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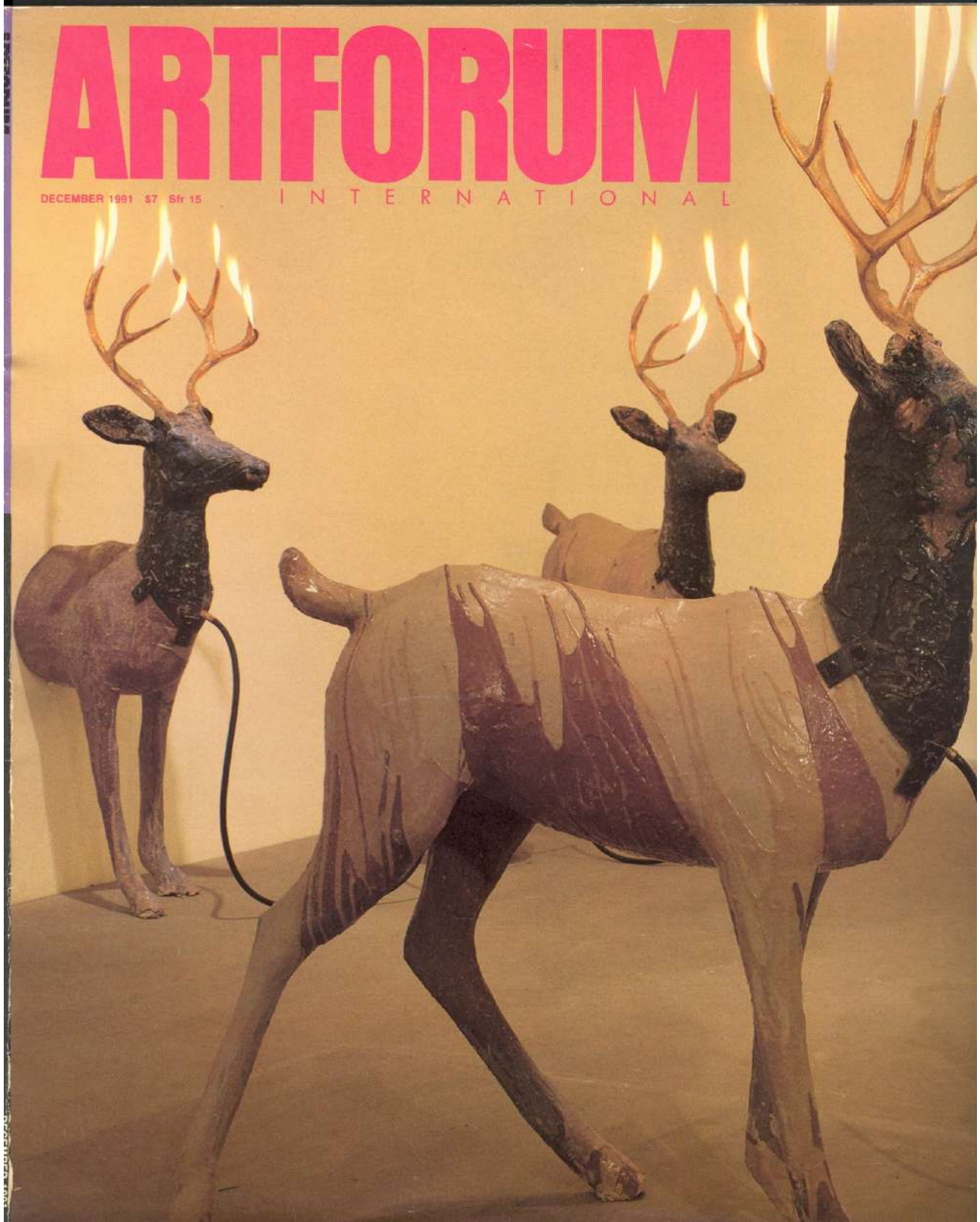

**Dennis Oppenheim, *Hot Voices*, 1989,** fiberglass, electric fan, gas torch, and steel, 70 x 60 x 60".

# The Dark Side of Dennis Oppenheim

Tobey Crockett

Current critical thinking seems to have us shuffling around in the morgue of Modernism for any fairly fresh body parts to reassemble. The slightest clue to where the next belief system is incubating sends us poking into overlooked corners and proposing interesting new hybrids for contemplation. The territory of artmaking is especially enriched today by the fallout of corrupted theory, a collapse that has liberated our ability to construct new worlds, additive and synergistic, unlimited by notions of pure and absolute reality or truth. In a present that has grasped the shifting sands of Wittgenstein and Derrida, Baudrillard and Burroughs, we no longer shriek when they tear away the veil, not in this brave new art world.

