

## **The Function of the Artist in Contemporary Society**

The artist's function in contemporary society is to create new ways of seeing by researching previous ways of seeing, breaking them down and repurposing them to expose underlying assumptions of established knowledge. This process induces an uncertainty and an ambiguity of meaning in order to cause a questioning of identity. The breaking down of previously understood meaning often leads to abjection, which the psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia Kristeva defines as "a disturbing of identity, system, and order without respect for borders, positions, and rules" (Kristeva 207-10).

I arrived at this conclusion because the above definition seems to describe how many artists intend for their work to function in contemporary society today. I am referring to art that has been legitimized through notable texts, respected museums and galleries, and has been deemed important and influential by persons of authority in the art world.

I believe this is an important and effective way for the artist to function in the world because if we are not faced with the kind of trepidation and discomfort that causes us to question preconceived ideas of knowledge, meaning and identity, then we do not grow and evolve as individuals or as a society. An intense pushing of boundaries causes a greater awareness of our own feelings about ourselves and others and the roles we play. A continuous challenge of the notions of self is what we need to understand who we are.

Many of these thoughts and ideas came from poststructuralist thinkers who have had a huge influence on the postmodern artists of today. These thinkers have been united by a rejection of the Enlightenment project and more importantly a refutation of modernism.

In the past artists have always acted as a reflection of the time period that they were born into. Some of the historically constructed definitions of the artist's function in society are imitator of reality (Plato), servant of God and the Church, autonomous genius (Kant), politically motivated member of society (Marx), authentic, intuitive and self-expressing (Rosenberg), cultural worker, and post-colonial other. In some respects, a few of these functions may still be a part of the present day artist's role, but there is another dimension to how artists currently function in society and most of the occupations listed were the goal of other historical eras leading up to and including modernism.

The goal of the modern era was to seek knowledge and to understand the secrets of the universe so that there could be a mastering of nature in order to create a better world. This method puts absolute faith in human rational capabilities. The moderns believed that knowledge was certain and objective and inherently good which lead to the belief that progress is inevitable. They had faith that the knowledge based fields of science and education would free us from vulnerability to nature and social bondage (Grenz 7).

But, modernism began to be challenged in the 1970's with the deconstructionist idea that meaning doesn't come from the text, but from the interpreter. Each reader has a different perspective. Reality then is also left up to the interpreter and there is not one universal and objective meaning for the world. Poststructuralist thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty lead the way in abandoning the quest for a unified grasp of objective reality.

Postmodernism gained momentum in the 1970's and really came to fruition in the 1980's with pop culture and during these decades is when we really start to see a big shift in the way art is made. Art was no longer about social advancement and the thought that human beings could create, improve and reshape their environment with the help of science, technology and

education. Instead, artists started to follow in the footsteps of the poststructuralist thinkers and began challenging the idea that knowledge is good and objective. They did not believe that there is one universal and purely rational truth, which leads to inevitable progress. For them truth was based on emotions and intuition and interpretation and was also relative to the community in which one lives. Postmodern artists saw truth and knowledge as relative (Grenz 24-25).

Moving forward, artists have continued to think this way, and in the current time period they stress some concepts such as: people are constructs of society; there is no true authorship or originality; myths are important and facilitate social relationships; and there is great importance in global consciousness and a celebration of diversity. The methods they used to express these concepts often revolved around a juxtaposition of contradictory images and an embrace of stylistic differences.

Through the process of making and presenting art in contemporary society, I believe the artist is replacing knowledge with interpretation. There is a breaking down of previously understood meaning that often leads to abjection, which in turn results in redefining self and identity. The poststructuralist thinker, Kristeva, introduced the idea of "abjection" in her book "Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection" as the basis of a fundamental differentiation between the self and non-self. Abjection is defined as a reaction to the confrontation of bodily fluids and the corpse causing disgust or phobia. Kristeva said that these things have no status as objects, and do not belong to the self, and thus are seen as a threat by the subject, who rejects them (Kristeva 207-10).

