CINCINNATI, OHIO
By Jeffrey Hughes

The inaugural exhibition of the Contemporary Arts Center’s stunning Zaha Hadid structure is an extraordinary experience both as indicative of the late-modernist architectural vocabulary usurping its space, and as an interaction with works of art that herald a virtual textbook of most of the prominent critical issues and artists of the previous five years. Curated by Thom Collins, who also wrote the catalogue, SOMEWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE (June 7–November 23, 2003) investigates various social experiences in the context of a disoriented, heterogeneous understanding of place and social dialogue. Although these works have been shown elsewhere and, in many cases, are exceedingly well known, the exhibition is much more than just a travelogue of recent international neo-conceptualism.

The exhibition title derives from a phrase on a Felix Gonzalez-Torres give-away work Untitled (1989–1990). Placed in two continuously replenished stacks, Gonzalez-Torres’ pages read “somewhere better than this place” and in binary opposition “nowhere better than this place.” The viewer/participant is free to choose a single statement, its contrasting assertion, both or neither. The statements are their own textual referents with no fixed inferences, but are accorded positive, negative or neutral value by the participant. In concurrence with contemporary critical awareness of the markers of identity, with “Somewhere Better” Collins has constructed a synthetic concept of social meaning that combines the somewhere/nowhere dichotomy of Gonzalez-Torres’ statements with Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia. Foucault’s loosely defined heterotopias are those places that are simultaneously real and mythic, and therefore can expose the illusory qualities of either.

The majority of works in “Somewhere Better” suggest a state of being caught between times, cultures or locales either as that which forces the viewer to be actively engaged, as though locked into a position of intercession, or alternately that directly address a disjunction of opposing forces often including scant visual or psychic resolution. Shirin Neshat’s Fervor (2000) exemplifies this activity of viewer as passively following the storyline of the two primary protagonists, and yet thoroughly involved with directing one’s attention from the action on one screen to the next. Fervor uses adjacent dual screen projection to heighten the physical separation and tenuous union between male and female. As the speaker in the film brings the assembled audience to a state of religiously sanctioned fervor, the viewer becomes increasingly aware of multiple levels of sexual repression and the attraction/rejection dyad.

In Sam Durant’s Partially Buried 1960s/1970s: Utopia Reflected, Dystopia Revealed (1998), two mirrors are piled with earth, each with an embedded sound element that requires crouching very nearly to hear a recording of Warly Gray’s speech about peace and community at Woodstock on one, and on the other, Mick Jaggers’ pleas for calm at the infamous Altamont concert. Echoing Robert Smithson’s Partially Buried Woodshed (1970) that became a memorial to the Kent State murders, the nearly identical grave-like mounds proclaim the commonality of generational loss that was the war in Vietnam, and symbolically of the loss of utopian dreams and their dialectically determined dystopian resolution.

Mosheka Langa’s video Where do I begin? (2002) depicts the lower legs and feet of a seemingly endless queue of passengers boarding a bus. The artist clandestinely filmed the piece standing at a rural bus stop in South Africa, his birth country. The line of black passengers moves up to the bus in slow motion that reveals varying styles of dress and types and condition of shoes or sandals, often without socks, provoking a read of varying states of poverty. However, the passengers remain anonymous, as does their destination. They simply may be local commuters, or those who travel to distant cities in search of labor, or the throngs of the un-rooted and dispossessed in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Belgian artist Francis Alÿs is represented by multi-media documentation of his 2002 project When Faith Moves Mountains. The performance/event, staged for the third Bienal Iberoamericana de Lima, involved five hundred volunteers, many of whom were civil engineering students, who showed a quantity of sand along an enormous dune in the Ventanilla area near Lima. The displacement of sand was a symbolic moving of the geological formation four inches from its original position that created a series of lines reminiscent of a trail left by a giant comb. Alÿs evokes many references in this work; including most obviously the apostle Paul’s variously interpreted statement from 1 Corinthians that faith can move mountains. The inhabitants of the region live without electricity or running water in the aftermath of the Fujimori dictatorship and its policies of disenfranchisement of the working class. The group effort altered, albeit minimally, the existing terrain and produced a tangible moment demonstrating the power of cooperative subversion in the face of extreme social injustice. Alÿs’ installation successfully captures the intensity of the original event and serves to link that metaphorical activity to the broader tradition of activist art.

CRANBROOK, MICHIGAN

RONA PONDICK: SCULPTURE, 1992–2003 (Cranbrook Art Museum, September 20–November 30, 2003) is a mid-career look at an important artist. Since the mid-1980s, Pondick has made sculptures and installations that focus on the body and on corporeal signs of psyche (nipples, for example, as well as mouths, feet and ears). Like Robert Gober, Janine Antoni and Charles Ray, Pondick creates sculptures that are both humorous and terrifying, and much of the power of her work comes from its integration of the comic with the grotesque.

