

University Art Museum

University of California, Berkeley

California, University Art Museum

Exhibition dates:

April 18 / May 29, 1967

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Notes on Funk

by Peter Selz

funk (funk), v.i.; FUNKED (funk); FUNK'ING. [Of uncertain origin; cf. *funk* to kick, also, in dial. use, to shy, kick up the heels, throw the rider (of a horse).] To be frightened and shrink back; to flinch; as to *funk* at the edge of a precipice; to *funk* in a fight. *Colloq.* to *funk out*, to back out in a cowardly fashion. *Colloq.*

funk, vt. *Colloq.* 1. To funk at; to flinch at; to shrink from (a thing or person); as, to *funk* a task. 2. To frighten; to cause to flinch.

funk, n. *Colloq.* 1. A shrinking back through fear; panic.

'The horrid panic, or *funk* (as the men of Eton call it).' *DeQuincey*.

'That Sahib's nigh mad with *funk*.' *Kipling*.

2. One who funks; a shirk; a coward.

3 *Webster's New International (1909)*

Mrs. Martin: *What is the moral?*

Fire Chief: *That's for you to find out.*

— Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano*

The definitions in Webster's *Unabridged* are not very helpful in an attempt to find out what Funk¹ art is about. The quote from Ionesco at least gives us a clue to its anti-message content. When asked to define Funk, artists generally answer: "When you see it, you know it." They are probably quite right.

The term itself was borrowed from jazz: since the twenties Funk was jargon for the unsophisticated deep-down New Orleans blues played by the marching bands, the blues which give you that happy/sad feeling.

Funk art, so prevalent in the San Francisco-Bay Area, is largely a matter of attitude. But many of the works also reveal certain similar characteristics of form — or anti-form. In the current spectrum of art, Funk is at the opposite extreme of such manifestations as New York "primary structures" or the "Fetish Finish" sculpture which prevails in Southern California. Funk art is hot rather than cool; it is committed rather than disengaged; it is bizarre rather than formal; it is sensuous; and frequently it is quite ugly and ungainly. Although usually three-dimensional, it is non-sculptural in any traditional way, and irreverent in attitude. It is symbolic in content and evocative in feeling. Like many contemporary novels, films, and plays, Funk art looks at things which traditionally were not meant to be looked at. Although never precise or illustrative, its subliminal post-Freudian imagery

often suggests erotic and scatological forms or relationships; but often when these images are examined more closely, they do not read in a traditional or recognizable manner and are open to a multiplicity of interpretations. Like the dialogue in a play by Ionesco or Beckett, the juxtaposition of unexpected things seems to make no apparent sense. Funk is visual double-talk, it makes fun of itself, although often (though by no means all the time) it is dead serious. Making allusions, the artist is able, once more, to deprecate himself with a true sense of the ironic.

Funk objects, which are loud, unashamed, and free, may be compared to Dada objects. Indeed Funk, like so many authentic developments in recent art, is surely indebted to the Dada tradition (how paradoxical that we can now speak of a Dada tradition!). Especially in works by artists like Bruce Conner do we find echoes of Kurt Schwitters' Merz collages and the Hanoverian's love for the trash which he rehabilitated. But Conner's fetishist death images, Wally Berman's inventive collages, or George Herms' mystic boxes are really only precursors of the present world of Funk, which is often just as non-formal and arbitrary, but much more flamboyant, humorous, and precise. Perhaps again it is Marcel Duchamp's stance that is of the greatest importance here, his total absence of taste (good or bad) in the selection of his ready-mades, his indifference to form and indifference even to certain objects he created, especially those he made some thirty years after he officially ceased making art. Duchamp's



Marcel Duchamp. *Female Fig Leaf*. 1951.
Galvanized plaster. 3½" high.

Marcel Duchamp. *Object-dart*. 1951. Galvanized
plaster with inlaid metal rib. ¾ x 8 x 1".

