



ROBERT GOBER

SCULPTURES AND INSTALLATIONS 1979 - 2007

Catalogue

AN ATTEMPT AT AN INTRODUCTION

Theodora Vischer

The present volume, a catalogue of Robert Gober's sculptures and installations since 1979, is being published on the occasion of his retrospective at Schaulager. Robert Gober was born in Wallingford, a small town in Connecticut, in 1954. Immediately after graduating from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1976 he moved to New York, where he still lives. This book and its accompanying exhibition attempt to cover for the first time the artist's oeuvre both in a survey and in its larger context.

Over a period of nearly twenty-five years it has been possible to get to know Gober's oeuvre in exhibitions little by little. First only in galleries and later in museums and exhibition venues as well, his latest works and groups of works could be seen in solo presentations. That is not unusual in the life of a young artist. In Gober's case, however, this procedure seems to have been systematic. The presentations consisted almost exclusively of his latest works, and not just in the early years; even later, when Gober could look back on an oeuvre produced over many years, he only rarely included earlier works that could have established a connection to things seen previously.

Every exhibition is a surprise and always calls for grappling with his works anew. We discuss and attempt to understand a new group of works, whether individual sculptures or a multipart installation, both on its own and in the context of current events. As a result, Gober's oeuvre has been perceived and experienced more as a series of manifesto-like individual appearances than as a continuous narrative. For example, in 1994, when I began to prepare an exhibition with Gober at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel, it was against the backdrop of his previous large show, an installation with hand-painted forest walls and rushing water he had created for the Dia Center for the Arts in New York. Almost none of it returned for the Museum für Gegenwartskunst. Instead we had *Split Wall with Drains*, *Chair with Pipe*, *Lard Box*, and the monumental box of Kleenex that is also perforated with a bronze culvert pipe—an ensemble of works that occupied the large museum space with a disturbingly broken domesticity.

The various presentations are, however, immediately connected to one another, and continuity is created thanks to the intense effect that the sculptures have. Although they depict ordinary objects and furnishings taken from everyday life that are more or less

familiar, the *way* they are depicted and how they are employed makes these objects something special and transforms them into subjects of great suggestive power.

The sculptures are imitations of models that are recreated from scratch. They are developed in countless operations and produced using elaborate methods. Gober likes to provide information about the process of creating the works, about sources and techniques, problems and solutions, and thus emphatically direct attention away from that which is depicted to the individuality of the sculptures. This becomes particularly clear if one is given the opportunity to follow the creation of a sculpture or if one is directly involved in setting up an installation. That which might initially strike one as a deviation from the message of a work, as a detour and subordinate stage setting, proves unexpectedly to be the key to understanding it. It becomes significant that his sculptures have their own surfaces, that they clearly have a different materiality and hence are weighted differently than the objects they are modeled on, or that they sometimes reveal striking deformations and disconcerting deviations in scale from the original yet seem completely natural. The result is sculptures that are deceptively similar to the original but nonetheless radiate a vexing autonomy and make clear that they are not what they pretend to be. They appear to live in an intermediate realm between familiar reality and an unsettling dream world in which the clear meaning of things is broken up and turns into an open flux.

Closely connected with the particular makeup of the sculptures is the pronounced choreography with which their appearances are staged. The rules by which the individual sculptures operate in relation to one another and to the space are willful, nonfunctional; they spring from a reality unlike that of their originals. The step from the presentation of individual sculptures to multipart installations seems small against that backdrop, and it also occurred very early on. Originally explored as part of a collaboration with a fellow artist and as a self-curated collection of his own sculptures and the work of other artists, the installation as a complex work form of the sort Gober first created at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1989 has become a regular feature of his oeuvre. Since then he has created sculptures and installations in parallel; individual sculptures prepare the way for installations, just as parts of the installation become autonomous as individual sculptures. The distinct quality of choreography or installation of this oeuvre as well as the almost magical character of the individual objects means that many of Gober's presentations, whether individual sculptures or installations, impress themselves on our memory not primarily by means of their actual three-dimensionality but as spacial images, as tableaux.

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As such images accumulate, the individual experiences or appearances come together into a larger narrative as if on their own. The point of departure for Gober's visual world is the house as a place of ordinary domestic life. That is where it all begins. This context, which is at once personal history and collective, common property, becomes the stage for Gober's

narrative. *Slides of a Changing Painting*—a key work from 1982–83 that for a long time even the artist himself did not take much note of—demonstrates what was inherent from the start as the potential of the domestic setting.

The narrative begins in the late 1970s with drawings and photographs of interiors and dollhouse constructions of typical residential buildings. After completing the painting project *Slides of a Changing Painting*, the miniature houses were superseded by sculptures of objects from the inside of the house. For a good three years Gober first explored a single object—the sink. Although at first they could immediately be identified with the original, these sculptures had a crucial difference from the outset in that the faucets were missing, and gradually other deformations took place as well. It is an exemplary case of research, over the course of which the sculptures of sinks increasingly become not objects but subjects; they become autonomous and then are literally buried when the process is complete.

