), pp. 122, 125. This catalog includes a thoughtful survey by Flood as well, "The Law of Indirections." I date categories of work here to their first appearance.

3. See Dolf Sternberger, *Panorama of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Urizen Books, 1977 [1936]), as well as Stephan Oetermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1997). It hardly needs to be added that there is no form more alien to modernist art than the diorama.

4. Karel Schampers, "Robert Gober," in *Robert Gober* (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1990), p. 33.

with drains; a cast male butt tattooed with music; and so on. Some suggest a fixated image of an awful accident or a traumatic fantasy; and Gober has alluded to a childhood story, told by his mother (a former nurse), of a leg amputated at a hospital. Yet it is as an enigma that the story struck him, and it is as a riddle that the dioramas resonate. In a sense this is the work of his work: *to sustain enigma.*[5]

Sometimes the dioramas intimate scenes in which the subject is somehow at stake, put into play. Of course, to posit an originary scene in order to ground a self, to found a style, is a familiar trope in modernist art: many movements began with a baptismal event or a foundational story (often consecrated with a name plus a manifesto: Futurism is only one extreme instance). Art involved in primal fantasies, however, is different from art staked in origin myths. For primal fantasies are riddles rather than proclamations of origin: they *confound* rather than found identity. So it is with the Gober scenes as well.

5. The question here becomes: how to sustain enigma in *interpretation*? Enigma is bound up with desire, and this volatile compound invites an interpretive interest that is also erotic, "epistephilic." It is a Freudian commonplace that our primary investigations are driven by sexual curiosity, and Gober

Robert Gober. Leg With Candle. *1991.*

Freud distinguished three primal fantasies in our psychic lives: the primal scene proper (where the child witnesses parental sex, or imagines so), the threat of castration, and the fantasy of seduction. First called scenes, they were later termed fantasies when Freud saw that they need not be historically actual in order to be psychically effective—indeed, that the analysand may construct them, in whole or part, after the fact (often with the prodding of the analyst). Even when contrived, however, these fantasies appeared consistent, so much so that Freud deemed them phylogenetic—inherited schemas that we all might elaborate on. Yet today it is not necessary to see them as genetic in order to understand them as originary, for, again, it is through such fantasies that the child is said to tease out the riddles of origins: in the primal scene the origin of the individual (Where do I come from?), in the fantasy of castration the origin of sexual difference (Which sex am I?), in the fantasy of seduction the origin of sexuality (What is this strange stirring within me?).[6]

As is well known, Freud first referred each case of hysteria to an actual event: for every hysterical woman in the present he presumed a perverse seducer in the past. Although Freud abandoned this seduction theory as early as 1897, he retained the essential idea of a trauma that initiates one into sexuality, indeed into subjectivity. "Presexually sexual" (such is how Freud struggled to articulate the paradox), the first event comes from *outside* in a way that the child cannot comprehend, let alone master. It becomes traumatic only if it is revived by a second event that the now-mature subject associates with the first, which is recoded retroactively, charged as sexual after the fact. This is why the memory is the traumatic agent, and why trauma seems to come from *inside* as well.[7] Such confusion

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evokes this fundamental riddling in our lives. The question is how to interpret his riddling in a way that does not eradicate it. One way that Gober sustains enigma in the work is through its very fabrication: his objects often look like readymades, but they never are. Thus the readymade is at once invoked *and* suspended, and one effect is that authorial origin is not flatly disavowed so much as slightly disturbed—just enough to be rendered enigmatic. I discuss another effect at the end of this essay.

6. Freud added another primal fantasy, an intrauterine one, which might serve psychically as a salve to the other, traumatic fantasies, especially of castration, to which it only seems anterior. See, among other texts, "The Sexual Enlightenment of Children" (1907), "On the Sexual Theories of Children" (1908), "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood" (1910), and "The History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1914/18). For the relation of primal fantasies to Surrealist aesthetics, which Gober elaborates, see my *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993). Of course, then and now, the notion of primal fantasy, let alone the hypothesis of seduction, is very controversial. For a recent intervention in the debate see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, "Neurotica: Freud and the Seduction Theory," *October* 76 (Spring 1996).

7. "The whole of the trauma comes *both* from within and without," Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis write in relation to seduction in particular. "From without, since sexuality reaches the subject from the other; from within, since it springs from this internalized exteriority, this *'reminiscence* suffered by hysterics' (according to the Freudian formula)." See "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" (1964), in Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan, eds., *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Metheun, 1986), pp. 5–34, here p. 10. This remains the most useful explication of the notion of primal fantasy.

of inside and outside is the paradoxical structure of trauma; it may be this complication that *is* traumatic, especially when it triggers a confusion of private and public. In any case Gober (re)stages this complication in his dioramas, with scenes that seem both internal and external, private and public, past and present, fantasmatic and real—as though (in a natural history museum designed by David Lynch) we suddenly happened upon the most secret events of our own lives.

The primal fantasies are only scenarios, of course, and they never appear pure in life, let alone in art. However, they may help to illuminate this work of "memories remade, recombined"—in particular why its subject positions and spatial constructions are so ambiguous.[8] The scenes of most daydreams are relatively stable because the egos of most daydreamers are relatively centered, and this is true of most pictorial spaces as well: the ego of the artist grounds them for the viewer, or, rather, the primordial conventions that set up such spaces for the mastery of the ego (e.g., the framing of a pictorial field) so grounds them.[9] This is not the case with the scenes of the primal fantasies, for the subject is implicated in these spaces: put into play *by* them, he or she is also at play *within* them, prone to identify with different elements *of* them. This is so because the fantasy is "not the object of desire, but its setting," its mise-en-scène, in a sense its *diorama*;[10] and this implication of the subject in the space may distort it. Such distortion is also evident in some Surrealist art, and more effectively than any other artist today Gober elaborates Surrealism's aesthetic of convulsive identity and uncanny space.

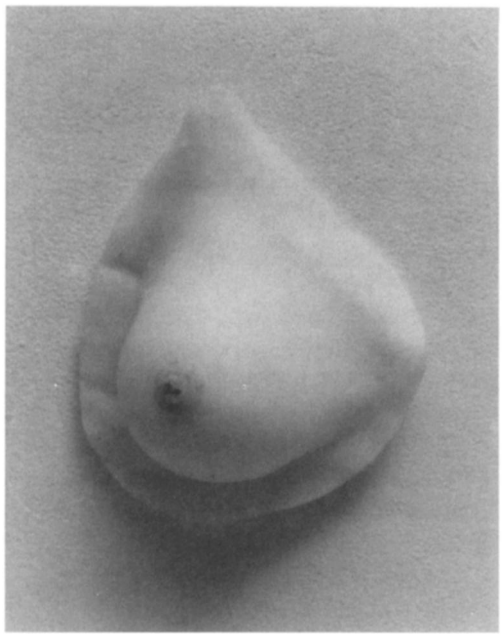
In "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), André Breton evoked this Surrealist aesthetic with a precociously Goberesque image: "a man cut in two by a window."[11] If extrapolated into an aesthetic model, this image suggests neither a descriptive mirror nor a narrative stage, the two dominant paradigms of Western picture-making from the Renaissance to modernism, but rather a fantasmatic scene where the subject is split both positionally, at once inside and outside, and psychically, "cut in two." Two aspects of this model are relevant to my reading of Gober. First, in this way of working the artist does not invent forms so much as (s)he retraces tableaux in which the subject is not fixed in relation to identity, difference, and sexuality

8. This may be the place to defend against the charge that this art or my analysis is illustrational of these ideas of the unconscious, desire, and fantasy. If it were so (or, perhaps I should say, when it is so), the enigmatic is diminished, if not eradicated. In any case, work, artistic or critical, is theoretical in its own terms—that is, it disturbs or otherwise develops received theory—or it is not theoretical at all.

9. On these conventions see Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs" (1969), in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Art, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994).

10. Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 26.

11. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972), p. 21.



Gober. Untitled Breast. *1990.*

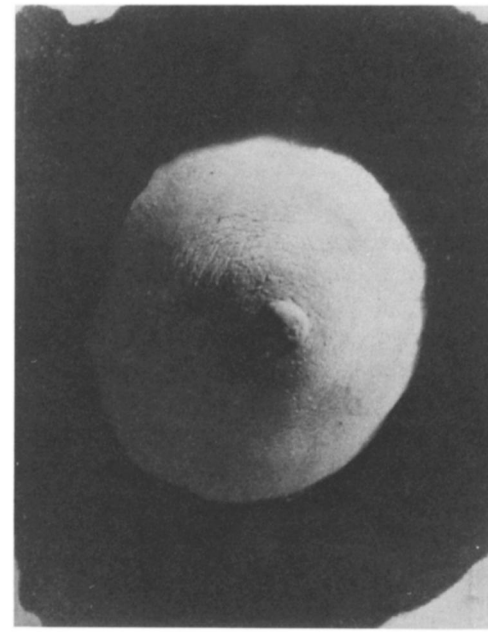
(again, these are precisely the terms in question in primal fantasies).[12] Second, the location of these scenes is not certain, as is evident in the paradoxical language used to describe them. "It's more a nursing of an image that haunts me," says Gober. "Who am I?" asks Breton at the beginning of his great novel *Nadja* (1928). "If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I 'haunt' . . . Perhaps my life is nothing but an image of this kind; perhaps I am doomed to retrace my steps under the illusion that I am exploring, doomed to try and learn what I should simply recognize, learning a mere fraction of what I have forgotten."[13]

Enigmatic Signifiers

In a series of recent texts, the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche has rethought all the primal fantasies as seductions—not as literal assaults but as

12. Breton writes of his image, "decided," he tells us, by "previous predispositions": "Here again it is not a matter of drawing, *but simply of tracing*" (p. 21; his italics). If this is a third model of *picture*-making, it might be asked, how could it be relevant to the *objects* of Gober? It is so precisely because, as quasi-fantasmatic scenarios, his dioramas are more pictorial than sculptural (or anything else). We are now witness to a pervasive—sometimes provocative, sometimes problematic—(re)pictorializing not only of the sculptural but of the theatrical (in the sense of Michael Fried), a (re)pictorializing in which the space of installation, for example, is treated as fictive, semivirtual, or again quasi-fantasmatic, a space of psychological projection at odds with the space of bodily reflexivity as conceived by installation artists in the 1960s and '70s.

13. André Breton, *Nadja,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 11–12.



Marcel Duchamp. Prière du Toucher (Please Touch). *1947. (Photo: Man Ray).*

"enigmatic signifiers" received from the other (parent, sibling, caretaker), which the infant finds seductive precisely because they are enigmatic. These signifiers, which need not be verbal at all, concern the subject profoundly (again, they involve the fundamental questions of our existence), yet they come from elsewhere, from an other.[14] So, too, the Gober objects seem to arrive from an other place, one more unconscious than not. They possess an *alterity*, and this alterity produces a passivity in the viewer, for, again, the objects appear as if suddenly; one feels almost helpless before them, one *suffers* them.[15]

The quintessential enigmatic signifer is the maternal breast, which the infant sees as an entity in its own right. Gober presents the breast (1990) in this way too—as a part object on its own, a fragment in relief. It recalls *Please Touch* (1947) by Marcel Duchamp, but that breast is more frontal, more aggressive: an object for a post-Oedipal subject, it challenges one to touch, to break this taboo of art, to

14. See Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis,* trans. David Macey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). Laplanche has long questioned the Lacanian insistence on the unconscious structured as a language; his signifiers can be "verbal, nonverbal, and even behavioral," as long as they are "pregnant with unconscious sexual significations" (p. 126). And they may be enigmatic for the other too: "As I see it, enigma is defined by the fact that it is an enigma even for the one who sends the enigma" (Laplanche, *Seduction, Translation, Drives,* trans. Martin Stanton [London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992], p. 57). For a very suggestive account of Caravaggio in terms of the enigmatic signifier (which appeared after the first version of the present essay), see Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge: MIT/October Books, 1998).

15. This affect may be related not only to what Freud called the helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*) of the infant in the traumatic event, but also to what the Surrealists called the availability (*disponibilité*) of the artist before the uncanny, and perhaps even to what Keats called the negative capability of the poet in

Untitled. *1990.*

confuse aesthetic appreciation and sexual desire, to trace the sense of the beautiful to "the secondary sexual characteristics" of the body (as Freud once defined this body part). The Gober breast is different: neither good nor bad object (in the terms of Melanie Klein), neither nurturing nor sexual breast (in the terms of Freud), it is exactly enigmatic.

Laplanche ventriloquizes the infant before this enigma in this way: "What does the breast want from me, apart from wanting to suckle me, and, come to that, why does it want to suckle me?"[16] Here the desire of the other prompts the

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inspiration. Lacan captures this state between anxiety and ecstasy with the ambiguous phrase *en souffrance,* which suggests both suspension and sufferance—a condition also evoked by such precedents of Gober as Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol.

16. Laplanche, *New Foundations,* p. 126. This ventriloquism acts out, comically, a problem fundamental to psychoanalysis—that the subject is already assumed in the theorization of its emergence. For a

desire of the subject precisely as an enigma, and this enigma recalls the riddle of seduction: What does this other want? What is this strange force that it stirs inside me? What is a sexual object? What is a sexual object for me? And who—or what—am I? For Freud the sexual drive is "propped" on the self-preservative instinct: the infant at the breast sucks milk out of need, which can be satisfied, but it also experiences pleasure—a desire for the punctual return of this pleasure—which cannot be satisfied. The milk is the object of need; the breast is the object of desire, the first such object for everyone. But even (or especially) when the constitution of the subject is at issue, Freud tends to presuppose—to project—a heterosexual male. With his ambiguous breast Gober seems to query this presupposition, to ask when it can no longer be held. In so doing he implies that the riddle of sexuality cannot be separated from the riddle of sexual difference: across the spectra of masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, these two enigmas are bound together.

If the Gober breast poses the riddle of the sexual object, his bisex(ct)ed chest (1990) embodies the riddle of the sexual *subject*: Which gender am I, or, more precisely, what sexuality? At first glance this hermaphrodite torso seems not so much enigmatic as repulsive—in its very refusal of enigma, perhaps, in its making-literal of bisexuality as double-sex. Nonetheless, the ambiguity of gender persists: the female breast (it is the same one) is a little penile, the male breast a little supple, hair strays into the female side, the male side is fleshy too, and so on. In a sense this truncated torso is enigmatic because it is both literal and ambiguous: here sexual difference is presented as both physically absolute and psychically undecidable. It is irreducibly both, and it is traumatically enigmatic because it is irreducibly both.[17]

The hermaphrodite, then, is not replete: its doubleness reveals a division, its excess a loss, and here Gober allows for a special insight into psychoanalysis and aesthetics alike. For if the breast is our first sexual object, it is also our first lost object. Again, according to the psychoanalytic formula, though the need of milk

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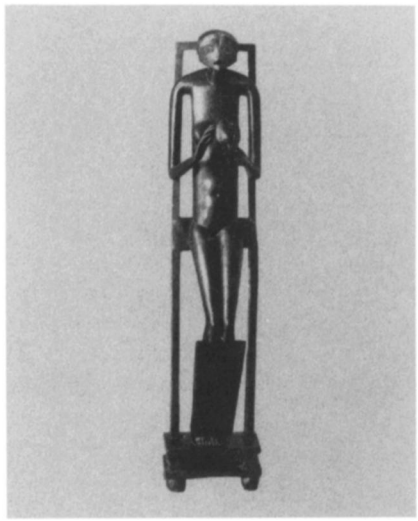
critique of Freud along these lines see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988).

