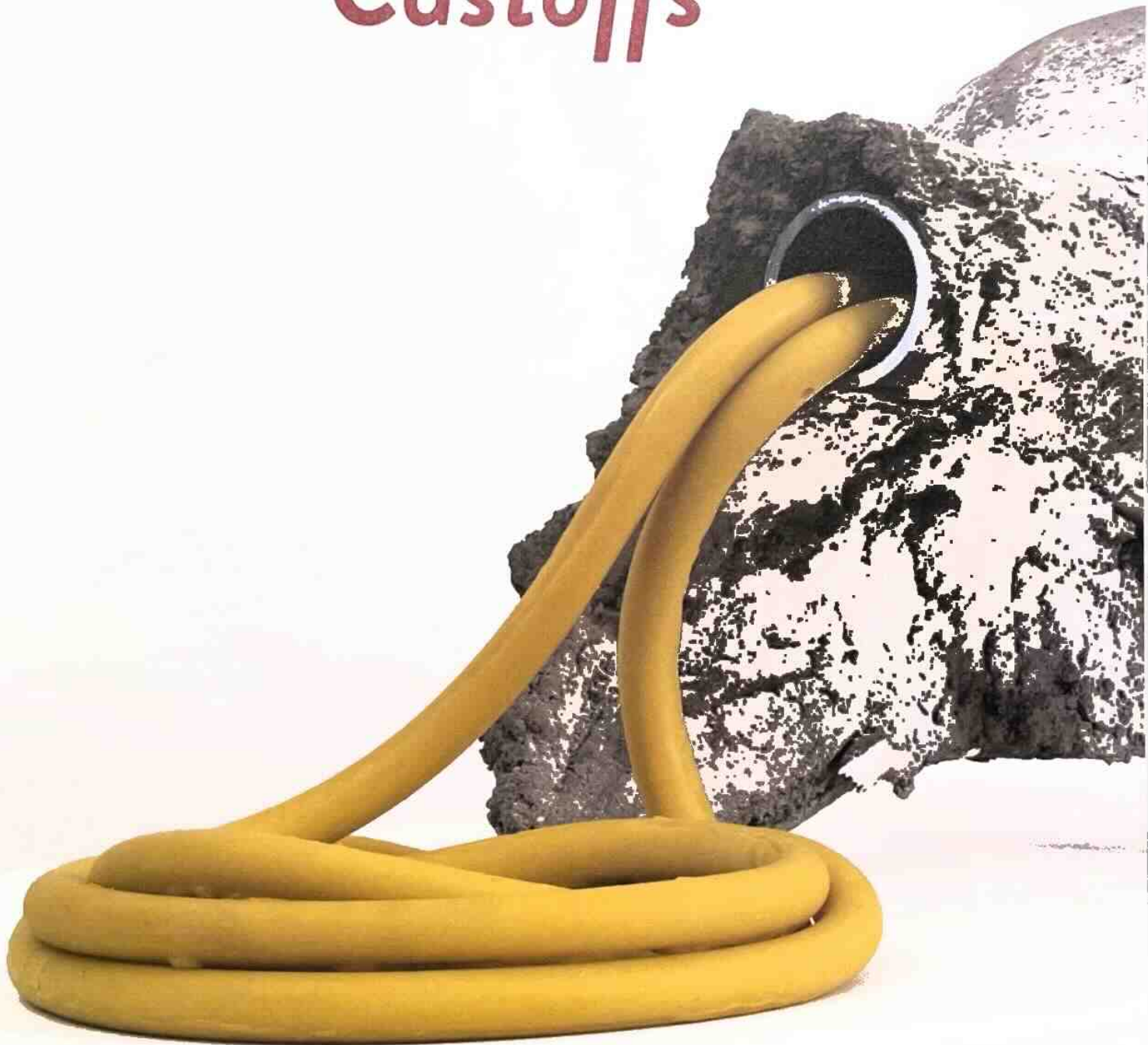