4 Marcel Duchamp. *Wedge of Chastity*. 1951-52.
Galvanized plaster and dental plastic. 2½ x 3½".



Joan Mirò. *Poetic Object*. (1936). Stuffed parrot
on wood perch, stuffed silk stocking with velvet
garter and paper shoe suspended in cutout
frame, derby hat, hanging cork ball, celluloid fish
and engraved map. 3⅞ x 11⅞ x 10¼". Collec-
tion, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Pierre Matisse.

three small plasters of the early fifties, the *Female Fig Leaf*, apparently modeled from a female groin; the *Object-dart*, its phallic companion piece; and the *Wedge of Chastity*, with its touching inscription for his wife Teeny, are actually as Funk as can be. Jean Arp, one of the original leaders of Dada in Zürich, also comes to mind, particularly with his later biomorphic forms existing in the world between abstraction and figuration. But then, Arp's carefully modeled or carved sculptures have a pantheistic spirit which would be anathema to the irreverence of Funk. Closer, perhaps, are certain Surrealist objects, like Méret Oppenheim's fur-lined tea cup or Mirò's *Objet Poétique*, a stuffed parrot perched on his wooden branch, surmounting a ball swinging freely on a string, adjacent to a dangling lady's leg, all supported by a man's dented hat. Objects like these are, I think, real prototypes for the current Funk, especially in the similar irreverence, satire, and free association. Like Dada and Surrealism, Funk has created a world where everything is possible but nothing is probable. There is also an important *difference* in attitude in the more recent approach. Dada set out to attack and combat the moral hypocrisy of the public; Surrealism in its prodigious publications and manifestos and programs hoped to establish a new and irrational order based on the revolutionary but contradictory doctrines of Marx and Freud; but Funk does not care about public morality. Its concerns are of a highly personal nature: the Funk artists know too well that a fraudulent morality is a fact of their world, and

they have no illusions that they can change it. If these artists express anything at all, it is senselessness, absurdity, and fun. They find delight in nonsense, they abandon all the strait jackets of rationality, and with an intuitive sense of humor they present their own elemental feelings and visceral processes. If there is any moral, "it's for you to find out."

Funk probably owes a considerable debt and momentum to the ingenious use of ordinary subject matter and common objects on the part of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Both Rauschenberg and Johns, like Schwitters before them, attempt to lead art back to life. While avoiding the tedious banality of many Pop artists, the Funk sculptors similarly share a general anti-cultural attitude and wholesale rejection of traditional aesthetics. They too enjoy and often exploit the vulgarity of the contemporary man-made environment and speak in a visual vernacular. Unlike Pop art, however, the Funk artist transforms his subject matter when and if he makes use of subjects at all. He is not satisfied with simply naming things and instead of a complete confusion of art and life, the Funk artist uses images metaphorically and his work expresses the sense of ambiguity which is the chief characteristic shared by all artistic expressions of our century. Moreover, in contrast to Pop art which as a whole was passive, apathetic, and accepting, the Funk artist belongs to a new generation which is confident, potent, and often defiant.

- Funk art has asserted itself strongly in Northern California. To be sure, the international art magazines are filled with idiosyncratic, sensuous, irrational, amoral, organic, visceral, and three-dimensional objects. They seem to turn up everywhere. Still, there is a heavy concentration of such objects in the San Francisco area. It is here that Funk sprouted and grew. In San Francisco
- Abstract Expressionism, originally under the leadership of Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, soon took an eccentric direction—it was never really abstract for a long time. Its chief protagonists among the painters turned toward a new lyrical figuration (David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff were the most prominent members of a whole new school of Bay Area Figurative painters), or, even when they remained superficially abstract, they did not exclude symbolic forms. Witty, zany, and unexpected breast forms and bulges can be discovered in Hassel Smith's canvases, and dramatic and disquietingly sensual, often phallic, configurations in Frank Lobdell's heavy impastos. Between 1957 and 1965 when Lobdell was on the faculty of the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), Arlo Acton, Jerrold Ballaine, Joan Brown, William Geis, Robert Hudson, Jean Linder, and William Wiley were among his students. Many of the Funk artists began as painters, and much of Funk art, although three-dimensional, remains more closely related to recent traditions in painting than in sculpture. Other aspects of the free-wheeling and

