

# TONY TASSSET

BETTER ME



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Curated by Barry Blinderman and Bill Conger

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*Be regular and ordinary in your life, like a bourgeois, so that you may be violent and original in your work.*

—Gustave Flaubert

In the eclectic yet frequently dreary setting of recent art, Tony Tasset is a particularly refreshing presence. He has become increasingly well-known over the past decade through his ongoing efforts to dismantle the newly constructed edifice of “Conceptual Art History” and run wildly around the (de-)construction site. Although Tasset emerged in the late 1980s, and has worked actively since that time, his art remains relatively underexamined by critics.<sup>1</sup> His intriguing and idiosyncratic body of work is also highly diverse in terms of media, from the early sculptures to the more recent photographs, videos, and installations. Tasset often seeks to present a maximum density of content with a minimal amount of “handiwork” (in other words, he skillfully mines the Duchampian tradition), which has probably led him in turn to use photomedia more extensively in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

I have seen Tasset and several of his contemporaries<sup>3</sup> referred to as “neo-conceptualists” but I’m beginning to wonder what that really means, and whether such a term is indeed helpful at all in assessing the scope of this particular artist’s production. Maybe it’s not a question of *reading* such terms, but of *viewing* his practice. Aren’t neo-conceptualists simply younger artists work-

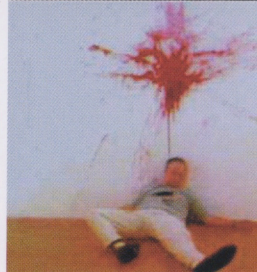
opposite: **In My Room**

DVD 4:48, no sound 2000

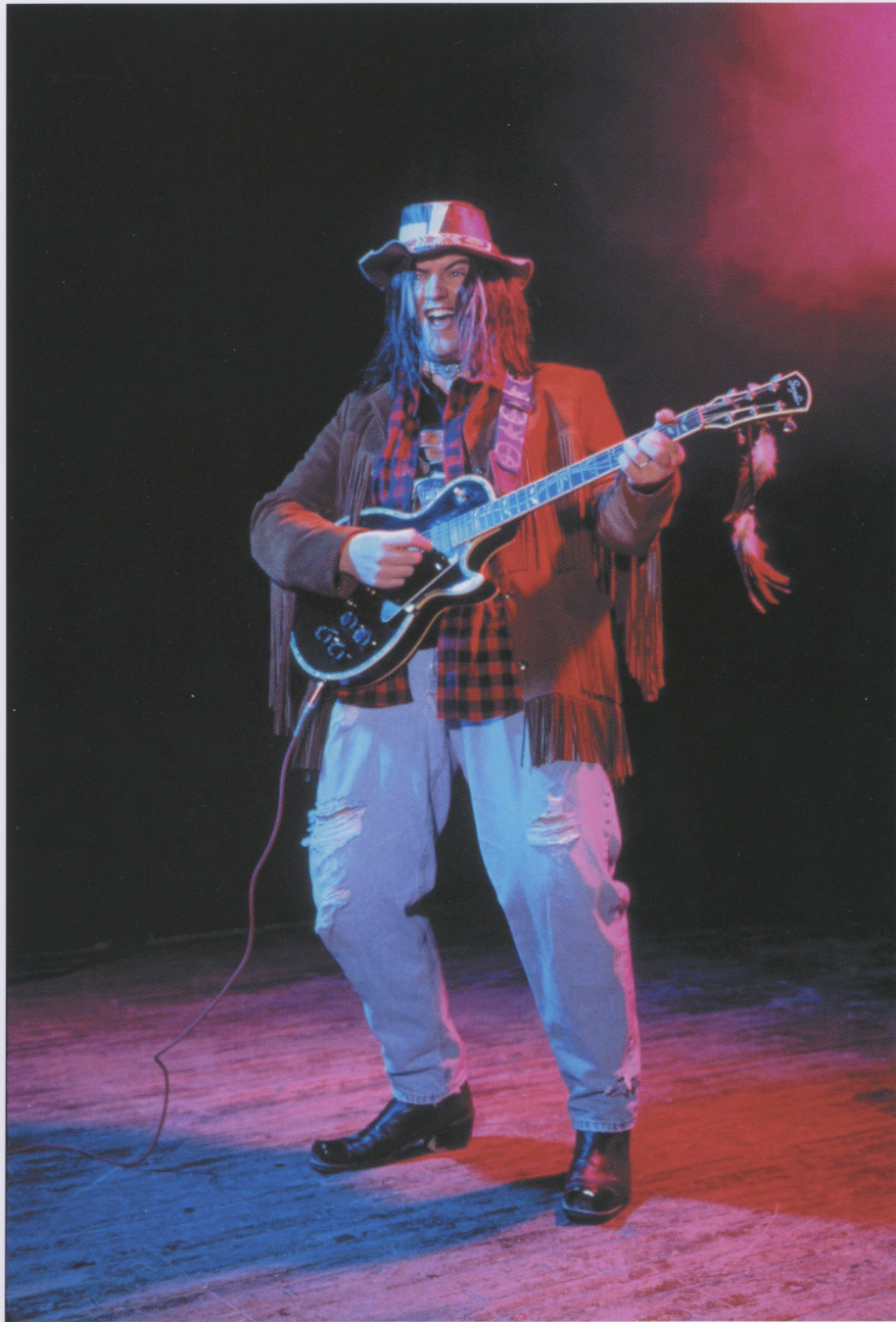
the legacy of both painted and sculptural form for some time, although aided and abetted by Postmodernist hindsight.