17. Just as the Bretonian image of "a man cut in two by a window" looks ahead to the paintings of René Magritte, this object looks back to them, as do several slides in a work that has long served Gober as an image-repertoire, *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1982–83), in which a single painting was recorded through many permutations. Like some Magrittes, it might be argued that this object is not enigmatic enough, that it is so literal as to be sadistic. I would claim as much about *Man Coming Out of Woman* (1993–94), in which a male leg with shoe and sock emerges from the vagina of a spread-eagled woman truncated in a corner, a work that could be deemed heterophobic. Its counterpart is a piece in which the leg of a child emerges from the anus of a man, in a scenario that recalls what Freud termed "the cloaca theory" of birth held by children who imagine that men can have babies too. This is a fantasy that seems to interest Gober; see note 42.

can be satisfied, the desire for the breast cannot be, and in this desire the breast appears lost to the infant. It can hallucinate the breast (in desire begins fantasy and vice versa) or find a substitute (what is the thumb, or the pacifier, but the breast in disguise, in displacement?). On the one hand, then, as Freud remarked, "the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it";[18] on the other hand, this refinding is forever a seeking: the object cannot be regained because it is fantasmatic, and desire cannot be satisfied because it is defined in lack. This is the paradoxical formula of the found object in Surrealism as well, its ruse if you like: a lost object, it is never recovered but forever sought; always a substitute, it drives on its own search. Thus the Surrealist object is impossible in a way that most Surrealists never understood, for they continued to insist on its discovery—on an object *adequate* to desire.



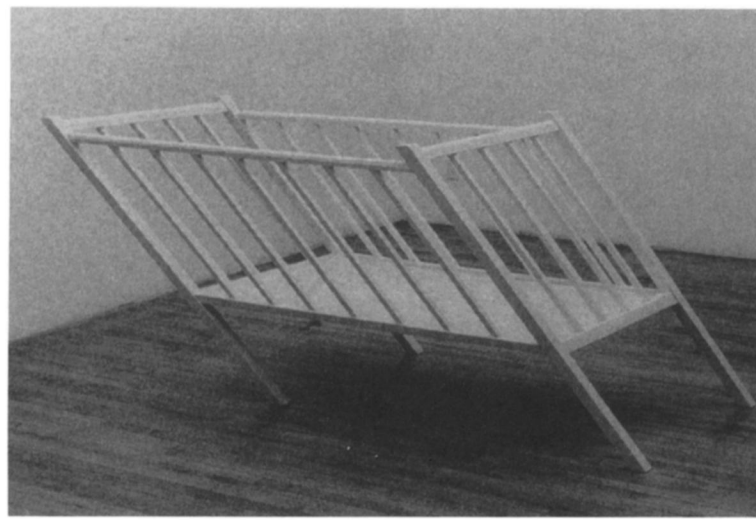
Alberto Giacometti. The Invisible Object. *1934–35.*

The epitome of this misrecognition occurs in the flea-market episode of *L'Amour fou* (1937) when Breton recounts the making of *The Invisible Object* (or *Feminine Personage,* 1934–35) by Alberto Giacometti, a sculpture born of a romantic crisis. Breton tells us that Giacometti had trouble with the head, the hands, and, implicitly, the breasts, which he resolved only upon discovery of a particular mask at the flea market. For Breton this is a textbook case of an object found—almost called into being—by an unconscious desire. But *The Invisible Object* may evoke the opposite, the impossibility of the lost object regained, of the void filled: with its cupped hands and blank stare this feminine personage shapes "the invisible object" *in its very absence.*[19] One achievement of Gober is that within a Surrealist line of work he reveals this impossibility of its object, this paradox of its aesthetic. He questions the Surrealist trust in desire-as-excess with the psychoanalytic truth of desire-in-loss.

18. Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905), in *On Sexuality,* ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 145.

19. See *Compulsive Beauty,* chapter 2. Yet another title for the sculpture is *Hands Holding the Void.* Of course one young initiate of Surrealism, Jacques Lacan, did understand the paradoxical formula of its object, and his account of the *objet petit a* informs mine here.

Sometimes Gober registers this desire-in-loss less in objects than in settings, as in his "traumatic playpens" (1986; the term is his). These crazy cribs recall the celebrated passage in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) where Freud discusses the *fort/da* game of his young grandson. According to Freud, the little boy was devastated by the periodic disappearances of his mother, which he sought to master actively rather than to suffer passively. To this end he represented her movements with a string attached to a spool: into his crib he would throw the spool, make it disappear (*fort!* gone!), only to recover it with the string, to make it reappear, each time with



Pitched Crib. *1987.*

delight (*da!* there!). This game suggests that the psychic basis of all representation resides in loss, which any representation works to compensate a little. However, the traumatic playpens of Gober present a less redemptive view of symbol-making. Pitched, slanted, tilted, or otherwise distorted (thus are they titled), these cribs are cages marked with aggression—whether of the child or the other (as intuited by the child) it is difficult to say. The nastiest playpen is the most normal, as if every standard pen were potentially a Skinner box. (This is also true of his beds [1986], each made up with simple sheets and blanket: the nastiest is the most uniform, as if every generic bed were potentially a straitjacket.) Rather than a happy accession of the infant to representation, then, Gober evokes a socialization that is blocked or broken. Perhaps the child of these deranged cribs and pens refuses the enigmatic signifer, rejects the name of the father—only, these cages seem to suggest, to earn a name nonetheless, that of psychotic.

From the breast through the torso to the pens, then, Gober asks these

Two Urinals. *1986.*
Corner Bed. *1986–87.*
Distorted Playpen.
1986.

questions: What is a sexual object? What is a sexual subject? What is desire? What is loss? (And for whom? Always for whom—even when this *who* is the question.) Moreover, how do we distinguish between subject and object, desire and loss? Even as Gober reveals the found object to be a lost object, he reworks the Surrealist aesthetic of desire (often tilted to the heterosexual) into a contemporary art of melancholy and mourning (here tinged gay), in which subject and object may appear confused. According to Freud, this is the problem for the subject struck by loss: as the melancholic refuses to surrender the lost object, he makes it internal, and reproaches it in the guise of a self-reproach, while the mourner learns to relinquish the lost object, to disinvest in this one thing in order to reinvest in other things, to return to life. Gober captures this vascillation of the forlorn subject between reproach and reverence. On the one hand, the legs planted with candles or plugged with drains may evoke a body consumed or wasted—the body burned at both ends, drained, spent in all senses of the word. On the other hand, they may evoke a body radiant or cleansed—the body transformed from an abject thing, too close to the subject, into an honored symbol, distanced enough for the subject to go on with life.[20] Gober puts other associations into play too—conflicted connections, perhaps keyed to the Catholicism of his youth, between fire and water, altar and slaughterbench, remembrance and oblivion—in a way that points to an enigma less of origins than of ends, of departures and deaths. What do you do with desire after loss? You burn for a while, carry a torch for a time, eventually

20. All the truncated legs cannot help but convey loss. For me the legs with drains evoke a loss in the self, while the legs with candles evoke a loss of an other, but, again, the difficulty of this distinction is also at issue. In part, along with such artists as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Zoë Leonard, Gober answered the call for an art of mourning that might complement an activism of militancy made by Douglas Crimp in his "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (Winter 1989).

light a candle to the memory of the loved one. What do you do with a body after death? You wash it in order to purify it of you and to free you of it.