Much of the artwork that forces us to face and question our definition of self has to do with transgressing physical boundaries. Kristeva believes that anytime identity is challenged it brings the physical body into the picture. She theorized that when physical boundaries erode, the

self must deal with the body in a way that betrays social norms and biological givens in the process (Frank 18).

As we cross physical boundaries we are asked to examine the body in a way that prompts us to think about demographic information such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, reproductive status, physical ability, grooming rituals, and body modification practices, which causes us to question where we stand in the midst of it all (1). This might both scare us and enrich us. There are pleasures and dangers in breaking down barriers that reveal our bodies allowing for scrutinization. When considering gender we must be aware that historically woman have been seen as objects with a focus on both the beauty and function of their bodies rather than as a body containing a mind. There is a need for women to “un-objectify” their bodies in order to be taken seriously in academia. For women, the practice of exposing the corporeality of their bodies has become a necessary yet risky rite of passage into the academic right and possibly a requirement to produce both knowledge and art. When contemplating the effects of gender on what constitutes an artist, we must consider the interdisciplinary contributions of feminists. Feminism thrust the female body into focus, calling attention to its simultaneously political, biological, and cultural dimensions (19).

Kristeva has been categorized as a feminist thinker because of her radical, liberal and social claims about gender in society. Her serious social and cultural research on the body has laid the groundwork for many artists thought of as feminist. Feminist artists often dismantled ideas of gender, identity, and form to build them back up again in a new way. Feminist also questioned whether the historical Western canon, largely male, truly represented “universality.” They used performance art, video, and other artistic expressions not traditionally seen as high art, which have now become significant in postmodernism. All of postmodern art as well as feminist art declared that meaning and experience were as valuable as form (Napikoski).

In the current art world women continue to create new ways of seeing in order to reveal underlying assumptions of established knowledge, which call for a greater investigation into identity. I have chosen Louise Bourgeois, Helen Chadwick and Cindy Sherman as examples of how I believe the artist functions in society. These artists use feminist thoughts and theories as well as the research of Julia Kristeva to explore the boundaries of the physical body and challenge the historically recognized notions of self.

Louise Bourgeois was a heroine of the early feminists. Bourgeois' art often referred to the bodily experiences of women such as pregnancy, birth, and breast-feeding. She also used the context of the house to talk about the stereotypes of the woman's role in the home. Bourgeois made a series of both drawings and sculpture called "Femme Maison" (1946-47) which depicted naked women with houses for heads. In these pieces the woman's physical body is essentially becoming a house. This theme brought attention to the fact that many women were finding their identity in the role that they played in their homes. (Sandler 120-122).

She also made various sculptures depicting pregnant women who are legless, armless and headless. In these pieces the women seem defenseless and vulnerable and they find their only identity in what's being held in the belly. There are other artworks by Bourgeois like "Knife Woman" (2002) which are much more aggressive. In "Knife Woman" the dismembered female torso seems to have a knife growing out of its chest and it is hard to tell who is in control of the cutting. It could be inflicted by an oppositional force or possibly self-inflicted (120-122).

Some of Bourgeois' work has been preoccupied with childhood, trauma and alienation that revolve around memories of her womanizing father and his mistresses who became intruders in her house. She reveals these hidden feelings lurking within by creating the sculpture "The Destruction of the Father" (1974). The disturbing imagery in this piece resembles the remains of a man devoured by his wife and children at the family dinner table. The violence and

cannibalism implied in this work are extremely repellent and painful for the viewer to encounter (121).