But Tasset's works then became increasingly performative and oriented instead toward the documentation of actions. In the 1993 photograph **Spew**, it's as if Tasset is issuing a look-alike portrayal of Bruce Nauman's 1966 *Fountain*, this time around with blood or pigment—actually chocolate syrup—spurting from the artist's mouth. 1996's video **Squib** portrays Tasset standing against a stark white wall confronting the camera as if transported from a police line-up, and after several seconds of anticipation he is shot—the act is loud, bloody, and startling, but—wait a minute—this is (of course) simply a Hollywood-style stunt. Tasset has flung yet another conceptual boomerang, flying out and sailing back picking up art historical reverberations along the way, such as recalling Chris Burden's infamous 1971 piece *Shoot* in which a friend fired a rifle at his arm. (Significantly in the case of Burden's work, however, real blood was shed, an audience—albeit miniscule—witnessed the act, and the artist staked his claim to a certain kind of macabre notoriety.)<sup>4</sup>

In a work commissioned to accompany a 1995 Robert Smithson exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Tasset played the role of Smithson in order to create a large-scale photographic homage; actually an off-kilter Madame Tussaud's-like rendering, as Tasset/Smithson, with mock seriousness begins to shovel up the desert environs of Las Vegas. We see Mr. Earthworks himself, clad in a straw cowboy hat, hornrim glasses, a garish striped

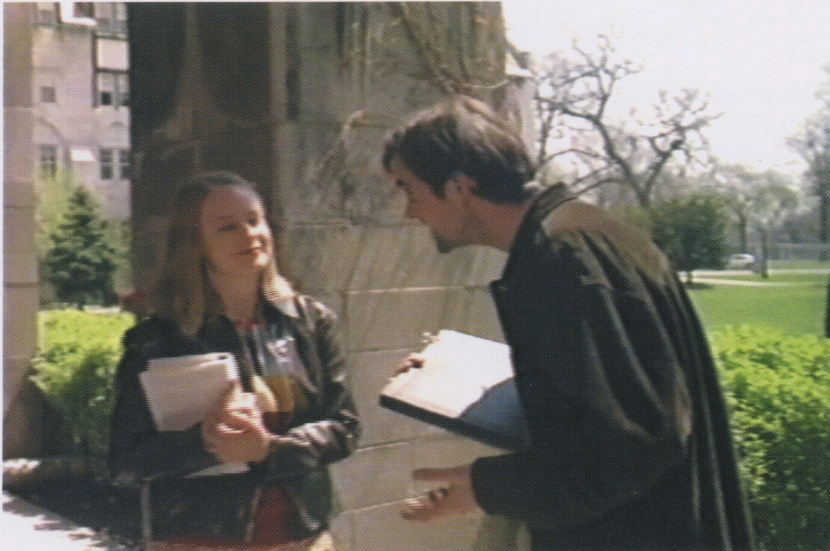


Bruce Nauman, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966-70. Tasset, *Spew*, 1993. Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971. Tasset, *Squib*, 1996.



**Neil Young**

Cibachrome 82 x 48 inches 1997



CUT TO: STRAIGHT ON  
SHOT OF MAN, LOOKING  
DOWN SLIGHTLY, INTO  
THE CAMERA

MAN: "I'M HAPPY YOU LIKE  
THE CLASS, BUT I'M BE AFRAID  
YOU MAY HAVE MISSED THE  
WHOLE POINT. YOU SEE, NOT  
THAT YOU HAVE GRADUATED  
I'M SUPPOSED TO REPRESENT  
WHAT YOU SHOULD WORK FOR  
I'M THE ESTABLISHMENT, THE  
GUY, THE GUY YOU'RE SUPPOSE  
TO HATE."