In terms of precedents one thinks first of Duchamp, but Gober queers his reception in significant ways.[21] Unlike many contemporaries, Gober does not focus on the model of the readymade, which can query the relation between art work and commodity. In fact, he almost opposes this model, not only because he fabricates his objects, but because Duchamp intended "complete anaesthesia," while Gober explores traumatic affect.[22] Instead, Gober adapts another Duchampian model, the cast body part, which can query the relation between art work and sexual drive.[23] Like Duchamp, he sees cognition as sensual (in the notorious phrase of his predecessor: "to grasp things with the mind the way the penis is grasped by the vagina"), but this cognition is different for Gober because the desires are different. Hence, instead of the "female fig leafs" and "wedges of chastity" of Duchamp, Gober offers casts of musical male butts and colossal butter sticks. And instead of such misogynistic fetishes of Giacometti as his spiked *Disagreeable Object* (1931), Gober offers such homoerotic relics as his candle seeded with human hair. Nevertheless, the affinity with Duchamp and Giacometti is clear, and it rests in a shared fascination with enigma and desire—with the enigma *of* desire, the desire *in* enigma.[24] Seduction is also central in Duchamp and Giacometti,

21. In his interview Flood reduces such elaborations to "critical gamesmanship" (p. 128), and so diminishes this significance of Gober, who indeed demurs: "But it was always my artistic nature and talent to work with diverse images whose meanings interweave, and that's what I keep doing." Apart from Duchamp and Giacometti, one thinks also of Magritte, especially his simulacral scenes of fantasy, as well as of Johns and Warhol.

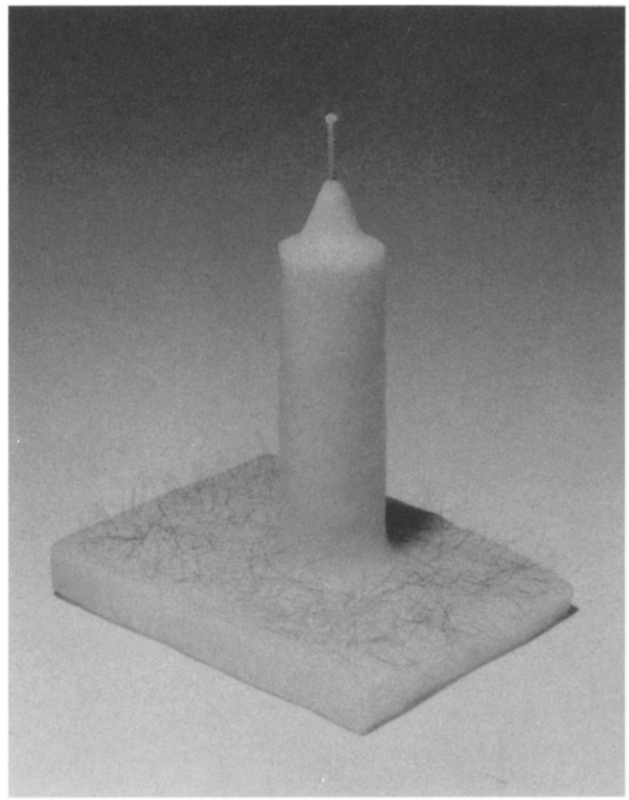
22. Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades'" (1961), in *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), p. 141.

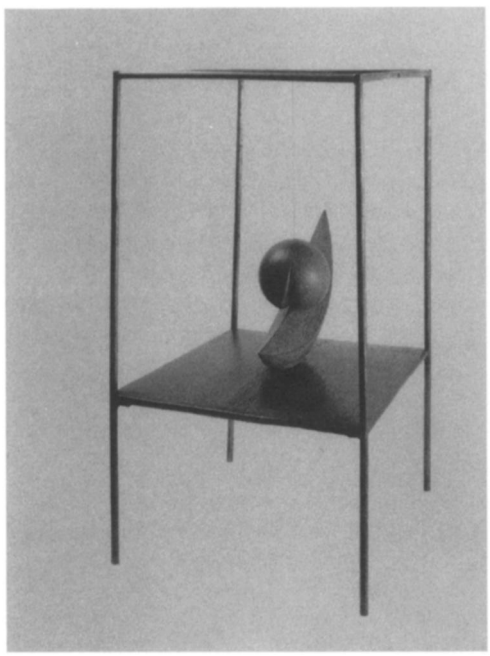
23. For a very suggestive typology of modern sculpture in which the models of readymade and part-object are opposed, see Rosalind Krauss, "Bachelors," *October* 52 (Spring 1990).

24. Long ago Michel Leiris captured the Surrealist aspect of Giacometti in a way that resonates with "the memories remade" of Gober today:

"There are moments that can be called *crises*, the only ones that count in a life. These are moments when abruptly the outside seems to respond to a call we send it from within, when the exterior world opens itself and a sudden communion forms between it and our heart. From my own experience I have several memories like this, and they all relate to events that seem trifling, without symbolic value, and one might say *gratuitous*. . . . Poetry can emerge only from such 'crises,' and the only worthwhile works of art are those that provide their equivalents.

"I love Giacometti's sculpture because everything he makes is like the petrification of one of these crises, the intensity of a chance event swiftly caught and immediately frozen, the stone stele telling its tale. And there's nothing deathlike about this sculpture; on the contrary, like the real fetishes we idolize (real fetishes, meaning those that resemble us and are objectivized forms of our desire) everything here is prodigiously alive—graciously living and strongly shaded with humor, nicely expressing that affective ambivalence, that tender sphinx we nourish, more or less secretly, at our core" (*Documents*, vol. 1, no. 4 [1929], pp. 209–10).

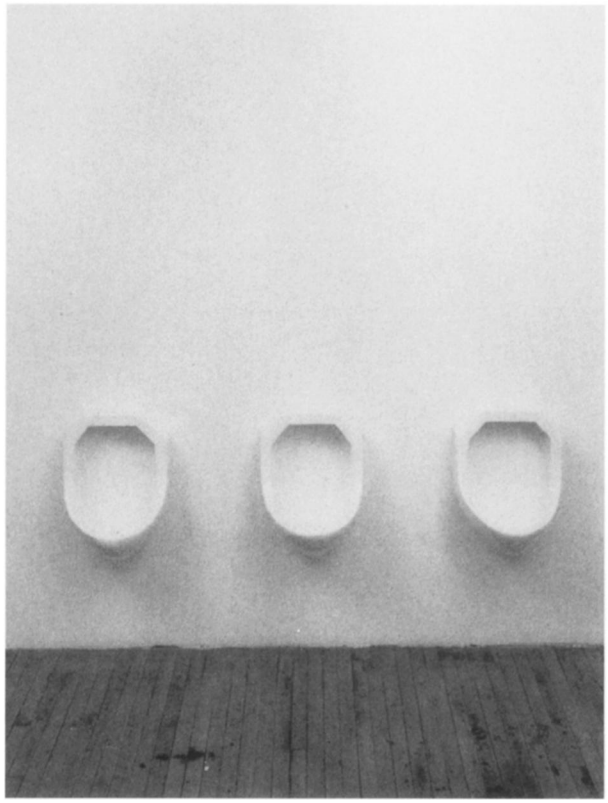




Gober. Untitled Candle. *1991.*

Duchamp. Coin de Chasteté. *1954.*

Giacometti. Suspended Ball. *1939–31.*



Gober. Three Urinals. *1988.*

but it is seduction as heterosexual quest: the bachelors never attain the bride in *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23); the banana never touches the peach in *Suspended Ball* (1930–31). There the operative analogy is coitus, but it is coitus not only interrupted but deferred: for Duchamp and Giacometti delay and suspension (privileged terms respectively for each) are fundamental to desire, and this puts them awry of the dominant Bretonian line of Surrealism. In his bachelor machines, which include unconnected sinks (1983), urinals (1984), and drains (1989), Gober queers this formula of blocked desire, revises it in terms of melancholy and mourning, loss and survival—that is, in terms of the age of AIDS. "For me," he remarked in 1991, "death has temporarily overtaken life in New York City."[25]

Human Dioramas

Gober does not focus on the Duchampian readymade, but there are apparent exceptions, such as the sinks, urinals, and drains, all of which recall the paradigmatic readymade *Fountain* (1917). Yet here, too, Gober twists Duchamp, literally

25. Gober quoted in *Parkett*, 27 (March 1991).

so in a work like *Three Urinals* (1988). For *Fountain* was a found urinal rotated ninety degrees and positioned as art on a pedestal, while *Three Urinals* is a simulation fabricated out of wire, plaster, and enamel paint and returned to the official place for urinals on the wall (they are also hung low). In effect Duchamp brought the bathroom to the museum, with a provocation (beyond scandal) that was both epistemological (What counts as art?) and institutional (Who determines it?), while Gober brings the museum to the bathroom (if one urinal signals a public toilet, three confirm it), with this additional provocation: suddenly these different spaces seem strangely congruant, for both mix the public and the private in uneasy ways.

