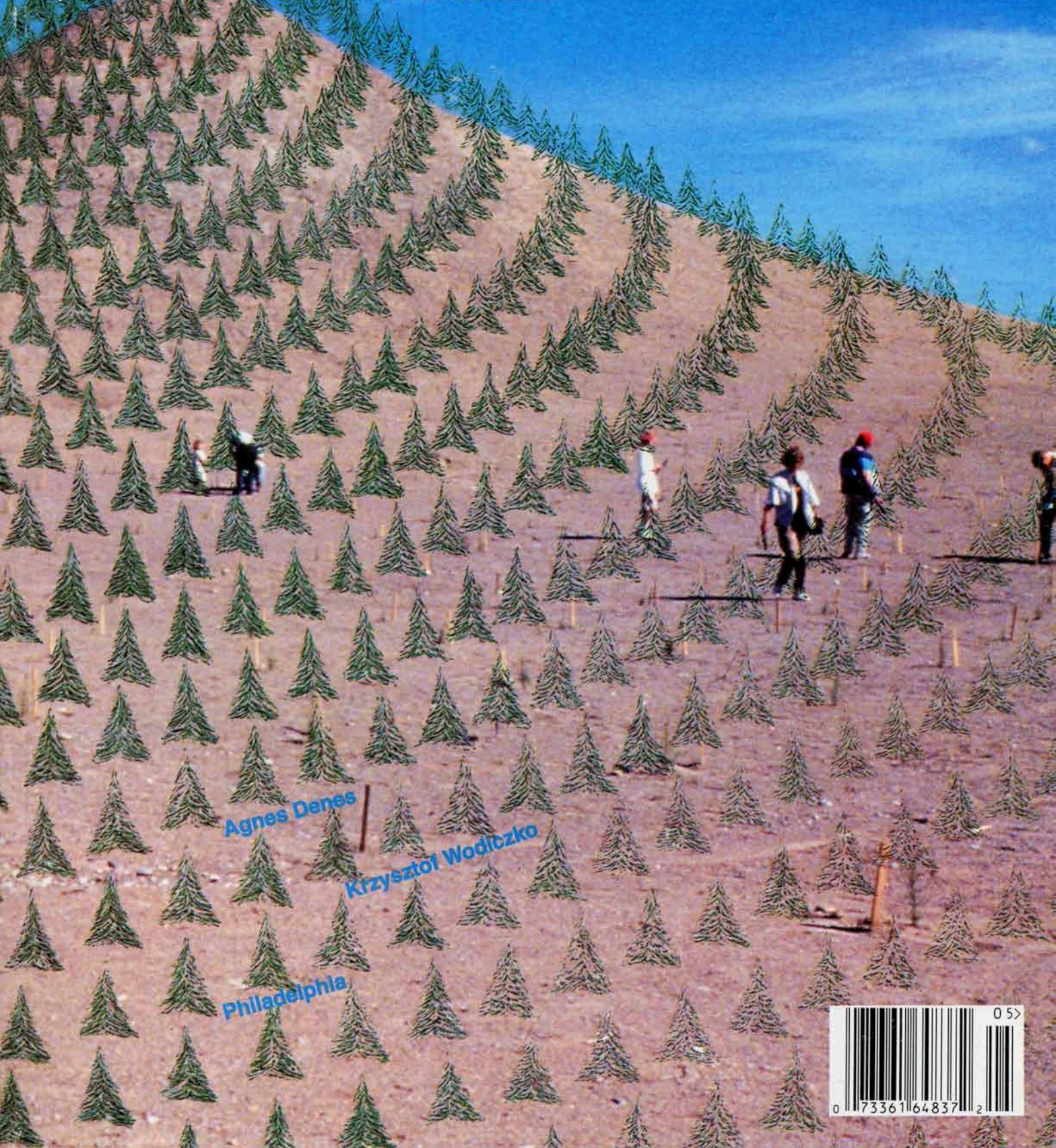


# Sculpture

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Agnes Denes

Krzysztof Wodiczko

Philadelphia





After a century of experimentation with the material and conceptual definitions of sculpture, artists are starting to selectively integrate those changes into their work in ways that combine historical notions concerning technique with contemporary radical definitions. It is in this arena of objects joining present and past that the notion of sculpture as craft-object is beginning to flourish.