Stalking around in this romantic killing field is the intrepid Dennis Oppenheim. The subject of a large retrospective opening shortly at P.S. 1, New York, "And the Mind Grew Fingers," Oppenheim has reemerged with a spew of new sculpture after a brief hiatus in the mid '80s. This pause marked a transition from earlier incarnations as earth and body artist, and maker of monumental machines, to an apparently kinder and gentler creator of human-scaled, approachable works. One should not be fooled, however, by the artist's innocent parade of coffee cups, deer, zebras, cars, toasters, bottles, and Raggedy Anns and Andys. In virtually every instance, these cozy signifiers of everyday heroism avail themselves of murder, death, disease, and depravity as their stock in trade. It is as if Oppenheim's personal mythology had been set loose as a pink panzer in the collective living room of our art scene.

Oppenheim has a history of pushing the bounds of accepted art practice. At various points in his career he has manipulated such nonart materials as poison, explosives, and his children to remarkable effect. *Kiss*, 1991, belongs in the same rarefied category. Oppenheim imagines two giant head-shaped cages, connected at the lips by a door. One head is to contain live blackbirds and the other live black cats; the piece is incomplete as of this writing, but the intention is to show it, complete with openable door, at P.S. 1. The primary issue explored here seems to be predation, rather than cruelty at the hands of art. Somewhat mind-boggling, *Kiss* literally embodies the conflict at the heart of Oppenheim's oeuvre, the dialectical opposition of birds and cats carrying out an epic struggle in which the deck has been stacked according to the artist's instructions. A kiss between lovers, a Judas kiss, a kiss of death, all interplay in this elegant and hard-hitting work. We need not rely on AIDS as the text's sole explanation; the struggle between the sexes has been in and of itself sufficiently inspiring for the last several millennia.

Inevitably, some viewers will ask why Oppenheim finds *Kiss* necessary, and whether or not it should be called art. But titillation and shock are not the artist's pursuit. Pushing beyond sculpture's failsafe zone in such schools as Surrealism, Conceptualism, and Pop, Oppenheim employs many of these modes' strategies to construct hybrid objects that he also infuses with a jolt of the kind of raw personal investment associated with Joseph Beuys. A number of critics have located Oppenheim in the role of artist as shaman, a placement that acknowledges the artist's powers in breaking down the barriers between art and life, so that the two apparently separate realms may interact and influence one another. Indeed, by synthesizing an exchange between the necessary formalism of the art object and the suggestion of complex narratives, Oppenheim not only addresses the issues of contemporary artmaking but creates objects that answer to the ends of his dialectical vocabulary of ideas, concepts, and information. His art casts the artist as a mediator between the viewer and the world of personal mythology. This is the shaman role in which he excels, negotiator and controller of invisible forces, maker of efficacious objects.