often rebellious life among the younger generation in California may have had an impact on the development of Funk. In the fifties the beat poets, with their vociferous disregard of social mores and taboos, were very much on the scene. These poets not only wrote poetry, but they also performed and entertained with it. Their first public readings, in fact, took place at the Six Gallery, successor to the aptly named King Ubu Gallery. With Kenneth Rexroth presiding as master of ceremonies, Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen read their poems, and Jack Kerouac, then on the Coast, was there and recorded it soon thereafter in *The Dharma Bums*. The beat poetry, read to the accompaniment of jazz, recalls in retrospect the simultaneous poetry and music recitations in Zürich's Cabaret Voltaire (Dada's birthplace)—but in San Francisco it was new and full of excitement, and helped bring about a kind of free environment in which Funk, itself a combination of sculpture and painting, could flourish. Already in the early fifties there were programmed events (similar to the later "happenings") in San Francisco, and as early as 1951 an exhibition under the title "Common Art Accumulations" was held. Bruce Conner and his friends in the Rat Bastard Protective Association put together ephemeral conglomerations, combining all kinds of uncombinable things, called them "Funk," and didn't care what happened to them.

The art scene in San Francisco with its peculiar general lack of support for the artist may have also sustained the

growth of this highly personal art. Here the artist has not yet become a popular idol and, as in New York in the forties, there are only a handful of successful galleries, a paucity of collectors, and meager sales; art has not become a status symbol. Harold Paris, who has himself achieved considerable renown, recently explained this situation in his article on Funk by saying:

In Los Angeles art is consumed voraciously — a bargain-table commodity. In San Francisco and the Bay Area artists live among a citizenry whose chief artistic concerns are opera and topless. The serious artists, galleries, and museums founder in this "Bay" of lethargy and social inertia. The artist here is aware that no one really sees his work, and no one really supports his work. So, in effect he says "Funk." But also he is free. There is less pressure to "make it." The casual, irreverent, insincere California atmosphere, with its absurd elements — weather, clothes, "skinny-dipping," hobby craft, sun-drenched mentality, Doggie Diner, perfumed toilet tissue, do-it-yourself — all this drives the artist's vision inward. This is the Land of Funk.²

Perhaps it is possible that Karl Shapiro was right when he said that San Francisco is "... the last refuge of the Bohemian remnant."

In 1959 Peter Voulkos came north from Southern California, where he had achieved an important reputation not only for the extraordinary quality of his ceramic sculpture but also for his highly funky endeavor to make useless pots. While Voulkos himself now works

primarily in bronze, others have transformed pottery into pure Funk: James Melchert's ceramic pipes, socks, and globular, bumpy, suggestive objects; Manuel Neri's funny, brightly glazed, child-like loops; Arneson's sexed-up telephones; or Gilhooly's zoo, fired in the kiln because, as he writes, "... animals just seem right when done in clay." Kenneth Price, who worked with Voulkos in Los Angeles, has brought the useless pot into the realm of high funk with his beautifully crafted egg forms from which germinal shapes extrude, shapes which evoke divergent but related associations in different spectators. Many of the Funk artists have recently turned toward a greater formality in their work. Even the idea of permanence has occurred to them. Although neatness or sloppiness is not the issue here, there is a general trend toward greater care in execution and more precision, partly due to a limited amount of recognition enjoyed by the artists, and partly facilitated by the use of new materials — all kinds of plastics, including fiberglass, vinyl, epoxy, and the polyester resins. Jeremy Anderson now enamels his redwood sculptures; Arlo Acton uses shiny metal instead of old pieces of lumber; Robert Hudson's sculptures have consistently become more precise and clear-cut; and Jean Linder's sexual furniture looks increasingly antiseptic. Mowry Baden, whose sculpture previously had a rough and hairy finish, now produces a smooth fiberglass object like the *Fountain*; and Harold Paris, when not building his enigmatic, ritualistic rooms, makes little rubber