Although more prosaic than the riddles of the primal fantasies, the mysteries of the bathroom are also never solved. Boys forever wonder what is inside the girls' room (they imagine a garden of earthly delights and horrors), and they never get over the unease of the boys' room as well. To piss is a semiprivate act, but often men do it in a semipublic space where, straight or gay, they have to wonder about the men next to them (even if they are only imaginary). Bigger? Freud got it wrong: penis envy—that is, penis anxiety—is strictly a male thing. Better? Vaguely disgusted? Very interested? The Gober urinals call these secret ceremonies to mind, at least to some viewers (the share of the beholder in this work is not only large but specific). They put sexual difference on display in a way that again twists Duchamp.[26]

After *Three Urinals* there followed a series of installations, most with different Duchampian spins. The first, at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1989, resonated with *The Bride Stripped Bare.* In one room Gober hung wallpaper depicting dicks and cunts, assholes and belly buttons, sketched in white line on black ground and punctuated with chest-high drains—as if to suggest that sexual difference is the ambient pattern, both obvious and overlooked, of our everyday lives of eating and evacuating. In another room he hung wallpaper with schematic drawings of two men in light blue on pale yellow, the one (from a Bloomingdale's beefcake ad) white and asleep, the other (from a 1920s Texas cartoon) black and lynched—as if to suggest that racial antagonism is another occluded structure of our daily grinds. Like *The Bride Stripped Bare,* then, the installation was split into two registers, and each room was split in turn: in the center of the first was a bag of doughnuts on a pedestal; in the center of the second stood a wedding gown attended by bags of

26. The Gober sinks evoke other mysteries, those of the washroom, a place associated with an underground, a basement or a cellar, which is a recurrent location in Gober. Like the bathroom, the washroom is a place of initiation, but here the father is the spirit that presides over its secret ceremonies. In a commentary on his first sink, Gober remarked, "The basement is basically where my father lived, and I think, in a non-dark way, you learn as a young boy unconsciously about being a person and a man from your father" ("Interview with Richard Flood," p. 130). However, the very insistence on the "non" here suggests that this initiation might also have a dark side, that this space might be one of reclusion, if not of repression, that menaces the familial house, and, as we know, the divided house is another obsessive image in Gober.

"Fine Fare Cat Litter" set along the wall (all, as usual, fabricated by Gober and assistants). Thus from space to space, and from images to objects, Gober put a series of oppositions in play: male and female, bachelors and bride, white and black, immaculate gown and stale food, purity and pollution, dream and reality, and, above all, sexual difference and racial difference.

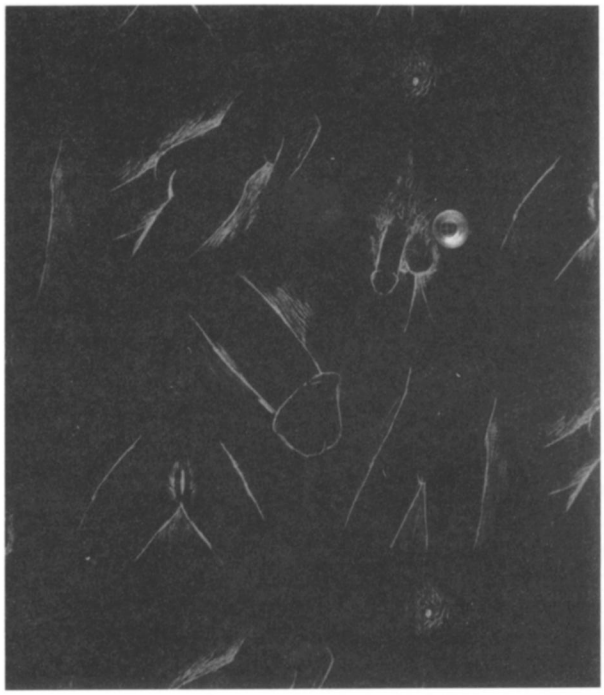
However, rather than map these oppositions onto one another, Gober intertwined the terms in an ensemble that evoked the intricacies of fear, desire, and pain at work deep in our political imaginary. In a sense this was to elaborate Freud as well as Duchamp, for here Gober intimated that our traumas of identity and difference are social and historical too.[27] It was also to refunction the diorama as a re-creation of an actual event, for here Gober intimated that our racist past persists, nightmarishly, in the present. In our political imaginary, simple oppositions of sex (male and female) and color (white and black) reconfirm one another in a way that makes complex differences across sexual and racial positions difficult to think, let alone to negotiate. The Cooper installation prompted the viewer to tease out old American knots of misogyny and miscegenation in the form of a broken allegory: What is the relationship between the two men? Does the black man haunt the white man? Does the white man dream the black man? If so, does the white man conjure the black man in hatred, guilt, or desire? Is the woman implied by the wedding gown the object of their struggle? If so, is she the pretext of their violence, or the relay of their longing, or both?[28] What is the role of heterosexual fantasy in racial politics? Of racial fantasy in heterosexual politics? And how do homosexuality or homosociality come into play? Finally, how does one *dis*articulate all these terms—clarify them in order to question them? The installation posed these traumatic questions, only to remain mute. But the wallpaper reminded us that they remain the stuff of everyday realities and everynight dreams.[29]

The installation also evoked another work by Duchamp, *Etant donnés* (1946–66). In this diorama at the Philadelphia Museum the viewer spies, through

27. In a celebrated passage in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967 [1952]), Frantz Fanon stages the moment of his racial marking as a social primal scene. For related encounters in modernist art, see my "'Primitive' Scenes," *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1993).

28. I presume her to be white—but then why should I? For that matter, why do I presume the absent bride to be female? (In some of his collaged pages from *The New York Times*, Gober has slipped his own body into the bridal wear advertised there.) Thus do these images catch us up in ideological assumptions, a catching up from which Gober is not free. When he used the wallpaper of the two men in a collaboration with Sherrie Levine at the Hirshhorn Museum in 1990, "museum employees of African-American descent found the imagery offensive and racist." In a subsequent conversation at the museum, Gober reported, "One man described it to me quite vividly as, 'We got the nigger, now we can go to sleep'" (Robert Gober, "Hanging Man, Sleeping Man," *Parkett* 27, pp. 90, 91).

29. In this light the best gloss on the installation may be the extraordinary meditation on racial and sexual trauma in William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936). In a similar spirit Flood mentions Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" (1897) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).



Gober. Installation at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. 1989.

a peephole in a door and a hole in a wall, a female mannequin spread-eagled in a wooded landscape, with a gas lamp in one hand (the Duchamp version of the Gober candles?) and a waterfall behind her (the Duchamp version of the Gober drains? in retroactive readings influence can flow backward, too). A more literal diorama than the Gober installations, *Etant donnés* is also a more direct re-creation of a primal scene, which, in another uneasy mixing of the public and the private, is reframed almost as a peep show. But what traumatic origin does one revisit here? The diorama brings into convergence two old obsessions of Duchamp, perspectival vision and sexual violation (both are essayed in *The Bride Stripped Bare* as well). Indeed, prominent theorists have read *Etant donnés* as a making-physical of perspective, one that connects our viewing point, through the holes, to the vanishing point, which coincides here with the vulva of the mannequin. *"Con celui qui voit,"* Jean-Francois Lyotard remarked concisely of this perspectival structure: "He who sees is a cunt."[30] In this account, then, Duchamp is taken to demonstrate that perspectival vision is not innocent, let alone scientific, that our gaze is marked by

30. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Les Transformateurs Duchamp* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), pp. 137–38.

