

From concept to gesture:

Bonvicini's play with the strategies of modernism, or how to turn minimalism from its head onto its hands

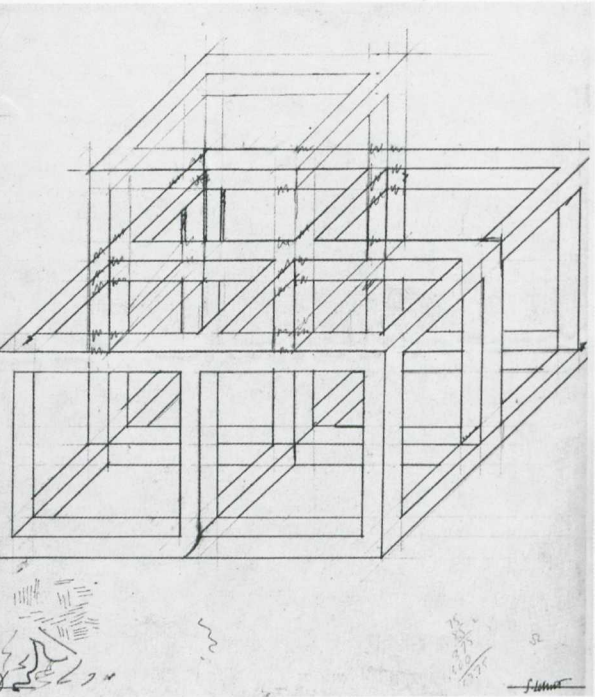
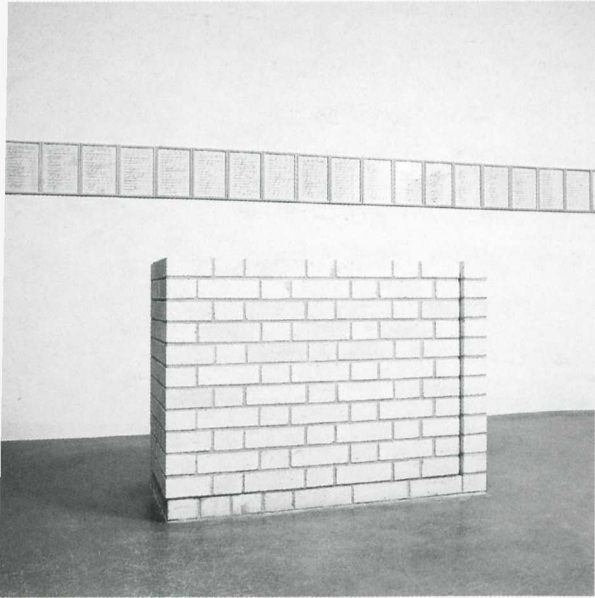
Susanne von Falkenhausen

The success of Monica Bonvicini's art is recent: two important prizes in the past two years, one exhibition after the other in galleries in Berlin, where the artist lives, and elsewhere, the first major works - installations of a certain weight, in the physical sense as well - sold.

What does all this mean? Do these works perhaps follow some trend? Do they touch the senses and hearts of viewers? Are they spectacular in the sense of a culture of events? Is there something about them that would help us to understand why they have entered the circulation of the "avant-garde" art market? These questions are not intended to move us towards the sort of gloomy moralistic anti-trendism, anti-consumerism and anti-capitalism that are never far behind when Germans speak about art. My concern, rather, is to formulate a point of departure for an analysis, taking the fact of this success as a symptom of the circumstances prevailing in the context in which this art is produced - an approach, it seems to me, that I share in a certain sense with the artist, as we shall see presently.

In my field, art history, constructing artistic genealogies in order to judge an artist's work is an ancient custom. In general, artists do not have parents, but first and foremost fathers, and occasionally grandfathers - following presumed similarities of style, of ingenuity, spirituality and other eminently idealistic and vague criteria. This approach does not get us very far, however, when dealing with artists in their thirties like Bonvicini. This generation has grown up in the age of postmodernism with its rapid coming and going of trends, practices and artistic methods, which echo the strategies more than the styles of the fathers and grandfathers. Their presuppositions, however, are far removed from the schemes and myths of "true" art in the odor of brilliant authenticity, as the militant critic of the Abstract Expressionists and prophet of "Modernism" Clement Greenberg preached it in the 1950s. And thus even the personal genealogies of artistic careers today are constructed in highly diverse ways.