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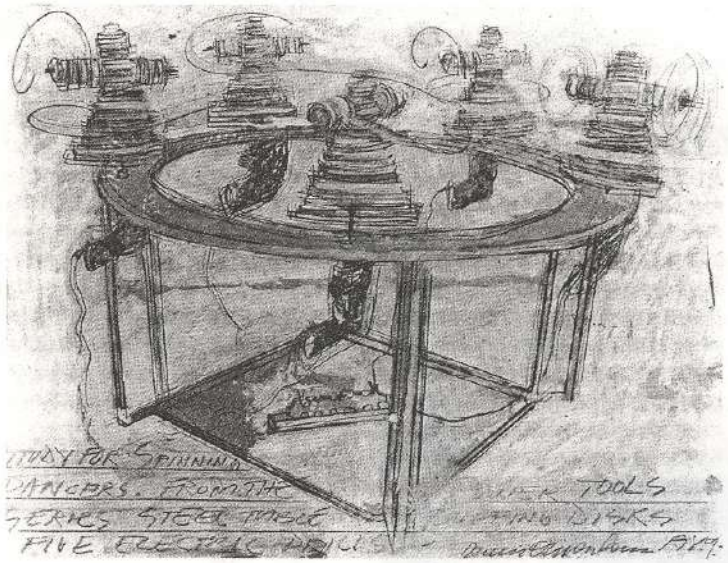
We have come to expect something different from the conceptual artwork, which usually reveals its charm in its ability to invert the relationship of signified and signifier, so that the art object exists in order to stand for or mean something else. Oppenheim's new sculptures are respectable in and of themselves, esthetically, intellectually, and formally, but they also carry an invisible and even daemonic invocation as subtext. This quality is accomplished by combining a restrained exercise of formal concerns, such as choice of scale and materials, with a provocative vocabulary of medical and diagnostic references, sexual puns, phantom and spirit imagery, and terms relating to death, music, the physical sciences, violence, and instability. Titles, scale, and a Pop-like selection of objects from everyday experience allow us to read the identity of the artwork immediately, triggering the appropriate associational cues and prompting us to seek out the relationship between the object before us and such invocations as *Murder in Hawaiian Shirts*, *Badly Tuned Cow*, and *Spirit Notes*. The theme of the unknown and invisible recurs, whether the work functions as a talisman or hints at a mysterious dimension of origin. Oppenheim's works inform us of alternative realities and creative processes, and of the power of esthetic investment.

*Badly Tuned Cow*, 1988, exemplifies the dark undertone of Oppenheim's recent sculpture. Even without the title's macabre hint of genetic experiment, this nearly life-sized, mottled, and luridly surfaced cow would be clearly a deviant. It is corraled off from the observer by a fence composed of musical notes and staffs, which are silk-screened with a patterning of video static and intrusively lit by black-light lamps. This fiberglass cow is subjected to a variety of forces, not only in its containment, surrounded by ritualized bars of video transmission, but also in its own body, which is hierarchically divided by color into head, torso, and legs, dull wax building up to an oddly incongruous, crafted texture.

The beast stands mildly at attention, its head blindly raised in a sacrificial stance, a suggestion reinforced by the scythelike flags on the musical notes of the fence. And the frozen stasis of the video imagery suggests that the cow is not quite present in its occupation of space: *Star Trek*-like, it is still beaming aboard our plane of perception, enduring transmission through an unknown apparatus. Contemporary criticial dialogue often uses the word "apparatus" to refer to the camera, a device that alienates the eye and introduces the machine into the making of images. In *Badly Tuned Cow*, the idea of apparatus acts as a kind of reifying program, transforming information into images, and vice versa. Such programmatic thinking is one of the areas that Oppenheim explores in his recent sculpture. The video-static patterning in *Badly Tuned Cow* refers to the camera eye of the viewer, which he digitizes, freezes in time, and reproduces, fixing the moment and channeling our focus to the cow.

Technology and magic are virtually interchangeable in Oppenheim's art. In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), Vilém Flusser remarks that the difference between prehistoric magic and magic today is that prehistoric magic is a ritualization of models called "myths" while the current magic ritualizes models called "pro-



Right: **Dennis Oppenheim, *Study for Spinning Dancers*, 1989.** From the "Power Tool Series," 1989.
Below: **Dennis Oppenheim, *Bad Cells are Comin'*, 1989,** painted brass cymbals, glass test tubes, turntable, butane torch, and ink, 40 x 96 x 96".

grams." Oppenheim exploits both modes. On the one hand he is aware of the cow's old mythical and sacred qualities—as a symbol of fertility and of the power of the gods, as a profane idol, an object of veneration, a talismanic gatekeeper to spiritual zones. On the other, the cow is presented as a cog in our social program, a dietary staple, and a laboratory experiment, a scientific modification site for the pumping of hormones, the altering of genes, and the diversion of unprofitable livestock. In this incarnation the cow reflects an American economy driven by communication technologies and human services, its activity circumscribed by hissing transmission.