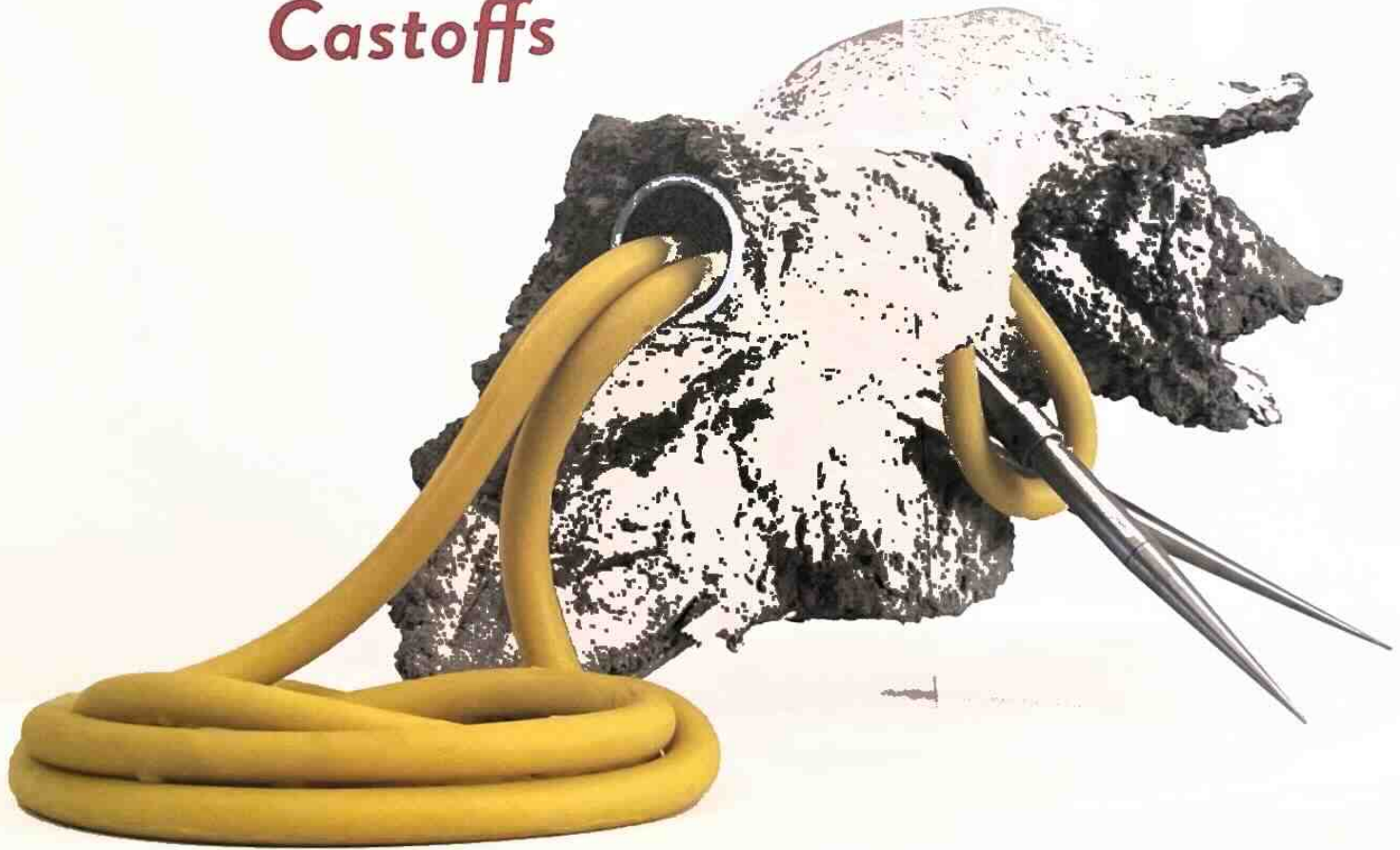