Looking at her works of the past two years, one may perhaps succeed in reconstructing some of the artistic echoes which perpetuate themselves within the framework of Monica Bonvicini's oeuvre.



•1 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube - The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, San Francisco 1976.

- 43 Veduta della mostra / Exhibition view
FUCKEDUPTIMES, 1999
- 44 Sol Lewitt, *Drawing for open cube structure*, 1971
- 45 *Senza titolo / Untitled*, 1999

Her most recent show opened on 8 November at the Galerie Mehdi Chouakri in Berlin, and presents two works in a single installation: **What does your wife/girlfriend think of your rough and dry hands?** and **7:30 h**. In the L-shaped space, we see four forms neatly built of white brick, including a pillar reaching from floor to ceiling and a narrow, elongated rectangular volume consisting of two interlocking L-forms, between which there is a small slit. An additional form proves to be a complicated series of corner solutions. All of them possess depth, breadth and height, corresponding to what is commonly known as a "human scale". The viewers can perceive them as both architectural fragments and sculptures, or even as pieces of furniture. Only the pillar enters into an architectural union with the room, which however is counteracted by its unplastered surface - the gallery space naturally shows itself in the pure white smooth plaster of the "White Cube"¹. The entire surrounding wall is articulated by a horizontal band of small wooden frames of equal size, on which photocopies of questionnaires (all containing the same questions) are mounted, which Bonvicini had distributed to construction workers in Berlin, Vienna, Milan, Bergamo, Santa Fe and Los Angeles. So far, so good? The gallery space is white and easy to survey, well-organized with formal intelligence. The brickwork "sculptures" are as adeptly positioned as furniture on the floor of a loft designed by an interior decorator. But what are they? They are definitely works of art, since the system of art decides what is art by placement in a space devoted to art. They are also quite clearly hand-made, a *sine qua non* of the traditional art scene. They are not signed, but we are already accustomed to this in the case of installations. For an "installation," though, the brickwork forms appear too much as individual works of the artist. And what do the frames containing interviews with construction workers have to do with the sculptures? The fact that the frames accompany our view of the "sculptures", however, contaminates the latter's status as autonomous works. One needs to study the individual answers carefully before it becomes clear that it was construction workers who filled out the questionnaires. At any rate their presence "contaminates" the isolation of

lines don't make
any sense.



the brick objects as autonomous sculptural works by incorporating them into a farther-reaching framework of information and association. As classically measured as the installation would appear, it leaves the viewer in the dark about many things. Is it about form? Is it a narrative, or architecture, or sculpture? Is it perhaps even about something social, construction work? With these confusions in view and in mind it is time to look for the above mentioned echoes. The art connoisseur viewing these objects may have associations of his or her own, which tie the work into the artistic vocabularies of past decades. How these similarities or references should be treated is another matter: as models, patrimonies, stylistic derivations, or citations? What an artistic genealogy might look like in the aftermath of postmodernism also appears open to me. Might it involve a horizontal operation with the past as something that remains available, or searching for and finding an artistic home in the sense of a - constructed - logic of generational change in the history of art?

Two associations present themselves unmistakably here: the object art of minimalism (in the brickwork pieces) and conceptual art (in the frames with text). But this cozy coexistence already muddles any classifications we might wish to make - or have you ever seen a Hanne Darboven (or a Kosuth) with an object sculpture, or a Judd object with a little frame? Particularly in this, her latest work, Bonvicini cultivates a formally quite conventional appearance. The viewers can walk with impunity between the objects and along the walls, engrossed in the usual gallery activity of looking, encouraged by the silence of the room. They might be alarmed to learn that the objects were made not by the artist herself but by journeyman masons, and that the "beautiful" form is the result of standard examination tasks for the - by the way still largely male - apprentice masons. And here we also find the link to the questionnaires, which ask, among other things, "what does your wife/girlfriend think of your rough and dry hands?". The implication of a narrative and anecdotal dimension, of irony, a sort of citation of the social investigative art of the 1970s (the reader may recall the documented and sometimes framed interviews with the inhabitants of state-