organs placed in neat plexiglass boxes. Jerrold Ballaine and Gary Molitor are using plastics, molded or cut and shaped by machine, which give their suggestive images a hard-edged, shiny, and ultra-clean appearance; Don Potts' constructions are most carefully carpentered; Mel Henderson has created an environment in which forms suggesting snakes, entrails, or pipelines present a highly polished appearance (and are all the more disconcerting for that reason), as does Sue Bitney's *Family Portrait* made of colorful fabric and brightly painted wood. Much of the work currently assumes this greater interest in a well-made finished product. But the imagery, the attitude, the feeling remain funky just the same: the same attitude of irony and wit, of delight in the visual pun, the same spirit of irreverence and absurdity prevail, even when dexterity and careful workmanship are more apparent in the finished sculpture. In fact, this precision of finish only enhances the ironic quality of the work.

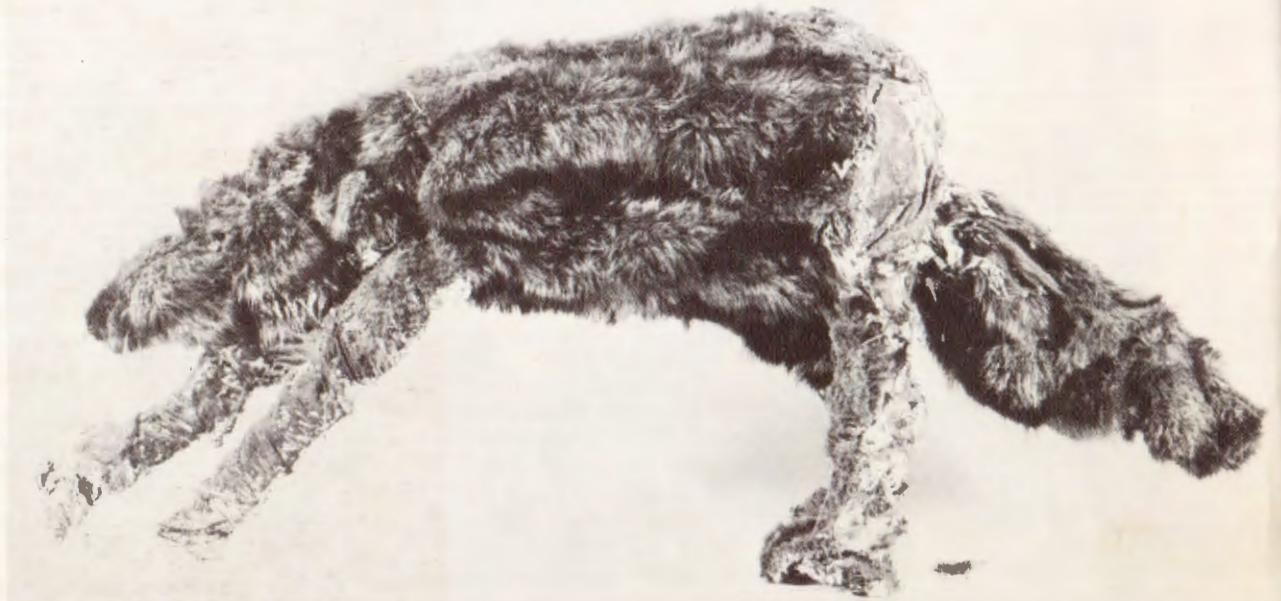
Alfred Jarry knew precisely what he was doing when he had King Ubu enter the stage exclaiming "Merdre!" [sic.]. And, although no one has ever deciphered the meaning, what could be more perfectly composed and more readily felt than:

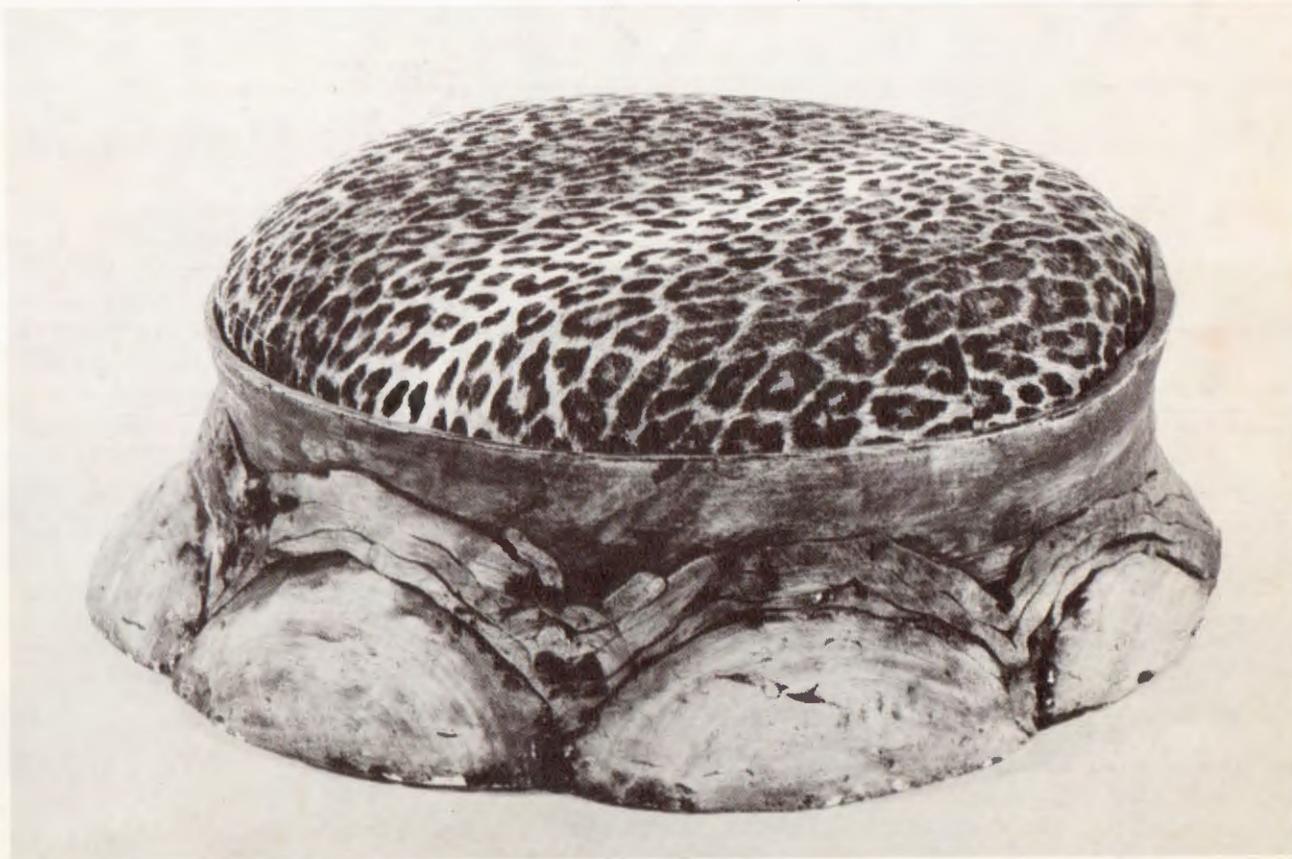
*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

¹David Gilhooly prefers to spell it Funkk, while William Wiley seems to alternate funk with Phunk.

²Harold Paris, "Sweet Land of Funk," *Art in America*, March 1967.







Robert Hudson. *Untitled*. (1965). Polychromed metal. 66 x 48 x 43". Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York.