Through a division of the physical body juxtaposed with symbolic objects Bourgeois makes her viewers uncomfortable. By using the body she is calling into question the role of the woman who has been defined by her body and its functions and she's asking how her body can be reclaimed. Bourgeois both forms and deforms the body, by dehumanizing and objectifying it. She depersonalizes and dismembers parts of the body, which cause us to examine the traditional depiction of the human figure in sculpture (Harrison-Sve). The abjection in Louise Bourgeois' artwork is pushing the social and biological boundaries that had been set up by society. We, the viewers, are forced to question the established societal framework and try to understand what this means for own identity and our relationship to others.

Helen Chadwick is another artist who makes work that is both considered feminist and abject. Her art is often described as visceral and talks about what it is to be human. All her works from the 1970's through the 1990's have surrounded the theme of flesh, sex, femininity and the place of the body in society. She transforms the image of the body, life and death by combining mythical, anatomical and scientific sources (Buck). Chadwick ridicules aesthetic sensibilities and confronts restrictions by using contradictory images of internal and external corporeality (Kerek).

In a series of photographs entitled "Meat Abstracts" (1989) she combined the fleshy surfaces of meat with electric light. The "Meat Abstracts" demonstrate Chadwick's subtly disturbing formal techniques, merging the clarity and allure provided by light with unsettling visceral compositions of lumps of meat.

In another piece entitled "Loop My Loop" (1989) Chadwick entwined a golden braid of hair with a worm-like intestine. The first impression is of pure beauty, followed by revulsion and

disgust. She takes the inside and puts it on the outside. She puts something internal and grotesque that we aren't accustomed to seeing in combination with something external that we see often and are drawn to and desire.

Chadwick takes her viewers through an exploration of desire, lust, identity and humanity. She described the feelings her work provoked as "gorgeously repulsive, exquisitely fun, and dangerously beautiful". (Gupta) The work confronts our notion of physical beauty and what lies beneath its surface.

Cindy Sherman is another artist that deals with the abject in her work. Her photographs challenge the imagery and myths in the world of gender and sexual stereotypes. Her work crosses the boundaries of playfulness and fantasy into a rigorous exploration of self through portraiture. In 1992-93, Sherman produced a series of photographs called "Sex Pictures". These photographs featured pieced-together sexually explicit medical dummies arranged in a way that mocked conventional conceptions of obscenity. (Roberts) These images ask us to cross-examine the fascination, repulsion, and disgust that we feel for the grotesque.

When this work was shown in a gallery the viewers felt such abjection that Sherman said "They thought that live models were used...I think what I realized from this is that people couldn't bear to look closely enough to realize that it was fake." The bodies in the photographs seem both real and unreal even though they are obviously artificial. The inanimate became animate.

The erotic and grotesque positions of the mannequins disturb the culturally given boundaries of relationships between males and females, both gay and straight. It ultimately creates an ambiguity that taps directly into our fears and desires of corporeality. (Lichtenstein)

When Sherman takes these familiar poses and defamiliarizes them, a visual disorientation takes place and it makes us feel that we have lost a sense of control of our bodies. We are forced

to ask questions such as: what lies behind our gaze? How do we use our bodies to relate to one another? And what are the cultural formations of sexuality, gender, and censorship. Sherman says, “I would hope that these images would make people confront their own feelings about sex, pornography, or erotic images and their own bodies.” (Lichtenstein)

Some might say there is an impending sense of death that surrounds these images. Death is the definitive crossing over of boundaries from subject to object. Sherman explains that the ambiguity of death is “terrifying and grotesque. It's something we can never know about until it's too late” (Lichtenstein)

I'd like to reiterate that the abject consists of those elements of the body that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and respectability. The abject covers all the bodily functions, or aspects of the body, that are deemed impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion. Kristeva herself said “refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 207-10).

The exploration of female biology, sexuality and identity, have engaged feminist artists. These women continue to bring to our attention the abjection of their own bodies in order to redefine the preconceived constructs of the body and create a new identity for themselves and others. I believe, as Kristeva did, that we need a continuous challenge of the notions of self to understand who we are. Bourgeois, Chadwick and Sherman as well as the feminist artists at large, created new ways of seeing by researching previous ways of seeing, breaking them down and repurposing them to expose underlying assumptions of established knowledge. They induced an uncertainty and an ambiguity of meaning, causing a questioning of identity, and this is my definition of how the artist functions in society.