•2 Cf. Peter Herbstreuth, in *Tagesspiegel*, 4.4.1998, under the title "Der freie Flug einer Junggenialen" (The Free Flight of a Young Genius). In the *Spiegel Kultur Extra*, June 1999, Ingeborg Wiensowski wrote "Wie ein Hurrikan: Die Italienerin hat sich auf körperlich erfahrbare Kunst spezialisiert - und die internationale Szene im Sturm erobert" (Like a hurricane, the Italian has specialized in art that can be experienced physically - and taken the international scene by storm). Gertrud Peters entitled her Autumn 1999 review in *PUR Magazine* "Einstürzende Fußböden - Minimalistin Monica Bonvicini" (literally collapsing floors, a play on the name of the German band Einstürzende Neubauten).

subsidized housing that were particularly popular in England and West Germany in those days), a play on the connotations (including the erotic ones) of the occupational profile "construction worker" and the expansion of the fields of meaning of cultural and social gender at any rate trouble the formalistic make-up of this work, if only very discreetly.

The viewers do not get off so easily in other works by Bonvicini, however.

Her **A violent, tropical, cyclonic piece of art having wind speeds of or in excess of 75 mph.** caused quite an uproar in March 1998. As soon as they entered the Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, visitors had to pass through two very gusty wind-machines which were positioned on either side of a walk-through room made of sheet-rock, which was built into the gallery. Not only did the hurricane unleashed by the machines in these tiny spaces practically knock one off one's feet, but the mighty noise that accompanied it demanded a good deal of passive resistance on the part of visitors. Critics understood the installation as a strong, uncompromising, indeed aggressive gesture directed against the gallery space, the simple consumption of art and against the art business more generally² - the only curious thing is that the work aroused great enthusiasm not just among art dealers. The critics were particularly taken by the power and aggression they found here because they came from a woman artist, and thus literally appeared to overturn the usual associations of female gentleness. What the critics have overlooked in their rush to read the "right" meanings into the work - and in Germany art is not art unless it is either beautiful (the conservative camp) or rebellious (the "progressive" camp) - is a certain irony that lies in the artist's clandestine but all the noisier art historical references. Let us recall the components of the work: a walk-through room made up of sheet-rock walls, open on top, the walls smoothly plastered at the edges and painted white. The fans are mounted on the walls somewhat below head level, they are not hidden, i.e., the viewer immediately recognizes the source of the wind and noise.

At this point in our query into artistic genealogies, I would like to engage in a little art historical "research" and consult the artist's biography. From her

46 *A violent, tropical, cyclonic piece of art having wind speeds of or in excess of 75 mph.*, 1998

47 *I Muri 2*, 1992

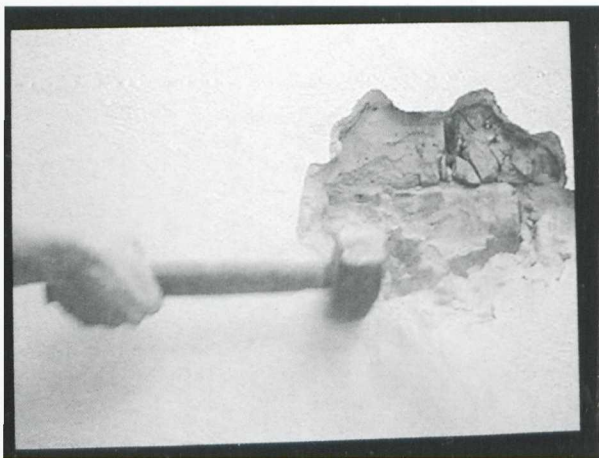


•3 Michael Asher, *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*, written in collaboration with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Halifax, Nova Scotia 1983, p. 8.

curriculum vitae we learn that Bonvicini studied at the California Institute of the Arts in 1991-92, particularly with Michael Asher. Asher, for his part, has designed and built several "Air Works" since 1965 in galleries and museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art (1969: *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*). They, too, involved building rooms out of sheet-rock and using fans. That is where the similarities end, though, and I believe that the differences are decisive for understanding the nature of Bonvicini's artistic practice. On the one hand, Asher mounted the fan so as to render it invisible to viewers, and on the other he reduced the air-flow to a minimum, so that the gentle draft could also go unnoticed. Ideally, the fan would have operated soundlessly, but technical problems prevented this in the work at the Whitney. Asher himself regarded the work as the most subtle contrast to "such expressively solid sculptural pieces as Richard Serra's *House of Cards*."³ His own intervention in the space of an art institution, however, was intended to remain imperceptible to visitors, and at the same time to be as immaterial as possible.