CUT TO: OVER MAN'S  
SHOULDER, 3/4 VIEW OF  
STUDENT

STUDENT: "WELL, OK  
PROFESSOR, BUT I  
STILL LIKED YOUR  
CLASS"



*Stuart Horodner: How about “Tony Tasset: This is Your Life” as title for the show?*

Tony Tasset: I’m sorry, that’s a perfectly reasonable title, but it makes me cringe. After a hard look at this show, I swear I am not going to use myself or my family in any more work! I figure if I quit now the work might have a chance of retaining some dignity. There’s a fine line between making art about narcissism and just being narcissistic. But before we get too far I want to know what you get out of the work. Why would anyone care about my life? I portray myself as quite content. I am a middle-class to upper-middle-class white guy, totally privileged.

*I don’t care about your life (OK, I do), I care about your ideas and objects and how they force me to think and feel. No different than Frida Kahlo self-portraits, or a Richard Serra sculptural space, or a Ray Johnson collage. You’re on a road of inquiry that I get to follow—daily rituals, domestic situations, and doubts, desires, vanity, time. Your cherry tree is not only a lovingly sculpted surrogate, but it’s also about the first moment of blossoming, an awakening. And maybe a reminder of the apocryphal story about George Washington with his little hatchet?*

Many people consider me the Frida Kahlo of the Midwest. I am thrilled that you see so many references in my work. I hope to identify the epic, the universal, the poignant, from a very local place—namely my life. We have a small backyard, and

Opposite: Cherry Tree (detail), 1999.



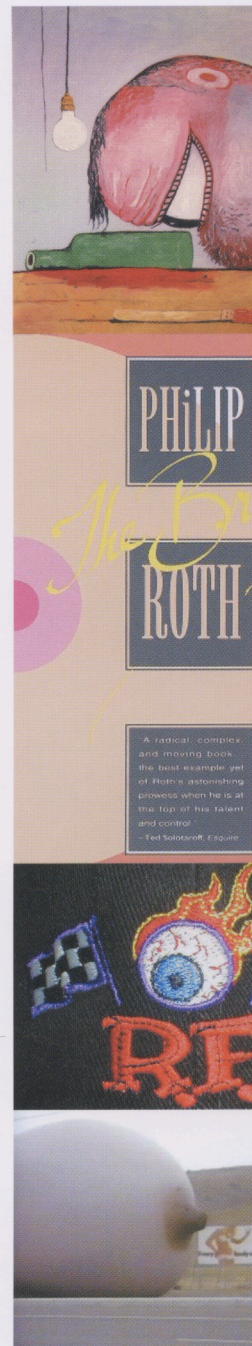
use some debased, unconsidered or common sculptural practice for my own means. Did you happen to see my big eyeball sculpture?

*I saw the big eyeball and, of course, it saw me. Like the tree, it's a very handmade object compared to your often cooler fabrications—very vulnerable with its tiny blood vessels and milky surface skin. I enjoyed thinking of it in the context of Guston's late paintings of eyeballs roaming the landscape, and Gogol's story "The Nose" and Philip Roth's The Breast. Body fragments that become whole figures.*

I think I got a little carried away painting those blood vessels. Day after day I would go to my studio, blast Coltrane, paint veins, glaze over them and paint them again. Being in my tiny studio and facing that eye—my eye—was very much like being trapped in a Guston painting. I created a monster, an idol of my self-absorption. The slightly crazed experience painting the eye mirrored the neurotic effect I was going for. I don't believe I'm anymore self-absorbed than any other person. (OK, let me think about that). I'm simply using my own experience to try to embody the general state of self-absorption. What finally complicates the issue is that the eye's a very populist piece. It's very rock'n'roll, Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. How many high school textbooks have veiny, bloody eyeballs? It's a classic.

You're the third person who has mentioned Philip Roth's work in relationship to mine. I should send him a catalogue. I do believe narrative is a good way to think of how my works relate to one another, and I often feel that all my work is one big story.

Philip Guston, Head and Bottle, 1975. Book cover, *The Breast*. Embroidered patch based on Ed "Big Daddy" Roth design. Still from Woody Allen's *Everything You've Always Wanted to Know about Sex but Were Afraid to Ask*.



### I. Anthony of the Desert

In *The Tacit Dimension*, Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi introduced the idea of *tacit knowledge*, stating quite simply that “we can know more than we can tell.”<sup>1</sup> I do not think it necessarily coincidental that an artist’s work should so strongly embody one of the meanings of the homophone for his last name. Tony Tasset’s art is unassuming yet highly charged, spare yet laden with association.