Martha
Friedman
Castoffs



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Time-Lapse: On Martha Friedman's *Castoffs*

Brooke Holmes

The body exists in time. The claim is so obviously true that it risks being only a truism. It becomes interesting if it's read not as a statement about bodies lived and witnessed, about bones and flesh and the bacteria in the gut and the synapses in the brain, but as a statement about "the body"—that is, the body as a concept we use to make sense of the world and our place in it and the place of others in their sameness and their difference from us. In its life as a concept that takes decisive shape in classical Greece, the physical body has long behaved in the cultures caught in its imaginative economy as the standing testament to what time demands of human beings and what time claims from them.¹ In this capacity, it holds out a place for that which obeys different rules, coolly aloof from embodied time: mind or soul or god or the Idea. It's worth emphasizing at the outset, then, that in making the body the emblem of what is fatally entangled in time, we are firmly within the history of the body: loving and hating it, noticing it and studiously ignoring it, opening it up and defending its boundaries. It can be easy to overlook the body's historicity precisely because it has been so persistently imagined as transhistorical and transcultural.² Nevertheless, the casting of the body as time's pawn is itself a process existing in time, steeped in history.

It is this double-sided time of the body that is inhabited and, in turn, enacted by Martha Friedman's group of sculptures in *Castoffs*. The installation comprises thirty-two evenly spaced pedestals raised uncomfortably high. Each pedestal, with a few exceptions, displays a composition involving some mix of concrete casts made from the body of the dancer Silas Riener; rubber mats, blocks, and tubes; and steel plates, poles, spikes, and pipes. The exceptions are three pedestals holding aloft three pairs of enormous and exquisitely detailed glass fingers, slightly bent, as if probing. The palette is rigorously gray except for the rare, bright colors of the rubber and the gleam of the fingers. To enter this gridded domain is to confront the body's fall into time at two levels operating simultaneously.

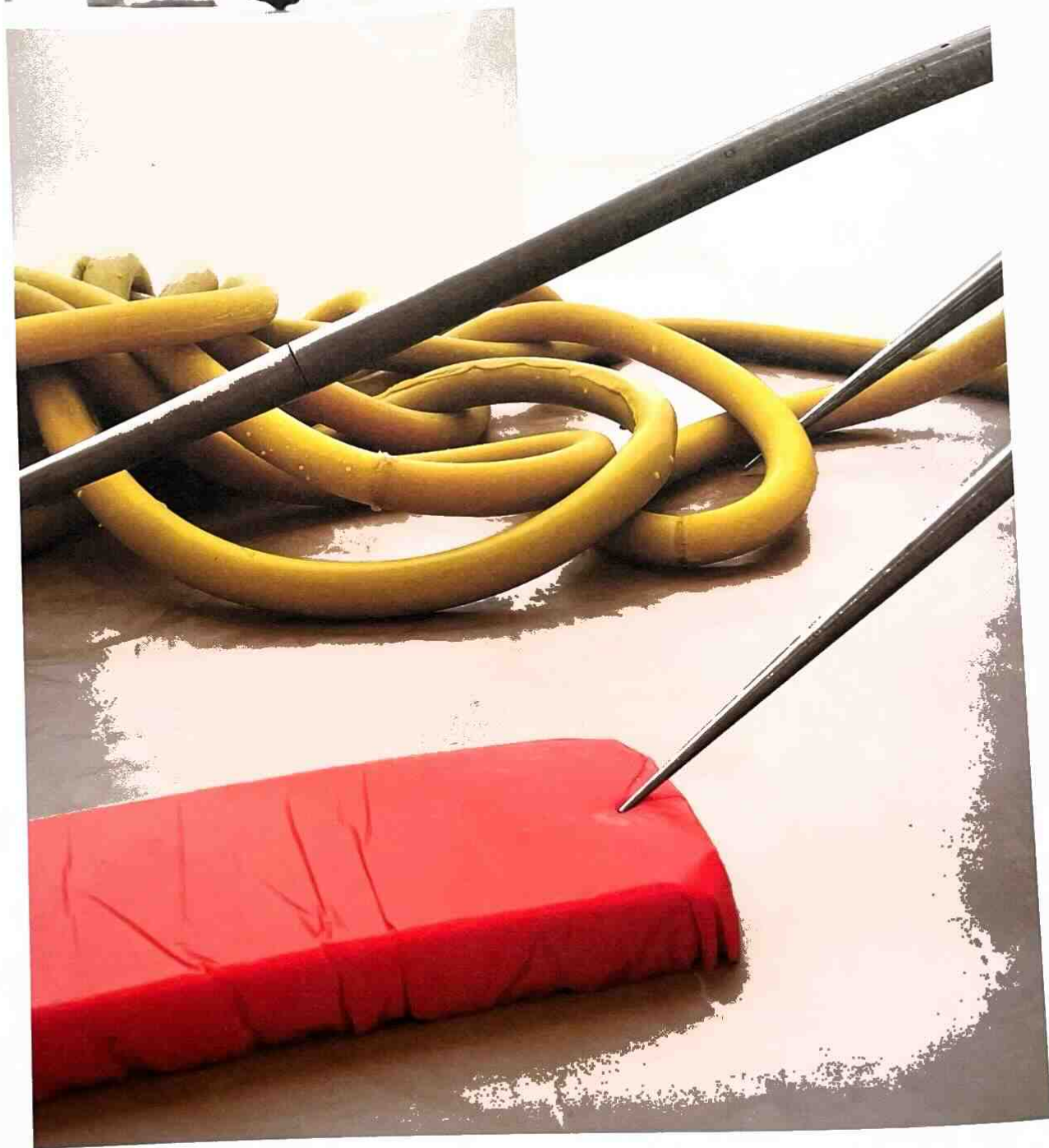
First and foremost, the sculptures are composed of and are themselves flagrantly *made* objects, openly bearing the marks of their discontinuous creation in time and the ever-present possibility of disassembly. They exaggerate the body as an assemblage of parts, held together with seams and spikes. They reject the figure of an organism governed by a single, timeless, unifying form. In their fabricated heterogeneity, they recall the cyborg made famous over the past few decades by Donna Haraway and its defiantly monstrous fusions of human and nonhuman.³ They recall, too, the human body that Plato builds in his cosmological magnum opus, the *Timaeus*, perhaps the most influential Greek text on the creation of the world for the Arabic and Latin philosophical traditions at least through the sixteenth century. In the *Timaeus*, the lesser gods, acting on instructions from the master Demiurge, rivet together the cosmic building blocks to design the human body.⁴ Immortal souls will fall from the stars into these bodies in utero. They will enter the world spinning from the tumult of birth and spend the rest of their lives trying to realign with astral harmonies by resisting the body's centrifugal tendencies: its innate, fluid instability, the slow erosion of its joints and the resulting dissolution. Those souls that fail this task are reborn first as women, then as animals. The hierarchy of Plato's ladder no longer surprises us, but we still despair of finding our way off of it.