Bonvicini was intensively confronted with Asher's principles and procedures in her courses at Cal Arts, and tested them in her own work while there. The whirlwind she staged in her wind works appears nevertheless to be a determined inversion of Asher's approach, in which at least one paradigm of the conceptual is fully realized - the systematic manner of proceeding which here lies in reversal: from soft to loud, from invisible to extremely conspicuous, from immateriality to a brutally staged material presence. In its effect, however, the concept becomes a *gesture* - loud, theatrical, and full of itself. We might view the shift from concept to gesture as a passage from the art of the Sixties to its post-postmodern reception in the art of the Nineties. But couldn't Asher's method also already be read as a gesture, as rhetoric? His above-cited statement indeed sounds rather suspicious.

Bonvicini sums up her year at Cal Arts with a certain ambivalence: Asher's treatment of space and architecture as well as the confrontation with his type of criticism of institutions provided important new impulses after her painting-centered training at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. At the

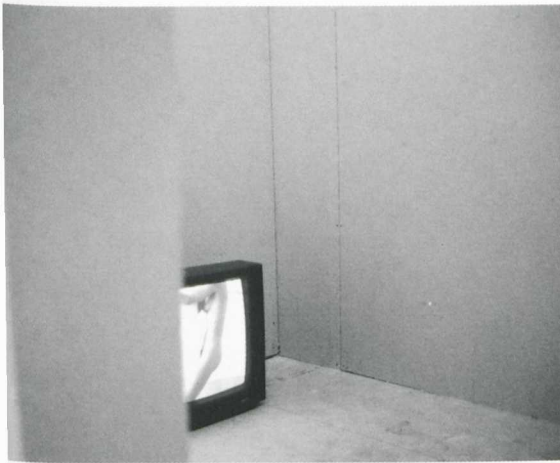


•4 "Eine Frau schlägt rhythmisch gegen die Wand..." (A woman strikes the wall rhythmically...) così Peter Herbstreuth, "Monica Bonvicini in der Galerie Mehdi Chouakri", *Kunstbulletin*, April 1998, p. 33.

same time, she experienced the dogmatic aspects of his approach, which has been conveyed with unabated strictness since the Seventies, and indeed speaks of an "academy" which awakened her spirit of rebellion and taste for polemics. Doesn't her polemical gesture also lay bare the gesture in conceptual art, a certain pathos of the rhetoric of the immaterial, which is humorless to boot - the latent Protestantism of this head art, as it were? A similar impression arises when we look at the work that was exhibited at the same time as her *Air Work* in the back room of the Galerie Mehdi Chouakri: **Hammering Out (an old argument)**, a video showing a woman's arm (the artist's, but that is unimportant) banging away at a white plastered wall with a sledge-hammer. Amid a loud din the plaster crumbles and the wall shakes, but does not collapse. Here, albeit awkwardly mediated, is a further connection to Asher. In a 1973 installation in the Galleria Toselli in Milan, he had had every layer of paint sand-blasted off the walls of the entire exhibition space, and then showed the purified gallery to the public. Once again, the differences between the two artists are significant. In Asher's case, the visitors were presented with the finished product - an empty, grayishly shimmering, very quiet room, which apart from the aesthetic fascination of the highly polished naked walls was intended, in drawing attention to the absent white of the walls, to confront the public with the conditions of art consumption in the "White Cube" of the gallery. Bonvicini, in contrast, appears to exaggerate the process - not the result - and to permit it to unfold into a gesture. The video might also be the trace of a performance, an "action", which however now appears to be mediated by the medium, forced in a sense into the rectangle of the video image projected on the white wall and re-presented, thereby undermining any actionist "authenticity". And yet the fascination of the moving image seems to make us forget precisely this rupture in the presence of the quite vehement action, so that Peter Herbstreuth writes about it as if someone (preferably the artist herself...) were actually there attacking the actual walls of the gallery.⁴ What interests the artist is no longer a conceptually analyzed phenomenology of spatial experience, but rather displaying a