If there is a confrontation and disturbance of boundaries when we look at art, than we experience it on a level that transgresses previous knowledge of the self and this realization that

there is a new way of seeing things opens the door to progress. Crossing boundaries of identity begs the question: how does our shared corporeality affect who we are, not only “to” each other, but more specifically “for” each other? Then this shared condition of being bodies becomes a basis for empathic relations among living beings (Frank 35). Humans come together through identifying with one another and understanding a shared experience of mortality through corporeality. I believe that this is what causes us to evolve as individuals and as a society.

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# Imitator of Reality



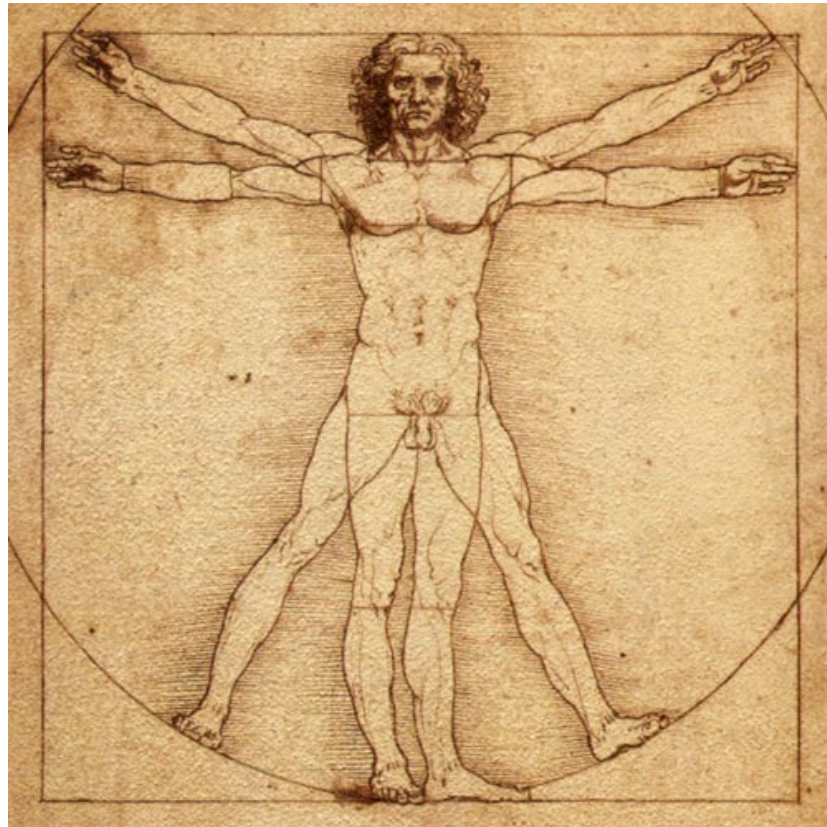
Jean-Francois Millet-The Gleaners

# Servant of God and Church



Michelangelo-Pieta

# Autonomous Genius



Leonardo DaVinci-Vitruvian Man

# Politically Motivated Member of Society



Jasper Johns-Flag

# Authentic, Intuitive and Self-Expressing



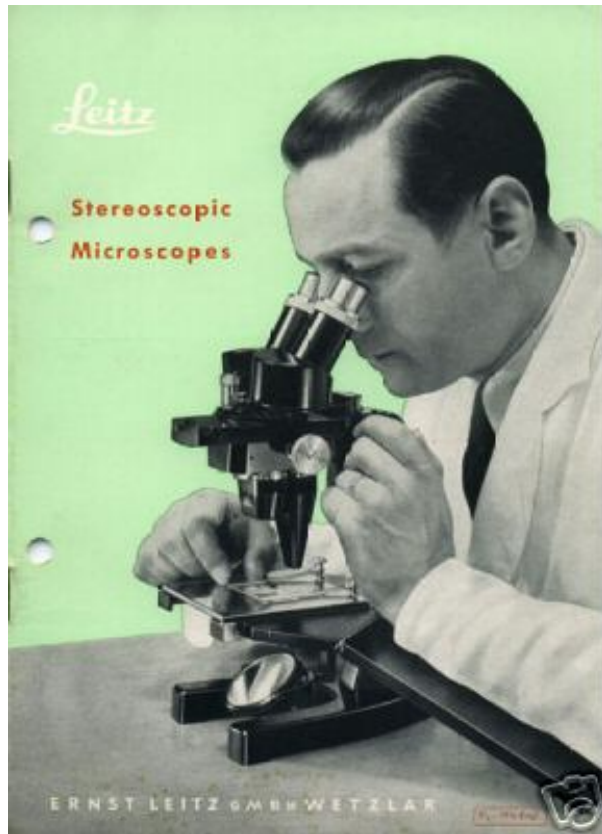
Jackson Pollock

# Cultural Worker



Diego Rivera-The Arsenal

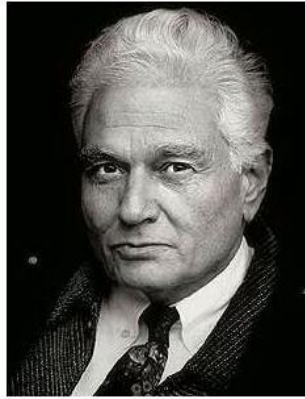
# Goal of Modernism



Kristeva



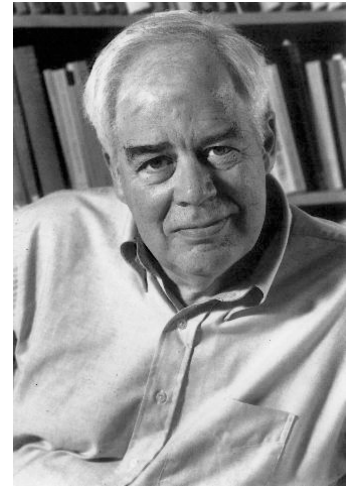