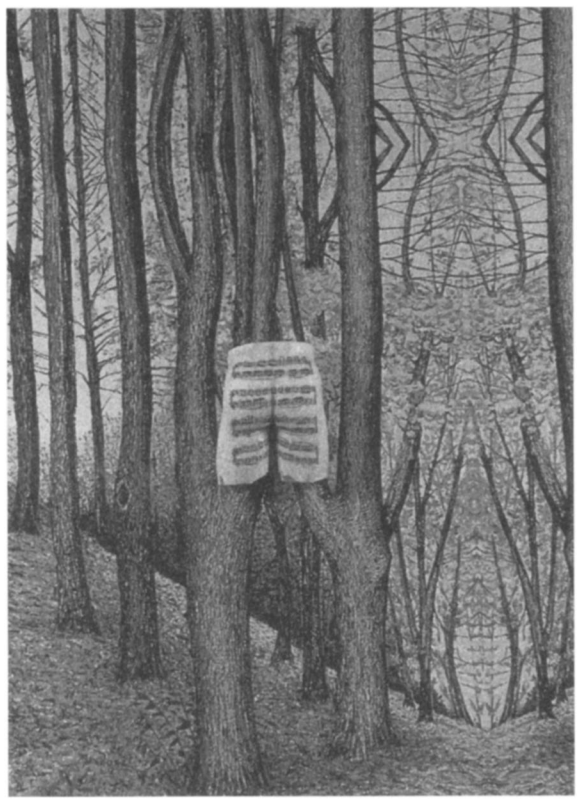
Duchamp. Etant Donnés *(Interior). 1946–66.*

sexual difference, by "this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration," as Lacan commented in a seminar contemporaneous with the finishing of *Etant donnés*.[31]

Gober assumes this Duchampian-Lacanian demonstration of the sexual inflection of the visual field precisely as a *donné*—as a given to elaborate in other ways.[32] In a 1991 installation at the Jeu de Paume he seemed to play on *Etant donnés*

31. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981 [seminar given in February 1964]), p. 77. In *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), Rosalind Krauss complements this Lacanian account of perspective, of difference in vision, with a Sartrean reading that complicates the position of the viewer on this side of the diorama, in the public space of the museum: not only is our gaze inflected by sexual difference, but as viewers in a public space we are under the gaze of others, caught in the act of the Peeping Tom (which, retrospectively at least, is the position of us all in the primal scene). Yet, even as there is shame in this looking, there is pleasure too—the pleasure not only of the voyeur but of the reciprocal figure, the exhibitionist. That is, might we not also identify with the exhibitionistic position of the mannequin, even as we gaze at her voyeuristically? As I suggested at the outset, this reciprocality is also put into play by Gober.

32. It should be noted that this demonstration came to Gober through the feminist postmodernist art of Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and others.

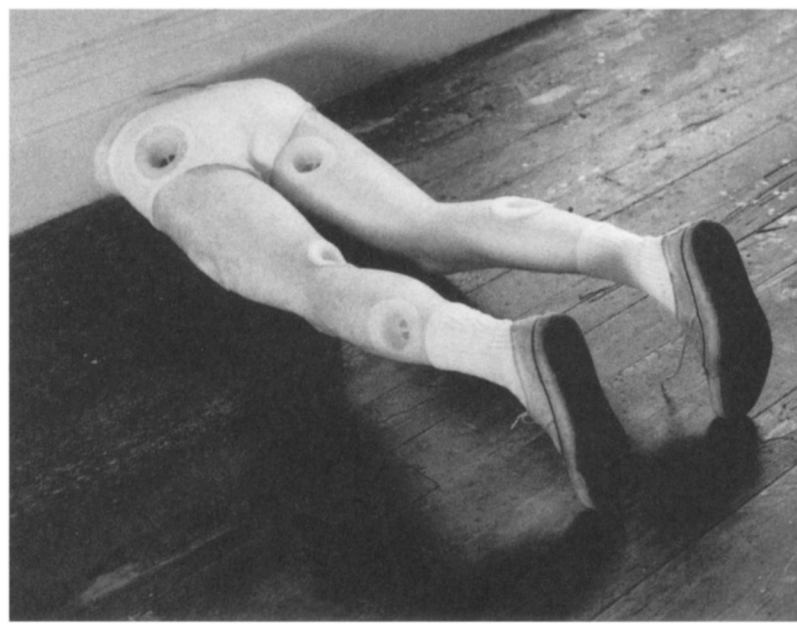


Gober. Installation, Jeu de Paume, Paris. 1991.

again. There Gober positioned three works in relation to a late-autumnal landscape of bare trees patterned in color on the walls: a cast male butt tattooed with bars of music and mounted, butt outward, against one wall; and two legs that extended from other walls, face down, on the floor. One leg wore dark pants, dress shoes, and socks, and was planted with three candles through holes cut in the trousers; the other wore white briefs, tennis shoes, and socks, and was plugged with several drains colored like flesh. For Gober the three works "present[ed] a trinity of possibilities—from pleasure to disaster to resuscitation,"[33] and at first it seemed clear which was which: pleasure was promised by the musical butt, disaster by the drained legs, resuscitation by the candles that wait to be lit. But an insistent ambivalence within each work disturbed this redemptive narrative. For the musical butt may evoke pain as much as pleasure (to the extreme point of the grotesque tattooing of Jews, homosexuals, and others in the Nazi death camps), and the source of the image is also ambiguous (it derives from the depiction of Hell in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* [1500] by Hieronymus Bosch).[34] Conversely, the drained legs may suggest seduction as much as violation, and the candles may summon up

33. Gober in "Interview with Richard Flood," p. 125.

34. In a diorama of 1994–95 Gober did evoke gas chambers and mass graves: it consisted of a pile of truncated legs (with socks and sandals) behind bars, the central ones bent in a belated promise of escape.