48 *Hammering Out (an old argument)*, 1998

49 *Wallfuckin'*, 1995/96



•5 "Der Verherrlichung der Wand setzt sie (Bonvicini) Profanierung und Destruktion durch ihren eigenen (!) Körper als Symbolträger entgegen." [Bonvicini sets profanation and destruction by her own (sic) body as a symbol-bearer against the glorification of the wall]. *Ibid.*

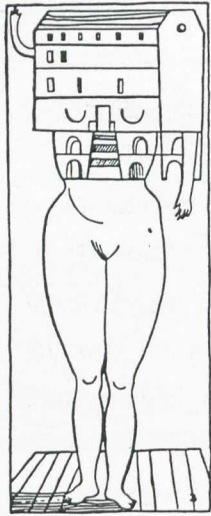
•6 The fundamental text of this tendency in feminist film criticism is Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, 16.3.1975. The strict dichotomy between a postulated male, active, controlling and desiring gaze and a passive female gaze has been revised and criticized on numerous occasions in the meantime, including from among the ranks of post-structuralist feminist theorists.

gesture. That is, her concern is not the action in its immediate, unrepeatable presence - and this is an important difference to another echo of the art of the Sixties and Seventies, performance and Body Art - but its representation in a visual medium.

In fact, performance is a medium that Bonvicini does *not* cultivate, and I assume that there are precisely calculated reasons for this connected with the status of this new artistic practice - which has already become a genre - within the system of art, particularly in the case of performances by women. Performance art is already some twenty years past its heyday, but audiences and critics still assume as a matter of course that when a woman artist shows a female body it is her "own", as in the good old days of Valie Export, Carolee Schneemann or Gina Pane. Once understood as a moment of shock, a taboo-breaking element and a critique of male voyeurism (at the same time playing on male ideals of female beauty), Bonvicini now maintains a cool distance to this practice. The critic's memory however is occasionally more powerful than Bonvicini's distancing measures, it seems, for the same (male) critic, who had watched the video **Wallfuckin'** in 1995, believed (or hoped?) that he had seen the naked body of the artist herself⁵ - such a strong impression, at any rate, that he could revive it three years later. Bonvicini, however, worked with a model, a practice that, tellingly enough, is more often expected of male artists. Thus she retained for herself the (masculine?) roles of producer, camera woman and director - i.e., the very roles involving control over the pictorial medium, authority, an active direction of the gaze and, ultimately, power that have been subjected to vehement criticism from feminist theorists, particularly in the field of cinema.⁶

Bonvicini translates conceptual practices into a violence of gesture, which however is "chilled" by the medium, for example via presentation on video. The "sterility" of conceptual art is contaminated, but the act of contamination is mediated and multi-layered, no longer dirty, direct and material, as in the practice of the early happenings.

It is not only noise, reversal and exaggeration that destroy the peaceful and subtle scenarios of perception of an Asher. Something else forces its way

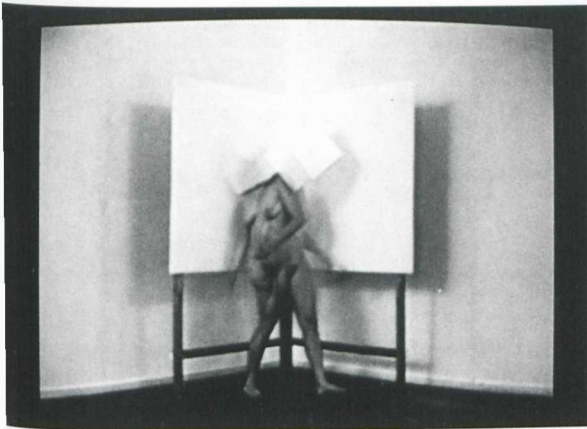


•7 Beatriz Colomina (ed), *Sexuality and Space*, New York 1992, esp. Mark Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender", pp. 327-389; see also two more recent collections of essays on the subject: Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze and Carol Henderson (eds), *Architecture and Feminism*, New York 1996; and Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman (eds), *The Sex of Architecture*, New York 1996.