The notion of "craft" or technique represented in the work of these artists discards the concept of function but retains a crucial aspect of craft: the painstaking, repetitive, highly skilled labor required to make an object that records that labor and comments on it. In other words, technique is paramount and is in dialogue with the material chosen. Unlike sculptors who attempt to transcend their materials, these artists work in concert with them. The notation of their skill is visually present in the way their materials are inflected; the surfaces are crucial to how they are apprehended and are also a record of effort expended over time. While these objects are not fetishized in terms of finish, they embody the work needed to make them; in this way, the objects are intimately linked with their producers. These objects are not conceptual orphans in the larger world of things in consequence of their disconnection from the processes that created them; instead their entire gestalt declares a fundamental separation from the mass-produced and technological.

The five sculptors whose work is featured in this article were formed artistically against the cultural backdrop of the 1970s, a time characterized by a great deal of discourse including feminism, identity construction, and the re-emergence of narrative. The intellectual ferment during this time was characterized by an intense scrutiny and



**Opposite: Michael Gitlin, *Finite Meandering*, 1998. Copper, foam, wire mesh, and cotton lycra, 96 x 40 x 41.9 in.**  
**Above: *Un-Trophy*, 1998. Plaster, foam, and cotton lycra, 48 x 32 x 44.5 in.**

revision of traditional hierarchies and art-historical narratives. The range of questioning took form in a dazzling array of disparate styles: Minimalism, Pop, conceptual art, Postminimalism, and neo-figuration.

An important component of this examination was a radical reevaluation of the notion of craftsmanship as the defining element conferring "quality" on an art object. In order to establish the primacy of idea over form, many artists had others fabricate their work for them. Others called the entire sculptural project into question by using determinedly industrial or non-art substances outside of the gallery and museum axis to construct their work. A major consequence of feminism was the understanding of concepts such as "mastery" and "craftsmanship" as constructions deliberately denying women and minorities access to certain fields of artmaking. The most important consequence of all this questioning was an awareness of the

ideologies constricting and delineating the boundaries of artmaking practice. Artists realized that the way something is constructed, the material it is made from, its scale and subject matter are all central to defining it.

These five artists have tired of the methodologies of dematerialization and strategies that obscure the object with non-visual concerns; they have returned to imagery and physical materials once considered too loaded with negative associations. At the heart of their processes is an attempt to reinvigorate sculptural craft techniques with a narrative that creates an "open" object rather than one enclosed and obscured within the traditional narratives. This represents an attempt to transform the current state of disconnected relations between viewers and objects. Rather than making an object that takes more time to make than is required to "get," these artists are concerned with making technique a factor in the time demanded of the viewer to see the object.

These artists are not nostalgic for the way things were, not interested in attempting to transfuse new meaning into academic craft skills such as stone masonry, wood carving, and bronze casting. Too great a shift has occurred in the way art objects are read for there to be any feasible revisiting of 19th-century aesthetic values. Too much valuable ground has been gained in the whole process of redefining sculpture. These artists are not advocating the return of the pedestal, the monument, the heroic nude. They are merely trying to integrate the way a thing is made with the way a thing means. In other words, to make their process integral to narrative meaning.

The British craftsman, David Pye, says that an essential component in the process of making things is the "craftsmanship of risk." This is opposed to

# Skilled labor

by Kathleen Whitney



what he calls “the craftsmanship of certainty”: the differentiating factor between these has nothing to do with the purist use of hand tools or the sanctity of the human touch. This is instead a means of distinguishing processes that bear no risk in terms of the manufacture of something, in comparison to processes where at any minute, the entire object may be ruined because of some mechanical/physical mistake in eye-hand coordination. This is a far more dynamic way of thinking about craft as opposed to the old, fetishized definition which has

## These artists have tired of strategies that obscure the object.

same time takes the conceptual into consideration. Their objects are conceptually and physically about the techniques and functions they engage. They are also deeply metaphorical and require the active participation of the viewer who must engage in a

and seriality. These devices are employed as an ordering system, a way of helping the viewer read the metaphors informing the work. Her materials—wood, steel, clay, copper, wax, paper, grass, and pigments—are formed as if she were making an object with a function. These materials may be poured, cast, or turned on a metal lathe, then encased within some kind of framing device so they can't be moved or touched. Like a table of contents in a book, her various processes are more than a specific set of technologies, they



Left: Anne Cooper, *Conservo (In Memory)*, 1997. Steel, alfalfa, reed, and paper, 16.5 x 16 x 3 in. Above: *Conservo*, 1999. Mixed media. Installation at San Ysidro church, Corrales, New Mexico. Opposite, left to right: Bill Gilbert, *combcachment braille-byte*, 1998. Clay, 42 x 14 in. *Amocantolloro sueno*, 1998. Clay, 40 x 19 in.

been obscured by sentimentality for the pre-industrial past. More importantly, it removes the relationship between technique/process and material from where it has been mired in the traditional realm called craft.