Haraway's commitment to the cyborg was born in fact out of her grappling with the long, stubborn history of the body as both the prison of the soul, as it usually is in Plato, and the obedient, feminized partner of form, as it comes to be for Plato's student and successor, Aristotle. Here, then, we are also working on the other side of the body's time: its historicity. Friedman's castoffs intervene in the historical life of the body most directly by addressing the tradition of classical sculpture as a privileged domain for the transcendence of mortal bodies into timelessness. From the eighteenth century, when Johann Joachim Winckelmann founded the modern discipline of art history on the guiding principles of ancient Greek sculpture, the classical body—male, muscular, and chiseled from white marble—has been the defining ideal of the plastic arts.⁵ Already in the fifth century BCE, the Greek sculptor Polycleitus had created his paradigmatic *Doryphoros* (Spearbearer) as a celebration of the rational order encoded in the exemplary male form. Polycleitus was working at a moment when the Hippocratic medical writers were simultaneously mapping the physical body as a mostly hidden domain of volatile fluids requiring the vigilance and discipline of technique (*technē*). In this context, the classical form of the Spearbearer has the air of a defensive fantasy. Indeed, the sculptor often appears in Aristotle and Galen as a figure much like the doctor, heroically imposing form on the body, keeping it from falling apart and drowning in its own matter.

In *Castoffs*, Friedman sets out not so much to invert the entrenched hierarchy of form and matter as to interrogate what form fears in matter and the defenses that this fear produces. Rather than decline to accept the conventionally male agency aligned with the sculptor, she instead cannily experiments with it in the registers of mimicry, exaggeration, and collaboration. In so doing, she lays claim to the sculptor's capacity to powerfully restructure corporeal imaginaries across time as well as under highly local conditions.