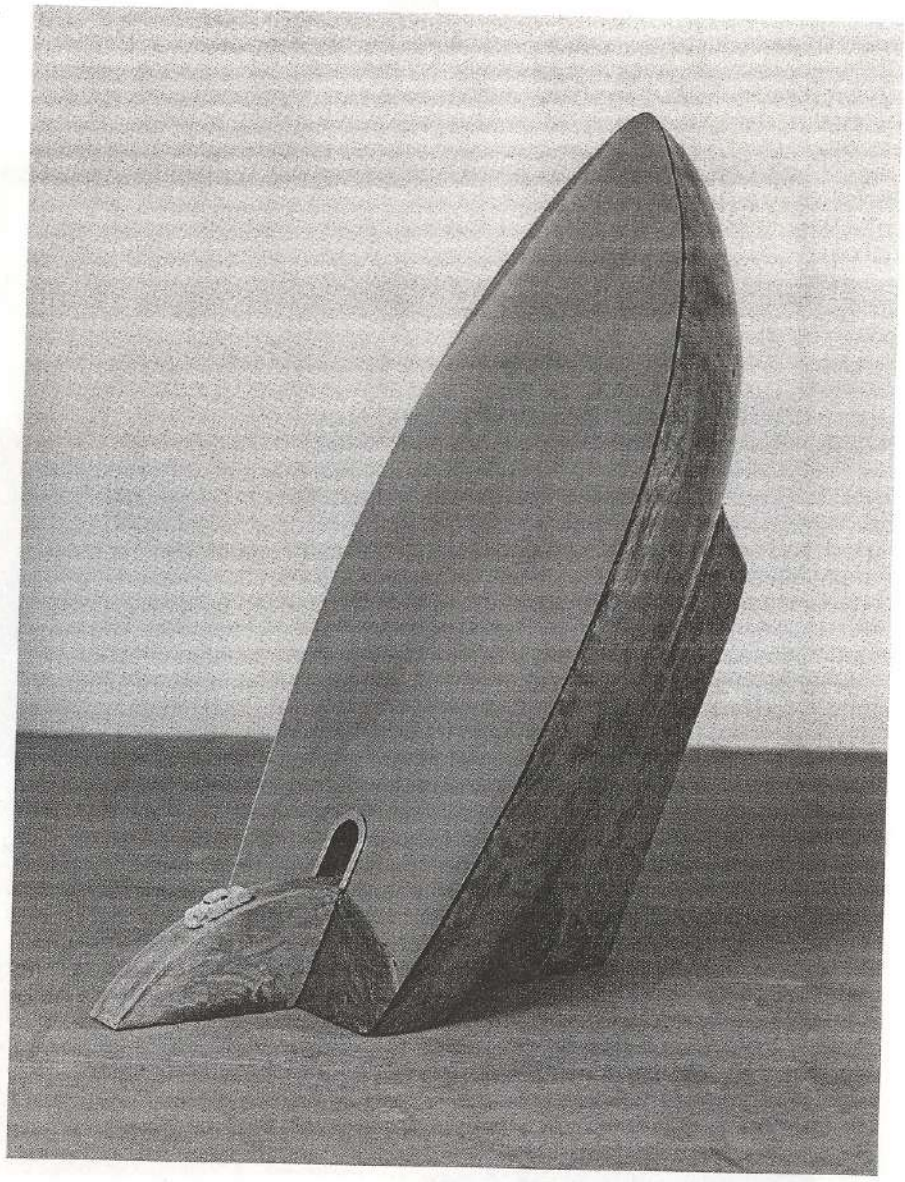
Oppenheim's program in this case involves a surreal manipulation of a readymade, pop image to carry an information-based narrative. That narrative, a general presence in the artist's recent work, establishes a dialectic between prehistoric shamanism and information-age theory, and its tense energy is channeled into a personal vocabulary that explores the dark forces of creation. The images are complicit in the artist's attempt to inject these forces into the real world. A piece that refers to disease, for example, virtually infects the gallery: *Virus*, 1988, proposes Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck as the interconnected molecules in a science-lab