Derrida



Foucault



Rorty

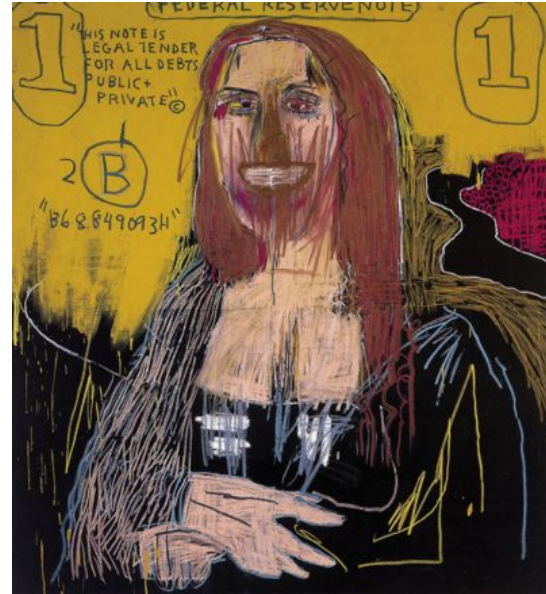


# Postmodernism

Jeff Koons



Jean-Michel Basquiat



David Salle

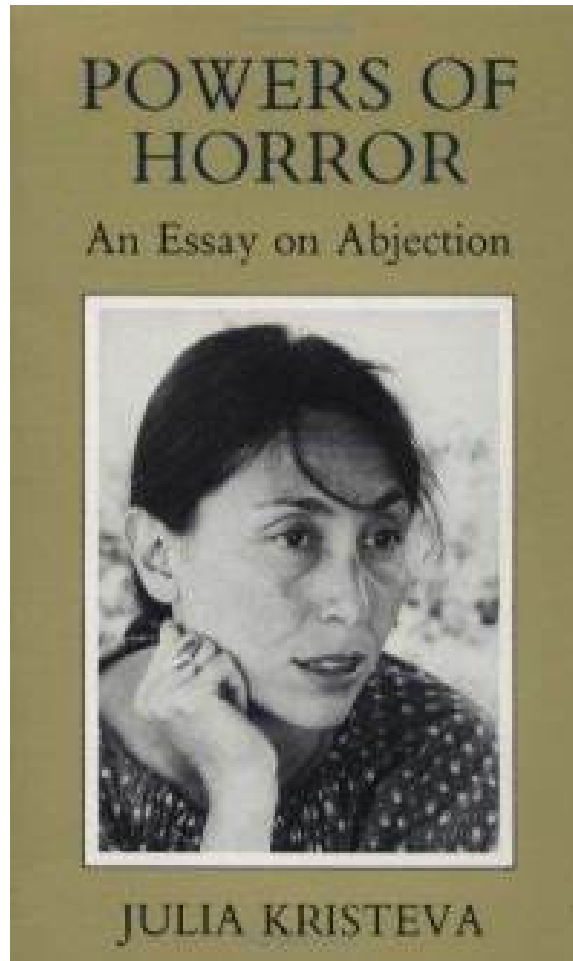


Elizabeth Murray



# Julia Kristeva

## Abjection



# Feminist Artists



Eleanor Antin



Judy Chicago



Hannah Wilke



Carolee Schneeman

Louise Bourgeois

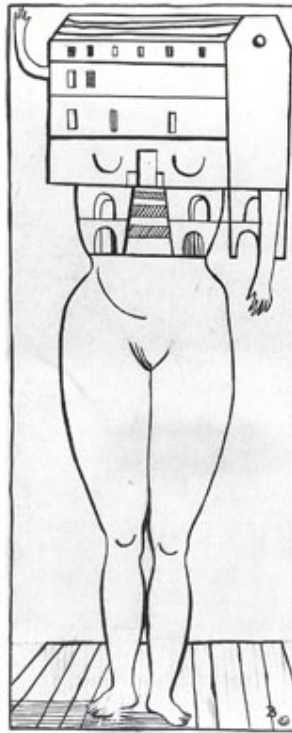
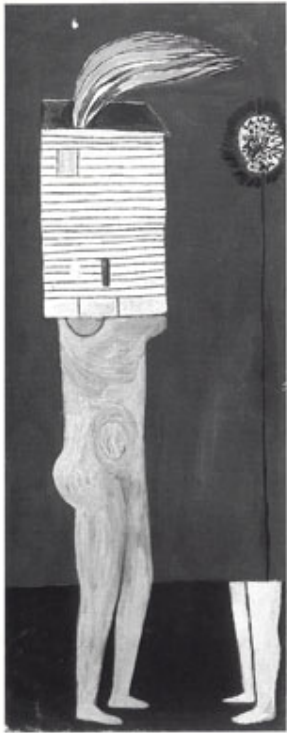


Helen Chadwick

Cindy Sherman



# Femme Maison



# The Woven Child



**Louise Bourgeois - The Woven Child, ( detail) 2002 - Fabric, stainless steel, glass, and wood - 70 x 35 x 21 inches - Stoddard Acquisition Fund - Worcester Art Museum**