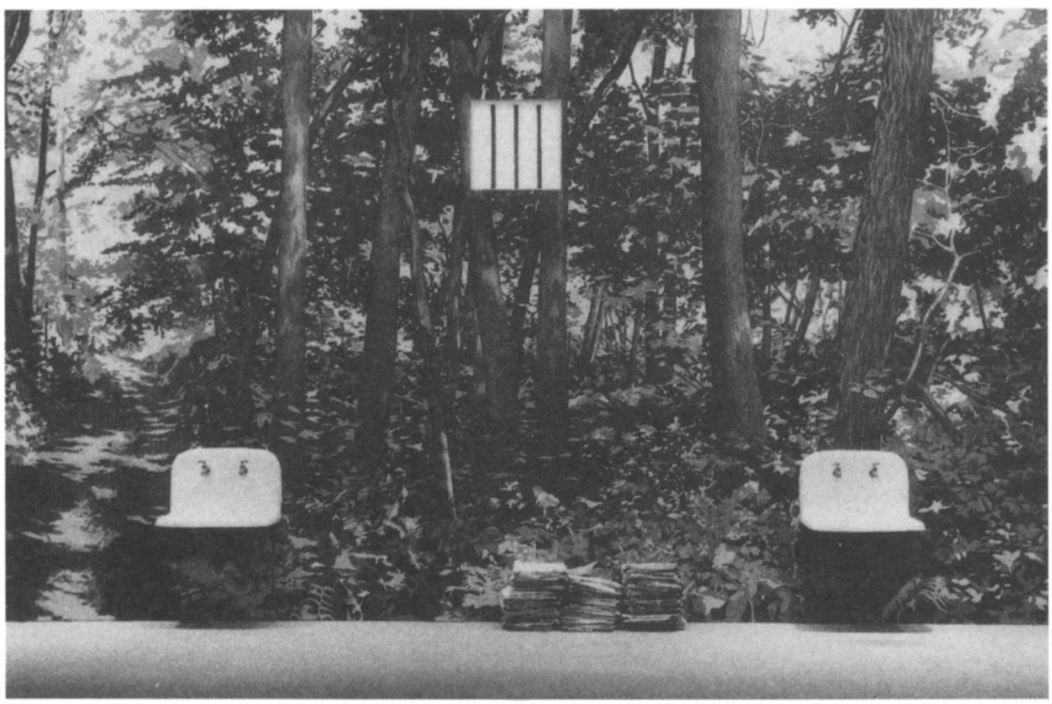
Untitled. *1991.*

death as much as resuscitation.[35] It is this ambivalence of near-opposites that sustains the enigma of the objects, which conduces to a complexity at once aesthetic, sexual, and moral, and which the closure of a redemptive narrative would diminish. This ambivalence may be most pointed in another object from 1991, the candle with hair at its base, which suggests both a memorial candle and an erect penis.[36] Like some other Gober objects, this mixing of mortality and sexuality projects a Catholic sense of the complementarity of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the base; but this complementarity is turned critically, "perverted," for here the second term controls the first.

But what of the landscape in the Jeu de Paume installation? Here again a comparison with *Etant donnés* is instructive. In his dioramic landscape with spread-eagled mannequin Duchamp suggests a relation not only between perspective

35. For me the legs planted with candles recall the haunting dream, told by Freud and repeated by Lacan, of the father who falls asleep while his dead son lies in the next room. In the dream the father imagines, in a self-reproach, that the room is on fire and that he has failed once again to save his son, who appears to admonish him: "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" In this case "Father" might also read as "Brother" or "Lover."

36. Ibid., p. 133.



Installation view, Dia Center for the Arts, New York. 1992–93. (Photo: Bill Jacobson.)

and castration but between pictorial landscape and sexual violation—perhaps through a will to possession that the first sublimates and the second performs. The Jeu de Paume installation also presented a perspectival landscape, as drawn on the walls by the repeated avenues of bare trees. Yet in this case the body parts were male, and they were moved away from the vanishing point of the perspective toward the seams between the patterns of trees. These seams opened and closed in a way that intimated a different kind of intercourse with the natural world, one of connection and communion rather than of castration and domination. In effect this rendered the landscape a homoerotic pastoral. Yet at the same time its season was near winter, and this dying turned a potentially suprahistorical pastoral into a historically specific elegy, a lament for the lost men of the AIDS epidemic. Again, in 1991 "death ha[d] temporally overtaken life. . . ."

In a 1992–93 installation at Dia Center for the Arts, Gober once more recalled *Etant donnés*, but this field of effects was now his own as well. Again we confronted a wooded landscape in the form of repeated wallpaper, but the season had changed to spring and nature appeared replenished. This seemed confirmed by the fact that the sinks that punctuated the forested walls were plumbed, that water flowed. Moreover, the body, the *corpus delicti*, was missing. In a sense we stood in its stead, and this rendered our position ambiguous and the space strange. For within a room we beheld a landscape, but this landscape had holes, squares cut like windows in the walls, and, more enigmatically, these windows, beyond which appeared the bright light of apparent sky, were barred. Bound stacks of *The New York Times* were placed along the walls and by the columns, and boxes of "Enforcer Rat Bait" under some sinks. Both outside and inside, then, we were also somehow *below*, in a spatial experience that was equal parts René Magritte painting, Franz Kafka novel, and everyday apartment-building basement. Once again, oppositions like purity and pollution (the running water, the rat poison) were in play, as were allusions to sexual and racial difference (some of the collaged newspapers showed reports of abuse and discrimination next to wedding announcements). The scenic ambiguity of the diorama was also used to underscore the old divide in American ideology between transcendentalist myths of individual and nature (the wallpaper might be called Ever Emerson or Thoroughly Thoreau) and contemporary realities of mass anonymity and urban confinement.

Much was made of the fact that water flowed for the first time in these dioramas. As the dry sinks, urinals, and drains came to read as "surrogate portraits of gay men in the 1980s," Gober began to question his AIDS iconography of broken plumbing and drained bodies: "I felt the need to turn that around and to not have a gay artist represented as a nonfunctioning utilitarian object, but one functioning beautifully, almost in excess."[37] For some critics this change expressed a desire not

37. Flood, "The Law of Indirections," p. 12; Gober in "Interview with Richard Flood," p. 128.

Details from installation, Dia Center for the Arts, New York. 1992–93.

only for health but for another model of desire, one based on flow and excess rather than loss and lack.[38] Developed by Deleuze and Guattari, in part through a different reading of the bachelor machines of Duchamp, this voluntaristic model of desire expressly opposes the psychoanalytic model elaborated by Freud, Lacan, and Laplanche that I have employed here.[39] One cannot have it both ways, one has to choose between these models. But if Gober began to shift here, it was less a shift from an aesthetic of missing parts to one of dis/connective flows than a shift from a realism of psychic loss to a symbolism of redemptive faith. And this turn was only begun: for though the water ran, we were still underground, and though spring had come, the space was still barred (not only at the windows but at a locked exit door with a red light above). Where nature was once desiccated, it was now deluged, so that if this were the spring after the winter of the Jeu de Paume installation, it remained the April of a contemporary Waste Land: "breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain. . . ."

Riddling, Redeeming, Working Over

In a 1995 installation in Basel, Gober explored this new idiom of water and flow, but its intimation of connection and renewal still vied with an evocation of division and decay: there were doors and walls that were doubled (the split house again), and dead leaves and crumpled cans that appeared in drains. However, in a 1997 installation at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, a redemptive iconography prevailed. Here one descended into a large space dominated by a six-foot statue of the Virgin Mary set on a storm-drain grate (the elements were crafted as always). Behind the Virgin was an enclosed wooden stairway down which water

38. See Helen Molesworth, "Stops and Starts," elsewhere in this issue.

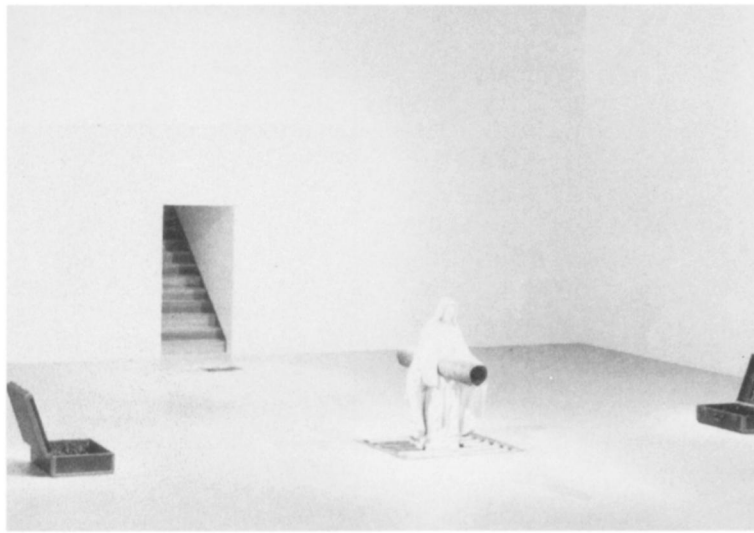
39. There is nothing ambiguous in this regard about the Deleuze and Guattari manifesto *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). My investment in the psychoanalytic model of desire might be, at least in part, an investment in the pathos of loss, and (as my colleague Michael Wood has revealed to me) this investment might be at work in much melancholia as well. In other words, melancholic attachment might be to the pathos of loss more than to the object lost; it is this pathos that is so hard to give up.

cascaded to a storm drain below (at a rate of 180 gallons a minute), and she was flanked by two old-fashioned suitcases open on the floor. Through each suitcase one could peer down into a tidal pool bathed in pristine light where a man waded with an infant in his arms (as usual one could see little more than legs). These pools mixed new life and old, the natural world and the human, in an almost baptismal way. The Virgin stood above a pool too, a wishing well strewn with huge pennies, which Gober dated to the year of his birth (1954). Like her suitcases (her altar wings?), she seemed an emblem of passage, the central conduit in this system of flows, the main medium of faith at these different stations of life—life everlasting (the stairway to heaven), human in its generations (father and child in the water), and primal marine (the tidal pools).