Mary Jane (1992), the earliest work presented, stands about four feet tall and hangs from wires attached to the ceiling. Made out of a pair of stockings stuffed with polyester and hardened with an acrylic medium, it simulates the bottom half of some strange humanoid with two elongated, boneless legs and a dimpled, slightly protruding crotch. The figure’s yellowish white legs terminate in a dainty pair of white Mary Janes that rest on the floor. Its legs bulge where it enter the shoes, as if the flesh was being pulled down by gravity. An eerie meditation on childhood and development, Mary Jane reveals Pondick’s debt to Louise Bourgeois. Its appropriated commercial materials bind together a series of disturbing oppositions including sensuality and decay, liquid and solid, and childhood and old age. It makes us think of how our bodies grow and decline, and how they are shaped by the products—fashionable or not—in which we house them.

Dirt Head (1997) is an installation of consisting of hundreds of iterations of Pondick’s most famous sculptural element: a sphere that sprouts a mouth complete with teeth, four hundred brown wax and thermoplastic mouth-spheres.
lie scattered on a pile of dark earth that reaches its apex in the room’s corner. Some of the spheres lie on top while others are partially buried. They look like a huge scattering of potatoes or bodies in a mass grave. Pondick’s spheres are so disturbing because they suggest severed heads and, at the same time, complete creatures. Because of their freakish hybrid forms, they appear to be mutants frozen in a process of either growth or decay. Sourballs (1995) presents these monsters differently. Here smaller versions are cast in green, yellow, and orange plastic, wrapped in Mylar, and housed in a large glass jar like taffies at a candy store. Both deadly products and preserved specimens, Pondick’s oral and seemingly sadistic spheres raise questions of the body’s relation to technology and mass reproduction.

Dirt Head is the masterpiece of the show as well as its only installation. This is a shame, since Pondick’s best works are generally her environmental ones. Instead, the second half of the exhibition focuses on a new series of sculptures that Pondick has made since 1998: cast stainless steel multiples representing human-animal hybrids, whose mismatching body parts are depicted with different degrees of realism. This focus is not a large problem, since many of these new works are provocative and interesting. Among the stand-outs are Fox (1998–99) and Monkeys (1999–2001). Fox is typical of Pondick’s new sculptures in that it merges a smooth, shiny, and somewhat abstract animal’s body with a darker self-portrait head that is both hyper-realistic and minutely textured. Monkeys is much more elaborate: eight quicksilver monkeys with textured human arms swarm over one another in a pile. Two of them bear Pondick’s visage instead of their own. These works splicemythic themes—chimeras, animal deities and the like—to questions of genetic engineering. In addition, they show Pondick to be moving from a formal language inspired by surrealism and post-minimalism to one that suggests Hollywood special-effects films like Terminator II or Mars Attacks.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

By Shana McCaw

As technology becomes embedded into more and more aspects of daily life, designers make it less visible by hiding iMacs and cell phones in slick, cheerful casings. Lurking behind these pretty exteriors are threats such as radiation and technological dependency. With the recent Walker Art Center exhibition STRANGELY FAMILIAR: DESIGN AND EVERYDAY LIFE (June 8—September 7, 2003), curator Andrew Blauvelt brought together a selection of conceptually based designs that neatly combine notions of technology and the science of symbiosis.

One such series, “Placebo Project” (2001) by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, consisted of eight objects that sought to protect their owners from the unseen evil of electromagnetism. EM radiation is emitted by many common consumer items like TVs, radios and stereos. To give users peace of mind and study how susceptible we are to the effect of placebos, Dunne and Raby constructed objects that absorb or deflect electromagnetic waves. For instance, the Electro-draught Excluder, a wooden panel with a handle for easy carrying, was covered on one side with protective, absorbent textured foam. The idea was to place this object, foam side out, between you and the source of electromagnetic radiation. A second device, Loft consisted of a lead box attached to the top of a ladder. The box is meant to protect precious items (like audio and videotapes) from renegade electromagnetic waves. The ladder would presumably make it difficult for nosy roommates to sneak a peek. Each object was subsequently tested in an income environment, after which the testers were interviewed. The interviews, printed on the gallery wall, were the most interesting aspect of the “Placebo Project,” clearly defining the conceptual intent of the series, which was to reveal a general proclivity toward blind faith. In this case, blind faith in innovation and technology, and ironically also the need to protect ourselves from them. The exhibit also included photographs of the test-subjects interacting with their objects. Most appeared to be very stilly posed, as if trying hard to sense the electromagnetic waves bombarding them and comprehend the protection offered by their new devices.

In a second behavioral experiment, Michael Anastassiades created an object defined by the limitations it places on users. The Anti-Social Light (2001) was a regular overhead light, casting a warm glow in a darkened room. But as viewers began to speak, or their footsteps echoed inside the room, the light dimmed. If sounds continued, the light dimmed further, eventually fading to complete darkness. In the presence of this object, viewers had to be very quiet or forego the convenience of electric light. An interesting and funny symbiotic relationship resulted, each participant alienating the other through a perceived form of “interaction.”

Both of these examples asked viewers to question their relationships with everyday objects. These artist-made devices