The force of Friedman's claim is announced by the use of the grid, that modernist bulwark against mess.⁶ But in Friedman's installation, the grid houses a menagerie of strategies for turning tradition on its head: the concrete casts taken from Riener, Friedman's muse; the flows and tubes of rubber; the reuse of earlier work and material; the cold violence of the steel implements; the finely-detailed, over-scaled fingers inspired by Egyptian rituals of mummification. The very proliferation of techniques is integral to Friedman's idiosyncratic challenge to the tenacious binaries of classic structuralism. There are different ways, she suggests, to reverse Platonism (to borrow a phrase used by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze to challenge the tyranny of form and mind in philosophy and the arts).⁷

The processes of casting and mold-making have been integral to Friedman's practice throughout her career. With *Castoffs*, these processes come center stage as both the means of producing objects and, in some sense, the very content of the exhibition. The mechanics of casting inherently challenge the idea of the artwork as a singular masterpiece by introducing the possibility of serial repetition (seriality is, in fact, an often occluded dimension of classical sculpture, as the art historian Salvatore Settis has emphasized).⁸ But the cast's promise of seriality always risks reinstating



the hope of faithful replication. In *Castoffs*, that promise is systematically undermined by the contingencies of process, which become a mirror to the infinite variability of the model. In Friedman's concrete casts of Riener, the mold "takes" the form of the body but it takes the body with it, too, in the stray hair caught and carried over to the concrete, or the odd fold of skin that clouds our recognition of what it is we're looking at. If these relics bring us tantalizingly close to the singular referent of Riener's body, they also bear witness to something even more slippery: the specific encounters of flesh and mold, mold and concrete—and the particular and only partially predictable behaviors of each material. They bear witness, we should note, only as traces of an event rather than as clear reflections of a process. Even formally, the body is captured in bits and pieces with no regard for the natural cuts of textbook anatomy. Instead, Friedman imposes a frame on the male body contorted in ways that defy legibility, at once comic and seductive.

The erotic imagination of the romantic-modernist fragment haunts Friedman's casts.⁹ Yet, parts find surprising partners. The casts are penetrated and encircled by alien materials, suggesting unexpected gazes. Rubber tubing in shades of the four humors uncoils like guts from an inside that at times turns out to be all surface, or slips through gaps with the unnerving agility of an epiphyte, or a prosthetic feeding device. At times, the tubes hang limply, pulling the forms earthward and echoing the drapes and folds of the rubber mats. Friedman has long been fascinated with the humors, the liquid stuffs that dominated medico-philosophical models of the human being from classical Greece well into the eighteenth century. She's toyed with them before, most notably in *Pore* (2015), which was made up of four enormous, ceiling-hung rubber sculptures, one for each of the canonical humors (phlegm, blood, yellow bile, black bile), each one paired with costume and choreography for Riener, who performed with the piece. Scraps from *Pore* reappear in *Castoffs*, reassembled with other castoffs from Friedman's corpus of work. In her reuse of earlier material, Friedman overlays and displaces the historical time of the physical body with biographical time. But biographical time is in no way linear. It does not imply organic development. Rather, in reuse, too, the techniques of juxtaposition and assemblage dominate; parts again find surprising partners.

Especially assertive in the exhibition's cast of collaborators are the steel poles, spikes, and pipes, which dramatically punctuate the visual field of the grid. They often act as prostheses, lending the casts of body parts vital support and fending off harm. But their power to defend is inseparable from the violence of preemptive penetration, as if protection required first the blunt demonstration of violability. They plug the very holes that Friedman's interventions in the casts have created. Holes are the greatest

threat to bodies in classical philosophy: they allow the outside in. Then again, bodies do get hurt. What makes this collection of sculpture so endlessly fascinating and disturbing is Friedman's use of insentient materials to work the ambivalent juncture between bodies and vulnerability. The strategy works at multiple levels. At close proximity, you feel the pointed pressure of the steel spikes on their rubber mats like a sharp object on your own skin. Inside the installation, Friedman imposes a claustrophobic verticality. Rather than dispensing with the pedestals that help scale the classical body up to ideal dimensions, she exaggerates their height, perhaps reading Minimalism's telltale floor work as false modesty.¹⁰ The pedestals elevate the sculptures. But they also flaunt the horizontality of the limp tubes and loose folds and splayed parts held to whatever verticality they have only with violence. The pedestal-as-prop reinforces the sense of the steel poles as prosthetic spines of the phallic. The aggression of the metal is both the object and the means of critique.