The aspect of “risk” is essential to the work of Anne Cooper, Bill Gilbert, Michael Gitlin, Carol Kumata, and Meredith Jack. Each has developed a body of work that restores meaning to physicality and at the

specific imaginative, interpretive act.

Albuquerque resident Ann Cooper's original training was as a potter. This grounding in the making of functional objects has had a profound influence on her present work, which refers to the vessel form and its social uses. As Cooper says, “the whole idea of concept versus form and craft versus art is one I've been involved with for years.” She uses a number of visual devices derived from Minimalism such as grids

are guides to her intention and a system of potential usages. *Conservo (In Memory)* is a demonstration of her indexical use of materials and the implications and associations clinging to them. This intimate piece (roughly 16 by 16 by 3 inches) is composed of nine nearly identical steel squares in three rows of three. There is a rectangular opening in the middle of each piece into which is inserted a tightly compressed wad of alfalfa, grass, and paper. This work is a record of Cooper's activity as an environmentalist. It is “In Memory” of several pieces of land in Albuquerque that Cooper and her group tried to save from development.

Bill Gilbert's most recent work concerns the visual qualities of language. He is “interested in letters as discreet images and the act of mark-making as a record of a physical experience.” The marks, made on large oblong, clay



tablets, are closely related to Sumerian cuneiform, one of the earliest forms of writing. Cuneiform is an angular, wedge-shaped script impressed into clay tablets with a split reed. Gilbert's marks, made with his fingertips, are arranged in a way that exhibits a regularity of direction, spacing, and grouping that corresponds to writing. These parallel bands create a tiered composition, one row of marks above another, referencing a system used for five millennia for narrative illustration.

Gilbert's clay slabs, often over 3 feet

long and 2 feet wide are subjected to a number of different processes after initial forming in a slab roller: they are stretched, folded, grabbed, thrown on the ground. All marks that occur during this process are preserved as a record of the action needed to make them.

The slabs are then fired using the raku process. After heating they are taken from the fire and put in steel boxes containing sawdust, newspaper, or shredded magazines. The combustion of these substances when they come in contact with the red-hot clay

is what produces their particular surface texture and coloration. The piece *combcatchmentbrailebyte* uses a terra sigillata slip, a traditional pre-industrial finish made by Gilbert from New Mexico clays. When burnished, this creates a shiny surface, interrupted by Gilbert's raised marks.

Gilbert has been working with clay for over 25 years, and his knowledge of the transformations that occur in clay during the firing process has led to an interest in working with chance and risk. For Gilbert the experience of deal-



ing with his materials is an acknowledgment of their nature and a surrender of his will and intention to them. He is not interested in transcending the material, instead, he wants the material to speak, to act in alliance with him and the processes tempering it. He is accomplished in the full range of ceramic techniques, but he is not interested in using the material as a way of exhibiting mastery. His hope is that "the work speaks to thumbprints that imply animal tracks which evoke landscapes whose structures mimic bee combs whose patterns resemble computer bytes, etc."

Pittsburgh artist Carol Kumata works with welded steel. The choice of this material creates an odd dialogue with her imagery, which takes the form of organic shapes mimicking microscopic forms such as diatoms, seeds, and pods. Her imagery and choice of materials reflect her interest in the structure of things and the notion of complementary opposites.