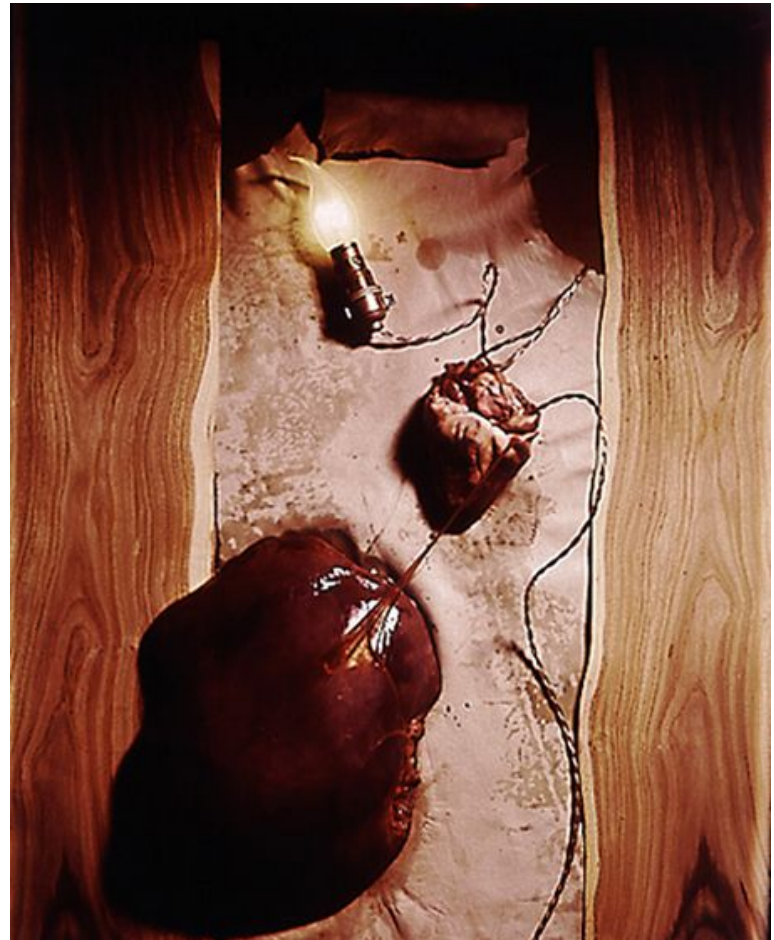
# Knife Woman



# The Destruction of the Father



# Meat Abstracts



# Loop My Loop



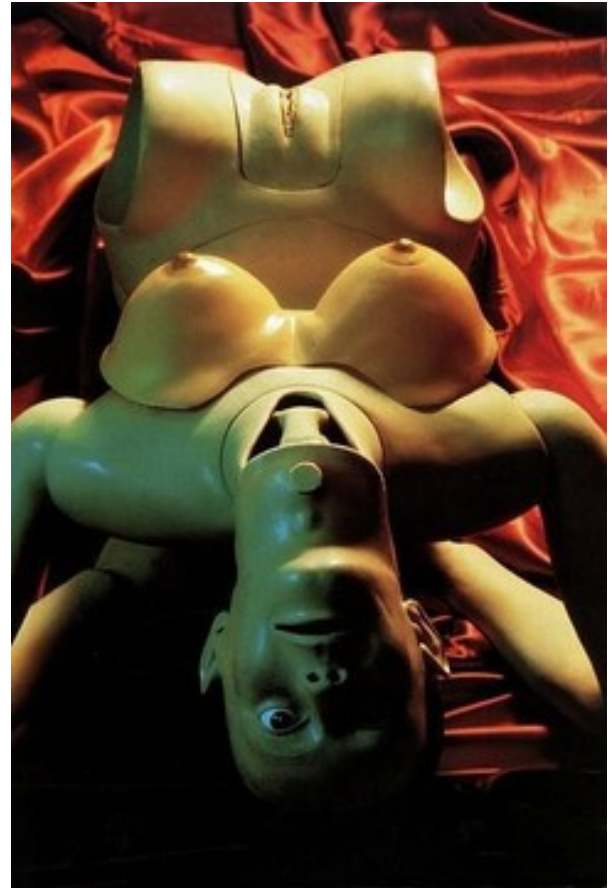
# Sex Series



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