Subsequently Gober's work concentrated on a few selected objects and furnishings from everyday domestic life: children's furniture and other furnishings such as playpens, doors, dogs' beds, an armchair, a fireplace, or drains. They all build on the setting of everyday domesticity, which in turn builds on normality but at the same time repeatedly reveals fissures.

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Since the late 1980s Gober has produced multipart installations in addition to sculptures. They recall domestic interiors or exterior spaces in the form of unspoiled forest landscapes; both are lined with wallpaper or hand-painted and furnished or enlivened by sculptures with subjects taken from the same thematic environment as the individual sculptures. The tone abruptly changed, however. The depictions on the wallpaper in the first large installation from 1989 allowed the outside world to enter immediately into the once carefully shielded interior. In combination with the bright pattern from the vignette of a sleeping white man and a hanged black man and a tangle of male and female genitalia against a dark background, the sculptures in both rooms—a disembodied bridal gown of white satin, sacks of kitty litter, and a bag full of donuts—become ambiguous and uncanny elements. The drains installed at chest level on the dark wallpapered walls add an additional dimension to the whole; they mean the wall separating the protected interior and the unpredictable exterior is no longer broken through in the imagination alone but literally so. The drain—long since introduced in the sinks—will later become a complex leitmotif where interior and exterior, private and public meet.

This is the moment in Gober's oeuvre when his images, which until then had been restrained, are filled with anger and turmoil. But that was not all. This period also saw a new

realm emerge from which Gober took models for his sculptures: the body, also his own; not naturalistic imitations of single parts of the body, legs and lower body; children's legs and torsos—at first male, later half male and half female. From the descriptions they may sound violent, but on seeing them they become something else. The sculptures of the legs are placed on the floor and connected to the wall. They do not seem cut off or dead, but they do seem exposed and in need of protection. It is striking that at the same time Gober allowed the excluded outer world to enter his pictorial world he also brought the body (his body) into play as something unscathed but vulnerable, and it signals a shift in position.

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The setting of Gober's narrative changed, expanding to include the dimension of the other, the previously excluded and unnamed. It was the prelude to a new, uncommonly rich creative period that will lead to unexpected, never before seen images and that has not yet come to a conclusion. Its beginning is marked by the installation that Gober created for the Dia Center for the Arts in New York in 1992. For all its fragility, it is permeated by an almost arcadian atmosphere. The walls of the inner space are lined by a hand-painted forest flooded by light; the space itself is filled with the sound of rushing water, which flows incessantly from several faucets into sinks. The floodgates have opened, so to speak, and the boundaries between inside and outside have become permeable; both sides are revealed to be part of a whole, outside which no location seems possible anymore.

The images that follow—individual sculptures and multipart installations—continue to move within an enormous, still unknown, newly opened terrain. The tone changes again, not abruptly as before but emphatically. Anger and turmoil have by no means disappeared. But the aggressive, accusatory tone is given a new meaning. A particularly beautiful though late example is the drawings that form part of the installation Gober created at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York in 2005. They are photolithographs of double-page spreads from the *New York Times* for September 12, 2001, with reports of the previous day's terrorist attack on the World Trade Center towers. On these pages Gober sketched, in delicate pastel colors, couples in intimate embrace. The figures are naked and always shown only as fragments; their faces are not visible. The nameless horror and impotent desperation for which the pages from the newspaper stand meet with simple drawings depicting the elemental values of love and concern. It is a change in attitude that is already implicit in his sculptures of body parts. Since the mid-1990s it has unfolded in a rich variety of sometimes contradictory-seeming images whose spectrum of expression ranges from the baroque drama of the installation with the Madonna from 1997 to the minimalistic *mise-en-scène* for the American pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2001.

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The narrative formed from Gober's individual appearances has developed an impressive complexity and beauty over the years, from their restrained beginnings to the pictorial idiom based on engaged humanity of recent years. Their themes remain the same: they revolve around childhood, sexuality, religion, power, and exclusion. These are all old themes that have emerged from time immemorial in social communities, both private and public. Here, however, they are narrated from the perspective of the 1980s and 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century, against the backdrop of a nation that had once sought to become a center of Western culture. Gober has never left any doubt about the context in which his artistic creativity played out. Again and again he alludes to it directly in his works, whether by looking at the history of the country, its great utopia of a just and free society and the failure thereof, or by looking at events from the immediate past that we have lived through ourselves, the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the 1998 Starr Report on President Bill Clinton, or 9/11. Such direct references to historical or contemporary events are never isolated, however. They appear as part of Gober's pictorial world, where they function as powerful catalysts that push his great narrative even further.

### **Robert Gober. Sculptures and Installations 1979 – 2007**

The book is the first complete listing of Robert Gober's sculptures and installations from 1979 to 2007. It comprises around 250 catalogue numbers, all with full-page illustrations. Comprehensive descriptions are rounded out with the artist's commentary on individual works, as well as technical information on how they were produced and the history behind them. With an introductory essay by Elisabeth Sussman, Curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Edited by Theodora Vischer, Schaulager. Steidl Verlag, Göttingen

Length approx. 550 pages, with over 500 illustrations; format 23.5 cm x 29.5 cm  
Retail price of Schaulager edition CHF 64.00

ISBN 978-3-9522967-5-2 English editions  
ISBN 978-3-9522967-4-5 German edition