structural model of the cells of a contagion, or perhaps of a new intelligent life-form. The notion arises that popular imagery and its cult of personality are a disease, or, alternatively, that the debilitating fascism that attends the advance of a virus like AIDS can take even the most innocuous form, threatening us with its ease of infiltration. This is clearly what Oppenheim's *Virus* has done in the gallery, seducing us to accept it grace of its nonthreatening art coating, but also telling us that we have been exposed to heaven knows what. *Bad Cells Are Comin'*, 1989, and *Blackware*, 1990, adopt the same strategy, cooking up unspecified experiments—both works include a variety of unlabeled chemical flasks and vials—within range of unsuspecting gallery-goers.

Oppenheim summons up other strange conditions with which to beset the gallery. General instability as a gateway to the profounder disturbance of chaos disgorges a multitude of artworks enduring the distortions of abnormal time and space, their very articulation in *our* space called into question, as for example in *Image Dissonance (Coffee Cup)*, 1989, which builds an immaterial cup out of wire and large foam balls. Like messengers from another world, the transmission and capture of these pieces is unsure. In a number of pieces that include the prefix "Second Generation" or "Third Generation" in their titles, more video-static patterning, applied as a surface treatment, immediately confers an alien patina, signifying a crack between our dimension and some unknown other. Interestingly, video static can lay legitimate claim to trace the origins of the universe, for it plays a substantial role in proof of the big bang theory. In this evocation, Oppenheim grants archetypal status to his video-screened sculptures.

The static declares the transdimensional arrival of toast in *Third Generation. Ghost Toast*, of a car lunging from the striped belly of the animal in *Second Generation Image. Zebra*, and of the mirrored surface of *Second Generation Image. Iron/Boat*, all 1988. The terms "second generation" and "third generation" relate to the reading of objects and animals as beings transmitted from elsewhere, a suggestion of unreality reinforced by an Alice-in-Wonderland scale that makes household items exaggeratedly too big and larger objects too small. The forms themselves are readily identifiable, but their abstracted surfaces render them generic and somewhat totemic. Multiplying the coded references to television and the media, which have their own dialectic of reality and image, the 1988 series "Second Generation. Appliance Spirit" juxtaposes animals and technology, radiating puppetlike heating-coil horse forms, reminiscent of Alexander Calder, from ovens painted with more television static and suggesting television in their basic shape. The horse spirits appear to rise from the ovens' burners, primitive animals generated by mysterious means, the stove openings acting as an energy transfer zone.

This notion of energy transfer, an explicit theme in earlier works of Oppenheim's, is also carried forward in such heating- and steam-related pieces as *Steam Forest with Phantom Limbs*, and *Stove for High Temperature Expression*, both 1988, and the fire-breathing heads of *Hot Voices*, 1989. As in *Kiss*, with its cats and birds, the prominent head forms of these works dispense their contents under pressure to mediate conflicting forces—liquid and gas, combustion and inertia. Both *Steam Forest* and *Stove* offer amputated trees, their truncated limbs fitted with electric heating coils on which sit water-filled glass heads. As the heads heat—the coils switch on and off by timer—steam rises eerily to sketch the missing branches as immaterial phantoms.



**Dennis Oppenheim, *Second Generation Image. Iron/Boat*, 1988,** silk-screened fiberglass, mirror, wax, wood, and metal, 54 x 30 x 42".

The heating of the water, then, completes the sculptures' form. The cycles of heating and vaporization, observation and creation, parallel one another with satisfying understatement, the artist again placing us in collusion with his process. Heads under fire have provided a consistent and powerful image in Oppenheim's career, offering a metaphor for the creative process of both artist and viewer.