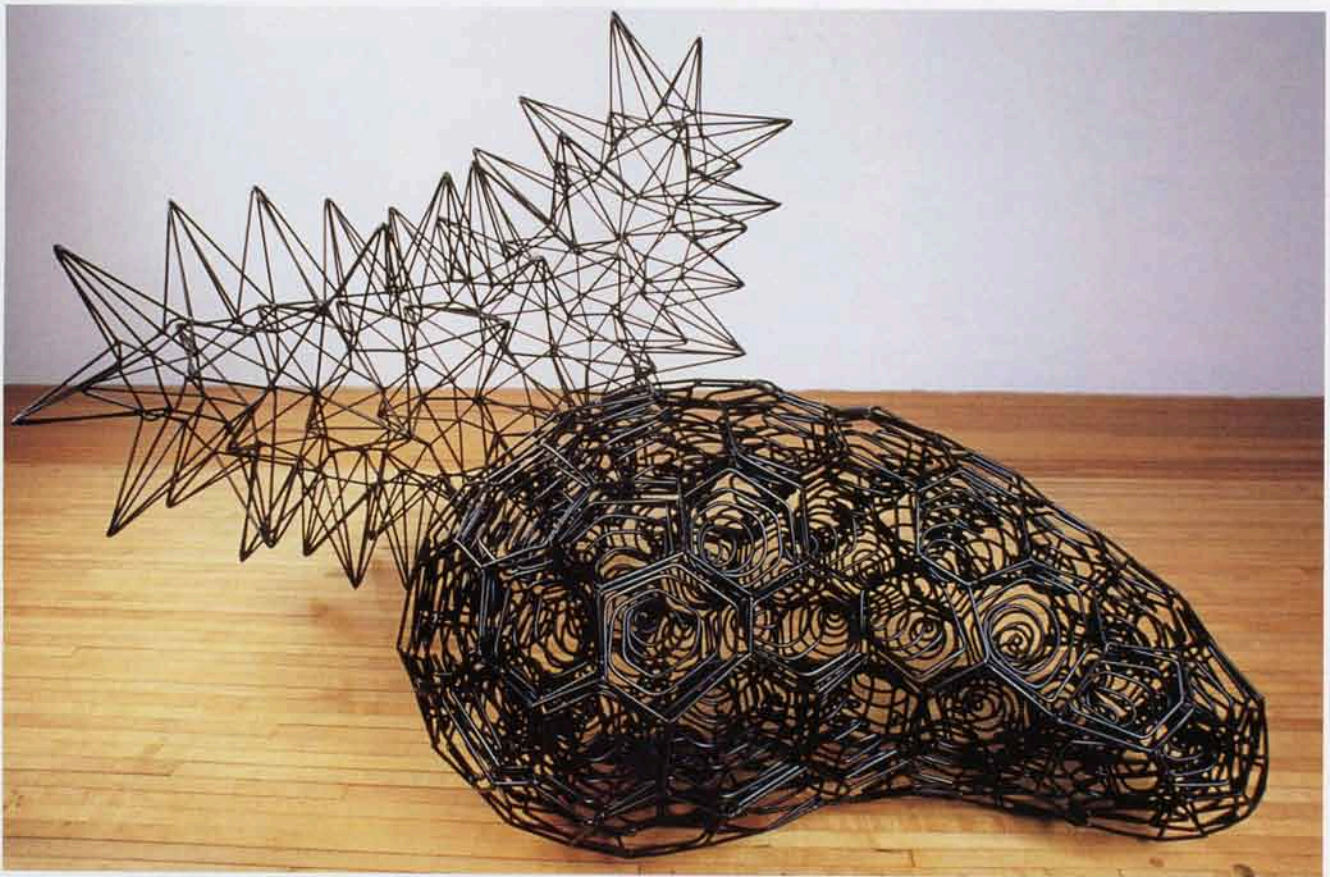
Like Ann Cooper and Bill Gilbert, Kumata works in the ideologically suspect and undefined territory between functional craft processes and fine art. In employing painstaking and obsessive processes, she seems to be insisting on the social functionality of that most useless object, the piece of art. Kumata makes symbolic forms that can be read as metaphors for various emotional or perceptual states. It is as if she perceives human response as a construct similar in nature to the logic of geometric form.

## They fuse the way a thing is made with the way it means.

and image trade meaning and association by virtue of having been named.

Kumata's dexterity and finesse in the manipulation of her materials similar to that of a jeweler. Because she works additively and the details of each piece are finely wrought and specific, the

Meredith Jack is also an extraordinary metalworker. He denigrates his skill as far as welding is concerned, claiming to be "a better grinder than a welder." He works with a great range of materials including clay, steel, iron, bronze, and aluminum. He is also concerned with blending concept and material. Like Kumata, he is interested in the representation of emotional states. A recent series sought to create forms that made parallels with non-Western forms of insanity. Each piece bears the title of one of these states.



Her intention is revealed via her deliberately descriptive titles.