through here, which was addressed for the first time with the construction workers and that crudely pushes itself into the foreground in **Wallfuckin'**: a level of meaning, of significance, of reference and legibility that points to the experiential worlds that extend beyond an aesthetically regulated phenomenology of perception: the power relations, stereotypes and hegemonic symbol formations that are largely regulated by the gender dichotomy, and are scarcely noticed by those who participate in (not merely) symbolic power, whether consciously or unconsciously (generally the latter). **Wallfuckin'** exaggerates this dilemma in a scenario of drastic symbolism which is only barely coded in aesthetic terms: in a small, three-sided room with sheet-rock walls, a video monitor on the back wall shows a naked female body (the head is out of the picture) in motion. The body rubs itself against the edge of a wall between its legs. The fiction of masturbation presents itself to the male viewer (a female viewer would be more skeptical about this). As obvious as the symbolism appears, it proves ultimately ambivalent: who is fucking whom? Can Bonvicini succeed in her attempt to transform women's feelings of helplessness in the face of male hegemony (in architecture, construction, and the definition of urban spaces, etc.) into the image of an energetic "I (don't give a) fuck (about) architecture", at one fell swoop (a powerful image) situating women beyond the position of disadvantage and victimhood? Can images ever pack such a punch? Such a question, however, turns art into a message, and Bonvicini's irony, which is an important part of her strategy, gets in the way... And yet a sort of substrate of commitment seems irrefutably present to me, and Bonvicini has devoted intense attention to feminist critiques of architecture. The 1997 work **Hausfrau Swinging** is a sort of response to the writings of Beatriz Colomina and others⁷ who have analyzed the system of architecture from the perspective of its dependence on gender relations. Here Bonvicini picks up the motif from a 1947 drawing by Louise Bourgeois, *Femme/Maison*, which shows the stylized outline of a woman's body bearing a house instead of a head on its shoulders. Bonvicini transfers the image, once again relatively directly, into an action which she recorded on video and made the center of a work. Before a corner construction of white-painted sheet-rock standing on a

50 Louise Bourgeois, *Femme/Maison*, 1947

51 Fotografia di / Photograph to *Hausfrau Swinging*, 1997



•8 "The Crux of Minimalism", quoted from the revised version in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, pp. 35-70, here p. 43.

frame, a naked woman's body moves vigorously back and forth wearing a house built of white cardboard on its head, all the while banging its head - the cardboard house - against the walls of the corner. An original soundtrack underlines the ear-splitting character of the action, which is mitigated, however, by the positioning of the video monitor as an image within an image, for the corner construction in the video is the same in which the monitor is installed in the room. This muddling of perceptions is additionally heightened by the confusion of the beholder's view of the video, which sits on the ground in front of the stand, so that one literally has to look down on events.

Elements of the program of Minimal Art are present - the relationship between room, object and viewer, the houselike object - but reduced to fragments. The work also represents a serious violation of the basic principles of minimalism, however, by re-signifying these elements, which in the practice of artists such as Judd were emphatically supposed to be non-significant, without meaning, and meaningful in terms of a phenomenology of perception only as volume/form. This loading with meaning is a reaction to something Hal Foster formulated in his controversial 1986 essay *The Crux of Minimalism*⁸: "... minimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power. In other words, it does not regard the subject as a sexed body positioned in a symbolic order any more than it regards the gallery or the museum as an ideological apparatus." Foster asserts this after the fact from the position of a postmodern critique of the paradigms of modernism, and Bonvicini takes up his critique and processes it from a (late-) feminist viewpoint using her own artistic means. It is this confrontation with minimalism, which was delayed by at least one generation and thus becomes a leitmotif of artistic confrontation in a dual sense (as both model and negative backdrop), that permits the context of the symbolic order to penetrate the formalism of the minimal. In **Hausfrau Swinging** this occurs in turn with a citation from the early work of Bourgeois, which had an affinity with surrealism. That is, in order to attack the objectivizing strategies of minimalism, Bonvicini invokes that very artistic practice that paradoxically feeds on a reference to content -