The three pairs of large glass fingers insert themselves here. They are modeled on ancient Egyptian amulets that were laid over the cut produced by mummification, covering the hole but also memorializing its refusal to close and, so, the need for protection. That they are Egyptian asks to be read as a challenge to the conventionally Greco-Roman classical in the aftermath of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* trilogy and the debates it triggered over a quarter of a century ago.¹¹ Bernal provocatively located the origins of Greece and "the West" in ancient Egypt and Phoenicia and argued that by denying this paternity, we remain mired in the racism of nineteenth-century classicism. Friedman's fingers echo this challenge, probing the classicizing and anti-classicizing terms of the installation and the very logic of the museum as art-historical institution.

But the fingers are not only critique. They flirt, in the spirit of amulets, with the fantasy of recuperated wholeness, and with the exoticization of that fantasy (the anthropological double bind). In their probing, they insinuate a pleasure that refuses the procreative urges of another origin story. They make no secret of their material: glass is a fragile defense (beware the stones of others, the critique deflected back). Still, there they are, taking up space, above it all, larger than life, stunning, glossy objects—unbroken. Friedman's glass fingers aren't perfect, but they also seem to warn against the fetish of imperfection, and contingency, and holes. They are made things, products of mind and collective labor and creativity. They remain alive to the blur and the noise involved in making an image of something in time. At the same time, they seem to want a body to live in different times simultaneously, to live at speeds other than the rate of decay. They ask: *Could we care for our mortality, rather than our immortality, in this spirit?*

1 On the early concept of the physical or biological body, see Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

2 That the body is transhistorical and transcultural is a cardinal feature of what the anthropologists Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Philippe Descola have called mononaturalism: see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014); Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

3 Haraway has herself moved away from the cyborg in favor of the companion animal for thinking about the human interface with the non-human. Both her manifesto on the cyborg and her manifesto on the companion animal are available in Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

4 Plato, *Timaeus*, 69c–81e; 90a–92c.

5 See Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

6 On the modernist grid, see Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 9–22 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).

7 On the reversal of Platonism, Deleuze's essay on Plato's *Sophist* in the appendix to *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) is an excellent place to start, but in fact "reversing Platonism" also stands as a leitmotif of his entire philosophical corpus.

8 Salvatore Settis, "Supremely Original: Classical Art as Serial, Iterative, Portable," in Salvatore Settis with Anna Anguissola and Davide Gasparotto (eds.), *Serial/Portable Classic: Multiplying Art in Greece and Rome*, 51–72 (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2015). The book accompanies two major exhibitions curated by Settis in 2015 at Fondazione Prada in Milan and Venice ("Serial Classic" and "Portable Classic," respectively).

9 For a distillation of the imaginary around the fragment, see Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo":

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.
(trans. Stephen Mitchell)

10 On the "lateral spread" of Carl Andre's floor work, in particular, as anti-phallic, see Briony Fer, "Carl Andre and the Fall of Sculpture," in Ian Cole (ed.), *Carl Andre and the Sculptural Imagination: Museum of Modern Art Papers, Volume Two*, 37–43 (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1996). The pedestal is often read specifically as a prop of classicizing authority. Rem Koolhaas declares that the "apparent symbiosis between classical sculpture and the pedestal has not been questioned for over 20 centuries now" ("The Socle and the Vitrine," in *Serial/Portable Classic*, 199) – until, that is, his decision to strip pedestals from the exhibition "Serial Classic." The decision aimed specifically at restoring intimacy between viewers and classical objects, freeing them from experts, and reanimating the sculptures.

11 Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, 3 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987–2006).