Like Marilyn Monroe or Rock Hudson, Tony Tasset is a name that could have emerged from 50s Hollywood producer’s imagination. It is a ten-letter lode of alliterative, symmetrical, near-palindromic, and etymologically enriched material just waiting to be mined. According to my American Heritage, the adjective “tony” is “marked by an elegant manner,” and as a proper noun it refers to an award for outstanding theatrical achievement. “Tasset,” interestingly enough, is “one of a series of jointed overlapping metal plates” used as armor for the lower trunk. Put the two words together and what you get is elegant theatrical armor—not bad for a silver-coiffed forger of hyper-precisely crafted objects, with a history of occasionally donning other artists’ personas.

Continuing this line of investigation, Tasset’s Christian name finds its origin in St. Anthony of Thebes, the hermetic 3rd century ascetic

Opposite above: I Peed in My Pants (detail), 1994.  
Below: Robert Smithson (Las Vegas) (detail), 1995.

for example, expresses mortality with an economic admixture of dead pan and poignancy that humbles Damien Hirst's most spectacular formaldehyde shark tank.

In contrast to Duchamp, who according to self-propagated myth picked his readymades at random in hardware stores, Tasset would hardly claim to select his subjects with "indifference."<sup>3</sup> Rather, they are tenderly symbolic of the primal artistic act: the making of one's mark, whether by bronze-casting a Halloween ritual carving in **Jack-O'-Lantern**, by engaging the scatological in the life-size photograph **I Peed in My Pants** and the fecal spiral of the rusted iron **Snake**, or by recreating a snowman, that ephemeral yet ubiquitous lawn monument, in hallucinatory detail.

*When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold.*

—James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1915

*The warmth of a seat (which has just been left) is infra-thin.*

—Marcel Duchamp, *Notes*, published 1980

Viewed as a pair, the fluid-based self-portrait photographs **I Peed in My Pants** and **Spew** link Tasset to Duchamp in fascinating ways. Tasset's **Spew** is a bile-laden response to the young Bruce Nauman's *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966-70, itself a direct reference to, and namesake of, the infamous Duchamp urinal, *Fountain*, of 1917. Unlike the seat retaining the warmth of the posterior just occupying it—one of several *inframincines* (commonly translated as "infrathin": "infra": under, beneath, below in a scale or series; "mince," as in



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917. Tasset, *Snake*, 1994. Ed Harris as Jackson Pollock in *Pollock*.



Tony Tasset's **The Eye**, a tightly cropped and vastly enlarged photograph of a child's single blue-gray eye, summons wonderment, purity and goodness. It is iconic, obviously a surrogate, as these Platonic ideals are not of the physical world. But there is something else at play here, something less benign and less perfect, and maybe even a little sad. It is the artist himself, and the subject of Tasset's work since 1993.

Tasset navigates the world cognitively, unable to remove the critical filters that shadow his existence. The pleasures that life affords him as an artist, father, husband and professor are churned through a complex psychological rubric of self-examination, social analysis and cultural critique. He perpetually struggles to see the world as absolute, free from irony and doubt, the way a child sees branches on a tree or pumpkins in the fall. But he cannot.

Looking back on Tasset's oeuvre, **Spew**, a photograph from 1993, marks a critical turn in his focus. This image, depicting a projectile-vomiting Tasset, marks the end of a body of work that investigated the inherent cultural values of art itself: authorship, display, craft and originality. But **Spew** also marks a turn inward. In this photograph we begin to see Tasset as a corporeal being, an organic body with guttural urges. It is a turning away from art as subject matter.

After **Spew** Tasset pees his pants, sculpts turd-like objects, and role-plays in an attempt to locate what is inherently human, immediate

Opposite: *The Eye* (detail), 2000.

## STILL LIFE WITH BLUE JAY: ENDGAME IN TONY TASSET'S ART

Bill Conger

Listen closely to the carefully orchestrated soundtrack of Tony Tasset's **I Am U R Me**. Amid the scraping of spoons against cereal bowls and an occasional growl of a lawnmower, you will hear birds softly chirping outside—a beautiful nuance that could hardly be coincidental in such a biting moment of commercialized American perfection. One can't help but wonder if this cunning, cool conceptualist really has a soft spot for puppies, flowers and an occasional Michelle Pfeiffer movie. But even if you buy that Tony actually does have Mr. Bluebird on his shoulder, works like **Dead Blue Jay** belie any overt sentimentality with a deep-seated memento mori theme.