•9 Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine*, v. 64, n. 5, January 1990, pp. 44-63, 55.

the "content" here being the pictorial language of dreams. The referentiality here points to the unconscious, that is, to the sediment of the symbolic order, with its dependence on gender images. Bonvicini's battle formation reveals an impressive coherence and clarity, which makes what she is trying to get at very plain indeed. Thus beyond all irony this work bears the marks of committed art, which find expression in the increased weight placed on its nature as statement in contrast to the above-described strategically planned ambivalence of her play with Minimal Art and performance.

One might make similar observations about the work by her shown at the 1999 Venice Biennale, **I Believe in the Skin of Things as in that of Women**. The title is taken from a macho slogan of Le Corbusier's. A walk-in box about the size of a small room is equipped within with hilarious caricatures, this time drawn by Bonvicini herself, which illustrate the accompanying quotations from the canonical texts of architectural history since Vitruvius, exposing their unconcealed sexism to present-day readers. The walls of the box are also damaged in places or even riddled with holes. The imagery is impossible to overlook: the ugly box disrupts the spatial harmony of the Gothic architecture of the venerable Arsenale, but also stands for male-dominated architecture, while the damage refers to feminist resistance to it. What set me to thinking here was the wildly enthusiastic reception of this particular work among the prize winners of the Biennale. Is it conceivable that Bonvicini's nonchalantly biting critique of the patriarchal system of architecture - and of minimalism! - might be *one* reason for her success? But this would mean nothing less than that this critique, overlooked by the art system, never reaches its addressee. Whether it is time to consider a change of strategy remains an open question. One thing is certain, however, she cannot have intended things as deadly seriously as Anna C. Chave in 1990. Chave provides a scathing indictment of macho minimalism: "... the face it [minimalism] projects is the society's blankest, steeliest face; the impersonal face of technology, industry, and commerce; the unyielding face of the father: a face that is usually far more attractively masked."⁹

52 *I Believe in the Skin of Things as in that of Women*, 1999

53 *Plastered*, 1998



Bonvicini's work with the marvelous title **Plastered**, which she set up in 1998 in the venerable Vienna Secession, in contrast, comes along with a soft crunch and a vague air of bewilderment. The floor of the exhibition space was covered with sheet-rock over a layer of polystyrene. The floor literally collapsed under the visitors' feet; with each step they broke through with a menacingly gentle crunch. The performance thus shifted from the video image to the visitors, who became unwitting actors; Asher's methods were once again recast, from the statics of a situation of perception controlled by the artist's experimental order into an unpredictable participation by the visitors, with plenty of potential comedy (at the visitors' expense), which in turn de-constructed the hallowed act of looking at art. Bonvicini's installations drag Michael Fried's critique of Minimal Art as latently anthropomorphic and theatrical¹⁰ out of latency and make it ironically and sharply manifest in the incursion of the symbol-laden gesture into the Minimalist scenario of object, body and space. The carefully calculated mix of media she deploys here - some of the works also contain drawings, which skillfully and compactly quote in collage form an entire arsenal of cultural sources of images, from advertisements for building societies to frescoes by Giotto or soft-porn magazines, as well as photography - makes it clear that she is concerned neither with formalistic postulates of purity nor with a reassertion of the subjectivity of artistic genius, but also not with applying rigorous post-modern theoretical models to an equally rigorous artistic practice. Bonvicini's eclectic intelligence however permits her to absorb the discourses that have been integrated into and taken up by the system of art since the Sixties, and to unite and transform them in their very own code of montage: on the level of tendencies and theories these would be above all the institutional critiques of an Asher, the feminist critique of minimalism and architecture and the artistic categories of context, participation and appropriation. And so she navigates her bumper car of methods, media and forms with carefully calculated collisions through the coordinates of a system of art in the post-postmodern age.

•10 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood",
Artforum, v. 5, n. 10, Summer 1967, pp. 12-13.