*The Attraction of Opposites* presents two distinct objects that represent opposed personality types. The organic, more detailed form is meant to be read as passive and inward turning; its spiky partner outgoing and aggressive. The literalness of this title with its pair of visual coordinates somehow opens up a range of meanings and references, which might in the absence of the title not be available. This is an interesting strategy in terms of engaging the viewer; words

viewer gets an odd impression of reality: as if these things had actually been observed under a microscope and enlarged for scientific purposes. Like a jeweler, she conceals the nature of the labor needed to create her work. Yet her choice of steel is so in tune with her imagistic conception that no other material could have been used. Confronted by these coolly beautiful, meditative objects, the viewer has no hint of the noise and heat of welding, the rigidity and resistance of the metal.

**Carol Kumata, *The Attraction of Opposites*, 1997. Fabricated steel, two elements: 24 x 24 x 48 in. and 20 x 20 x 36 in.**

Unlike Western, secular definitions of dysfunction, these exotic states have to do with persecution by spirits and unhappiness caused by the ill-wishes of neighbors. Jack's emotional states are not carefully structured; they represent states of mind manifested in manias and total loss of control. Jack uses technical means that correspond with those of pre-industrial cultures: simplified



forms, surfaces inflected by gesture, and symbols such as spirals.

One of these pieces, *Locura* is a columnar structure, six feet in height. It is less than a foot wide, raised up precariously on a tiny three-legged base resembling a small footstool. The piece is fabricated from pieces of heavy pipe that have been cut into and ground away unevenly. The head of the piece is separated from the main body, welded at an angle to it. It is an odd, totemic object simultaneously pathetic and dignified. Jack is clearly influenced by the art of the Third World. The informal way he handles his materials masks his conceptual sophistication; welds are coordinates for sewing, gluing; grinder marks become cuts from axes. This is not a mimicry of primitivism; Jack's work stresses the historical nature of sculpture without sentimentalizing the pre-industrial.

New Yorker Michael Gitlin is the intellectual sensualist of this group. His work is a consequence of process, the result of thinking through the implications adhering to specific kinds of materials. His recent sculptures, elongated asymmetrical structures, are covered with a taut skin of matte-black cotton/Lycra that yields to the touch. These structures are made by fitting a tailored, stretch-fabric tube over an armature constructed from foam, wood, and wire mesh. They are wall-mounted, the axial movement of the forms in space as they come off the wall towards the viewer and the floor creates a figurative presence. The space between object and wall or floor engages the viewer, inviting investigation around and under them. *Finite Meandering* has an odd biomorphism; it seems to change before the viewer's eyes, becoming not animal, vegetable, or mineral but some amalgam of all three. The blackness of the surfaces absorbs light rather than acts as a defining boundary in space. The consequence of this is an odd equivocation; there is no delineation of edges. These pieces have a highly theatrical physical presence emphasized not only by their color, but by the undefinable nature of the form.

Top, right: Meredith Jack, *Locura*, 1997. Steel, 75 x 12 x 12 in. Right: *Rosegarden 44*, 1997. Steel, 73 x 30 x 41 in.



Although Gitlin's body of work owes a great deal in its conception to Postminimalism, its appearance hearkens back to the drama and emotionalism of *fin de siècle* sculptors such as Medardo Rosso and Rodin. What Gitlin shares with these two is a fascination with ambiguity. His sensual surfaces conceal the enormous amount of labor that is their hidden armature. The viewer is left with an impression of a phenomenon that occurred immediately, organically, as there is no tangible trace of a process occurring over a period of time.

During the past 30 years, many sculptors have concentrated on investigating the social role of objects. Sculpture's historical bond to material and its ties to traditional fabrication processes have been renounced. This shift has resulted in the privileging of idea over physicality: its consequence the "de-materialized" object, the polemical device. The prevailing trend has been away from the object, and its unique ability to bear multiple meanings, toward a vehicle that exists solely as critique of both history and our bathetic present. Notions regarding visual pleasure have also been dismissed as frivolous or beside the point. The current climate is a puritan realm, which places the intellectual before all other functions and accuses the senses of political incorrectness.

The idea that sculpture is no more than a container of ideology as well as an advertisement for it is an oversimplification of the historical relationship between human beings and objects. Artists who reject these simplified and etiolated notions risk invisibility within the context of the art world. Nonetheless, without any kind of missionary zeal or deliberate intent, the artists whose work provided the *raison d'être* for this article are deeply involved in rescuing sculpture from its present academic mire. By injecting technique with metaphorical meaning, they are creating a radical basis for destabilizing and reinvigorating the entire endeavor.

Kathleen Whitney is a sculptor, critic, and frequent contributor to *Sculpture*. She may be reached via e-mail at [kaywhit@flash.net](mailto:kaywhit@flash.net).