Energy transfer figures principally in pieces that have a sexual subtext as well. Before this recent body of work Oppenheim had tended to avoid sexual imagery, despite its obvious richness. Now he has addressed the issue in a number of works that focus on tools, toys, and body parts, with electric drills, dolls, sponge shapes, and

**Dennis Oppenheim, *Spirit Notes*, 1988,** fabric, electric blower, and timer, 12" x 11' 8" x 11' 8".

display mannequins figuring prominently. The "Power Tool Series," 1989, relies disproportionately on the pun of "tool" to drive the message home, proposing female scarecrows made of stacked buffing disks in *Spinning Dancers* and heads with generic male masks in *Cutting Tools*, all skewered on the shanks of working electric drills. Stand-ins for futilely fixated victims, these figures achieve no communication, no transformation, just a frenzy of meaningless movement and misdirected drama as their energy spins out into space. *Disco Mattress* and *Vibrating Dolls*, from the same series, operate on a similar principle, here the up-and-down cutting movement of electric saws providing the thrust. Copulating pairs of Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls are made in black to eliminate surface detailing and overly kitsch connotations. The figures bounce in a parody of hot bedding action, the movement of the saw blades providing the perfect Magic Fingers counterpoint to the bleak landscape of the steel mattresses on which they sit. A timer makes the saws turn on and off abruptly and apparently arbitrarily.

The "Power Tool Series" is blunt in its pursuit of negative romantic images, the predatory and troubling aspects of *Kiss* being foreshadowed in these mindless progenitors of industrial society. *Two Objects*, 1989, takes a subtler tack. Two chairs, one pink, puffy, and upholstered, the other plain, stiff, and wooden, are motorized so that the hard wood chair slips its seat in and out from under the soft padded chair in a regular rhythm. In addition to being outright funny, *Two Objects* has the advantage of the "Power Tool Series" in that the chairs seem more expressive of human personality and emotion than are the Ann and Andy rag dolls or the schematic forms of the buffing disks. The incongruous contrasting partners in *Two Objects* reflect the human equation more accurately and sympathetically than the figures in the later series, and although the piece lacks their cynical bite, it is the more successful work.

Oppenheim's use of readymade mannequin parts to stand for women in a number of works again runs a sinister twist on an everyday item, feminist objections leaping immediately to mind. *Stacked Friends*, 1990, is nonetheless provocative and witty, a female mannequin lying prone to support a pair of staggeringly projected breasts—composed of twin towers of Barbie dolls standing on top of each other like a human pyramid. For stability, each Barbie must balance by standing on the breasts of the doll below her, so that each conical breast microcosmically reflects the structure of the sculpture as a whole. A darkly comic irony informs the piece, the classic male breast-fixation pushed to an extreme case of fetishism and relying on the structure of the work literally to carry the content. That the mannequin in *Stacked Friends* is reduced to representing all women through the articulation of these absurd breasts is emphasized by the obviation of any other possible expression. For she is a mere torso, utterly inactive and powerless, stuck to the floor without arms, legs, or head, the figment of an oversexed imagination, perhaps, or the victim of a gruesome serial killer. The viewer too may be involved in this victimization, indicted merely by observing and tolerating such a scenario. The impersonality of contemporary sexual mores has clearly taken its toll on society and significantly strained the sexual dialogue. By presenting us with his oppressed, anonymous mannequins, Oppenheim confronts us with these issues, while at the same time taunting us with his politically correct sense of irony.

As William Burroughs once said, "No one can own life, but anyone who can pick up a frying pan owns death." Oppenheim would seem to agree, for his innocent signifiers of everyday existence can ruthlessly mutate into dispensers of death, disease, and terror, the dialectic of form and content fusing to create a potent presence. Oppenheim seems most comfortable framing questions rather than dictating answers. Not afraid to open the door to unknown conclusions, he achieves a careful balance between cool, theoretical esthetic issues and the ambitious desire to bring the experience of art into our everyday reality. His transformations of the insignificant into objects fraught with meaning and stature reflect a universe in which all things are possible, for the energy of which everything is composed is fleetingly stable, impersonally fickle, and only briefly ours.□

**Dennis Oppenheim, *Two Objects*, 1989**, wood, fabric, motor, and timer, 41 x 32 x 34".

Tobey Crockett is an independent curator and critic who lives in Los Angeles.

Dennis Oppenheim's retrospective "And the Mind Grew Fingers" opens at P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York, on 8 December and continues there until 9 February 1992. At this writing, arrangements are in progress for the show to travel.

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