Gober rejected the Catholicism of his youth, as it had rejected him as a gay man. Yet, again, it often returns in his objects—perversely, critically, as in the hairy candle with its privileging of the profane over the sacred, the base over the spiritual. In the Los Angeles installation, however, the conventional hierarchy of these opposed terms returned; more, the second term worked to redeem the first in a way that threatened to undo the enigmatic complementarity of the two captured in prior work. This is not to say that no ambiguity or ambivalence remained. The water was figured as both destructive and restorative, and the Virgin was hardly heavenly: presented in worn concrete, a garden ornament eroded by worldly weather, she was also run through the middle with an industrial pipe (in bronze), as if she were only a material culvert in a material world. But did this pipe point to a hole where the Savior should be, and did the open suitcases underline that all was lost?[40] Or was it a conduit through which the destructive water passed to the restorative pools?

"The stream of life goes through the Virgin," Gober remarked of the installation, without apparent irony.[41] Here, then, we were far from the virgins of

40. This is how David Joselit read it: "Gober suggests that both bodies and things have been let go, allowed to slip into oblivion" ("Poetics of the Drain," *Art in America* 85, no. 12 [December 1997], p. 66).
41. Gober in "Interview with Richard Flood," p. 137.



Duchamp and his dioramas of desire. Rather than preside over a theater of desire-in-loss (or even desire-as-flow), this Virgin seemed to figure a wish for fulfillment, indeed a wish-fulfillment for a fallen world restored to maternal plenitude. "My mother had a sophisticated reading of the show," Gober also commented, with apparent approval. "She thought the whole piece was about me making a sculpture of my own birth"; and he added that for him to be inside a church (it was a kind of chapel that he fashioned here) was to be "inside a miraculous human body."[42] This remark points to another primal fantasy, an intrauterine one, which, in opposition to the the others, is a fantasy of repletion that readily crosses over into a fantasy of redemption.[43] With its rushing water, tidal pools, wishing well, and enfolding mother, this diorama did seem to stage a dream of redemption, of self-redemption, in which the viewer was invited to participate (to project) as well—and the enthusiastic reception of the show suggests that few could resist. Some of the relief on offer

Gober. Installation views, MOCA at the Geffen Contemporary, Los Angeles. 1997. (Photos: Russell Kaye.)

here was due to the easing of the AIDS epidemic (at least for the privileged) on account of the partial success of recent treatments. But some of the relief was also in keeping with the current reaction against the difficulties of traumatic loss, critical negativity, and abject states in art and theory, a reaction expressed in the renewed interest in Beauty and Spirituality. In any case the relief was psychic, a solace that heretofore Gober had refused, precisely because it involves a sublimation that heretofore he had resisted, indeed exposed—a sublimation of the enigmas of sexuality into "the mystery of faith."[44]

The problem here was not that there was a redemptive narrative, or any narrative at all. A riddle is a story too, precisely so, but it is one missing in meaning, whereas the story of the Los Angeles Virgin was allegorically neat and formally closed, and thus redemptive in a profound structural sense as well. For Laplanche, the most affective enigmatic signifiers are "designified," somehow broken in signification.[45] This is true of the most effective Gober dioramas, too. "Something's literally missing in the story," Gober once remarked of the Cooper installation, "if you look at it as a story—and you kind of have to. You have to supply that: what was the crime, what really happened, what's the relationship between these two men."[46] Again, this is the work of his best work, to sustain enigma, and it is usually done in two complementary ways. The first is to evoke a narrative riddle, a story with a hole in it. The second is to trace this hole somehow, to figure the missing part—*not* to fill in this hole or to make this part complete. The missing part, the lost object, is not only a desired thing; sometimes it seems rejected, spited, even accursed: the missing part as *la part maudite.* It is this quality that often renders his objects paradoxical and his viewers ambivalent, for again it is as if we suddenly beheld the thing that we have sought forever *and* dreaded to find. It is this anxious fixation in us that Gober re-creates in some early dioramas.

An insistence on the missing and the *maudite* was present in much dissident art and philosophy of the twentieth century that challenged the official ideals of

42. Ibid., pp. 141, 142. "She didn't think the Virgin Mary was specifically the Virgin Mary. She thought she was perhaps a stand-in for motherhood. And then she had a hole in her stomach where the baby would have been. The coins had my birth date. There was the man with the baby who was maybe giving birth. Those were her reasons."

43. See note 6. Contrast this fantasy with one active in a work made in 1991 at the height of the AIDS epidemic: a collaged newspaper with a one-paragraph report from 1960 about a six-year-old boy named Robert Gober who had drowned in a pool in Wallingford, Connecticut (the artist's age and home at the time).

44. Gober in "Interview with Richard Flood," p. 142. "It is an enormous relief to the individual psyche," Freud wrote in his critique of religion, "if the conflicts of its childhood . . .—conflicts which it has never wholly overcome—are removed from it and brought to a solution" (Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* [1927], trans. James Strachey [New York: Norton, 1961], p. 30).

45. Laplanche, *New Foundations,* p. 45. For Laplanche the crucial aspect of the enigmatic signifier is not its meaning but its address—its "power to signify *to.*"

46. Gober, "Interview with Richard Flood," p. 9.

aesthetic completion, symbolic totality, dialectical assimilation, and the like. Subterranean in modernism, which favored Hegelian systems over the nasty remainders that they cannot absorb, this insistence rose to the surface again in vanguard culture of the last decade. Whether conceived in terms of the heterogeneous (as in Georges Bataille), the traumatic real (as in Lacan), the abject (as in Julia Kristeva), or the inhuman (as in Lyotard), this motive drove many different practices in the 1990s, which faced new totalities (like cyber virtuality and global capitalism) to resent, perhaps to resist.[47] This motive did not became normative, but it did approach the routine. Moreover, it became restricted by its own anxious fixations. No wonder, then, that Gober wanted to escape this paranoid fascination with enigmatic signifiers, this melancholic cult of traumatic loss. So did many other artists and critics—thus again the current appeal to Beauty and Spirituality.[48] But between riddling and redeeming, besides an art of missing parts and an aesthetic of wish-fulfillment, there are other ways; indeed there is a third way intimated by Gober. Neither fixation on trauma nor faith that magically undoes loss, but the fabrication of scenes for a working over of both loss and trauma—a working over, not a working through in the sense of a having done, of a narrative closure or a redemptive meaning. Gober has revealed that his work is not as laborious or painstaking as it often appears.[49] Nonetheless, it does suggest some ratio between physical labor and psychic labor, between the working up of the fictive objects and spaces and the working over of traumatic causes and effects. Even if it is not laborious in one sense, this work can be pains-taking in this other sense too, in a way that neither fixes on trauma nor leaps toward redemption.

47. See my *Return of the Real*, chapter 5 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

48. In *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Bersani and Dutoit argue that the enigmatic signifer locks the primal couple of parent and infant in a relation of paranoid fascination that is then replicated in other relations throughout life. And they explore the particular ways that Caravaggio plays pictorially with such fascination (not through beauty and spirituality, obviously)—on occasion to offer potential forms of release from it.

49. Gober in "Interview with Richard Flood," p. 124.