This is not the first of Tasset's works to deal with mortality. The **Domestic Abstraction** pieces, sporting various animal hides mounted and framed like hunters' trophies, embody a gruesome end in their genesis. The **Comfortable Abstraction** series featured slick, black-veneered "pedestals" with marble-headstone density, and belly-buttoned leather cushions which seemed to reference padded cells. Specifically, the sarcophagus-like **Sculpture Bench**, 1986, with its upholstered leather cushion and shallow plexiglass vitrine, clarifies that beneath the luster of spray-finished laquers and perfect mitres lies a sense of despair. Although "made" nearly fifteen years later, **Dead Blue Jay**, like a fine feathered Pope Julius, could easily complete this particular tomb-in-waiting.



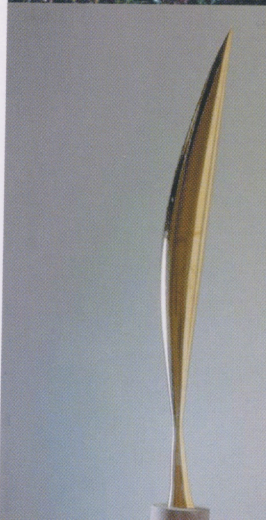
Tasset, *Location Performance*, 1993. *Open Sculpture Bench*, 1988. Installation view of *Anxious Objects* exhibition at University Galleries, 1987. Opposite: *Dead Blue Jay* (detail), 2000.

**Dead Blue Jay** is displayed directly on the gallery floor, prompting a fortuitous discovery similar to the one its actual finder had. In the sky, perched in trees, roaming on the ground—birds are eerily everywhere, and much folklore and Hitchcock-inspired fear have traded on this fact. Birds are symbols of war and peace, omens of disaster, and predictors of plagues.

A symbolic scene at the end of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* shows an obviously mechanical red-breasted robin gobbling a wasp. Its awkward simulacrum is mesmerizing and macabre. This scene, calling to mind Hitchcock's *The Birds*, prefigures in turn Tasset's subversive reverse-mimicry, Roni Horn's mummified owl portraits, and Gregory Crewdson's creature-filled suburban landscapes. Whether or not Tasset nods specifically to Lynch, his blue jay—a close relative to the crow and the raven—is a moody-blue presence of Poesque dimension, while its stiffened wings and tail recollect the meteoric velocity of Brancusi's *Bird in Space*.

Harnessing the bird's freedom by denying it a natural decomposition turns a subtle gesture of empathy and reverence into one of malevolence. A couple of weeks before his death, Barnett Newman stated that aesthetics to him must be what ornithology is to the birds. Relative to this particular fallen bird, can it also be said that Tasset's unfinished business with Modernism is alive and well?

Top to bottom: Still from *Blue Velvet*, 1986. Alfred Hitchcock, promotional photo for *The Birds*. Roni Horn, *Dead Owl* (detail), 1997. Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled* (detail), 1995. Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, 1928.



## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Unless otherwise noted, all Tasset works in this monograph are courtesy Feigen Contemporary, New York. Height precedes width precedes depth, all measurements in inches.

### **Carving Again**

DVD, :02 loop, no sound  
2000

### **Cherry Tree**

Oil paint, wax, steel armature, 120 x 144 x 144  
1999

### **Dead Blue Jay**

Taxidermied blue jay, 2 x 9 x 2.5  
2000  
Photo: Ted Diamond

### **The Eye**

Cibachrome print, 48 x 60  
2000

### **I Am U R Me**

DVD, :30 loop with sound  
1998

### **In My Room**

DVD, 4:48, no sound  
2000

### **I Peed in My Pants**

Cibachrome print, 83.25 x 38.25  
1994  
Collection of Refco Group Ltd., Chicago

### **Judy Ledgerwood**

Cibachrome print, 82 x 36  
2000

### **Marker**

Oil paint on Ultracal, 15 x 13 x 12  
2000

### **My Garden**

Cibachrome prints, 4 panels, 48 x 84 each  
1993  
Courtesy Christopher Grimes Gallery

### **My Parents**

Cibachrome print, 52 x 72  
1994

### **Neil Young**

Cibachrome print, 82 x 48  
1997

### **Robert Smithson**

Cibachrome print, 83 x 49  
1995  
Photo: Oren Slor

### **Snowman**

Polystyrene, fiberglass mesh, paper-mache,  
plaster, Sculpey, wax, steel, brass, acrylic  
beads, fake snow, acrylic and oil paint  
71 x 55 x 40  
2003  
Photo: Ted Diamond

### **Spew**

Black and white print, 48 x 48  
1993  
Courtesy Christopher Grimes Gallery,  
Santa Monica



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BETTER ME

WITH TEXTS BY

BARRY BLINDERMAN

BILL CONGER

MICHELLE GRABNER

STUART HORODNER

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TONY TASSET

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