

Divine Shit

- Edward
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‘At the end shit is shit; it has a sort of truth to it...’ says Mikala Dwyer about her new exhibition, the centerpiece of which is an opening night performance of what she calls a ‘shitting dance’.¹ Professional ballet dancers are deployed in a sequence of circular moves resembling musical chairs combined with toilet-training, the principal direction of which is for each dancer to claim a seat and then defecate into a transparent canister beneath. It’s the first time, I believe, that this artist — whose work from its beginning has incorporated so many allusions to excremental play, whether in maternal homage to childlike elemental fecal frolics or as simulation of vegetal, tuberous growths, swellings and extrusions from anatomical canals — has explicitly declared the material substrate of her work to be, literally, excrement. Startling as this may be, and also with a welcome reprieve from the clichés of performance art’s legacy of the imperative for transgression, Dwyer doesn’t intend this ballet to be crudely shocking or profane. Nor is there any uninhibited zaniness or fury driving the scatological references in material textures and lumpy, nuggety, turd-coloured forms throughout the rest of the exhibition.

Remove from our response, then, any associations with 1960s’ and 1970s’ Viennese *Aktionismus* of Otto Mühl, for instance, propositioning his performers into libidinal, infantilising food fights, coprophagy and shit-smearing orgies; or with, more recently, Paul McCarthy’s *grand guignol* satires of bulimic US West Coast overconsumption, their masquerades drenched in the slop and sludge of paint, ketchup and vomit. Neither cathartic cultural exorcism nor anarchically sarcastic clowning motivates Dwyer’s ‘shitting dance’. The tactically divergent but similarly libertarian scatological gestures illustrated by Mühl and McCarthy involve choreographing psycho-dramatic regression that subverts the civilising process. Their targets are especially manifest in the parental disciplining and educated social conformity of the body, exemplified by the acquisition of manners and deportment through toilet training. Both mean to liberate by abreaction or outrage, either by the route of perversion or by excess, in order to overcome our allegedly repressive induction into psychic and social normative behaviour.

In contrast, Dwyer’s work in this exhibition, and throughout her career, doesn’t so much intend to antagonise family propriety as to bestow weirdly mischievous, teasing and cryptic fantasias upon it. Discretion is crucial to her artistic strategy, even and especially to the ‘shitting dance’. Her aesthetic inclination is towards secretive, subtle and fantastic spaces that warp human conjugality — the nooks, retreats or escape routes fashioned to elude as well as to permit intimacy or rendezvous — and unseal mysterious portals and trapdoors in the fabric of household decorum, with the treacherous invitation of a Trojan Horse. Her installations often suggest ad hoc, mutable furnishings of cubby houses and chaotic foolery of makeshift sleepover dorms; or they conduct us towards the mutant objects that might have retreated into the sinister recesses of wardrobes or onto unreachable shelving. They are installations that suggest we’ve stumbled onto vaguely yet ominously animate piles of detritus and eroded talismanic fragments exhumed from archaeological pits, or that we’ve encountered the stunted, amorphous gremlin fossils from walled-up passageways and crawlspaces beneath floorboards or furniture. Throughout this repertoire of misshapen quirks of décor, the features and fixtures of what often appears to be a stylishly littered rumpus room seem to momentarily align as encoded glyphs: hermetic configurations betraying a secret knowledge and perhaps an occult science. We begin to suspect that this playpen is actually a laboratory or a machine — like a pentagram or a circle of standing stones — for summoning dark things. Discretion is required, but there is no sentimentality about the familial sphere that is parasitically invaded, captivated, held hostage, that hosts this alien thing.. In this fanciful landscape of capricious, grotesque and wild domesticity it should not seem too odd, then, to come across the ceremonial décor, voodoo-like visages and priestly choreography of something as explicit as a communal toilet that facilitates a kind of laboratory or occult machine!

From the viewpoint we could describe as an excremental vision, this shit may be ubiquitous but paradoxically it is anything but quotidian or mundane. It has, more pointedly, little in common with artistic



transgressions and desublimated aesthetics in pursuit of the abject or the *informe*, which are the ancestral theoretical fodder of a type of anti-form sculptural practice over the past decade that has been dedicated to laborious participation with the affective properties of raw materials. Georges Bataille's celebrated exemplum of formlessness was the utter semantic abyss of a gob of spit (as disgusting in his view as a spider).² Conversely, Dwyer's shit is a 'truth', she says, because it is logically clear in its materiality, and anything but fathomless or formless. It is also a truth not presented as counter to a lie but as a formally consistent, tautological substance — not a truth given in the paparazzi-like exposure of a sordid substrate lurking behind a mask of beauty or of moral or political propriety. The shit in this exhibition is instead a type of wondrous substance: lucid if unidentifiable, even supra-mundane, like *manna* or ambrosia. For like these foods of the gods, this shit is a substance without qualities, or more precisely is a substance for which qualities cannot be accounted for by mortals even as it is gifted to them. But it enriches and redeems.

We see then that the enrichment bestowed by this shit-without-qualities can be treated as essentially aesthetic: an artistry of effortless plasticity, of the anonymous materiality of compost forming in a mass grave or cesspit, and yet possessing a lucidity that is like divine glory. Towards the conclusion of his monumental and tiresome monologue on cosmogony, Plato's protagonist in the *Timaeus* asserts, with a bizarre physiological suggestion, that we are what we eat (and defecate); the slow digestive passage of food through the internal organs of the alimentary canal ('the convolution of the bowels') actually determines the means for governing the appetitive, bestial drives of the body and for forging the soul. By allowing us to continue consuming while we're away from the feeding trough or the carcass, this enables us to use the mouth for other purposes, such as speaking. This induces the sublimation of appetite into aspiration, '... which would otherwise,' says Timaeus, 'compel the body to want more and make its appetite insatiable, so rendering our species incapable through gluttony of philosophy and culture, and unwilling to listen to the divinest elements in us.'³

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Self-sustenance is a non-profitable activity: one consumes all of one's own waste. But all profitable production, including the production of philosophy and culture, generates waste that is constituted in matter eliminated from the process — metabolic, intellectual, industrial — with non-productive epithets: as slag, off-cuts, scum, noise, grime, bric-a-brac, flotsam, litter, nonsense... Production is 'doing one's business', in the coy colloquialism for shitting. 'Minding one's own business' is the imperative of both a tax system for tracking entrepreneurial profits and the injunction to treasure one's privacy, in the privy. 'Once eliminated,' explains Dominique Laporte in his *History of Shit*, 'waste is re-inscribed in the cycle of production as gold.'⁴ Incorruptible, exquisitely useless, it becomes the ubiquitous standard of a national treasury, the invisible hoard of bullion as guarantor of state wealth and the spectacular setting for the crown jewels. Excrement will be returned into the economy as a civilising and redeeming enrichment, as aspiration. The legendary *cloaca maxima* of the ancient Roman Empire — the urban sewerage system joining every *domus*, or domestic space, into the public fabric of the state — is not only a realisation of engineering genius but a pinnacle of government, a mirror of jurisprudence, and model of civil responsibility to be imitated by any city claiming to be a beacon of civilisation. But as Timaeus declares, the greatest enrichment will be the divinest elements in us. Excrement is the aesthetic form of an embodied, incarnate god, a god returning to us and to the world.

Taking account of Dwyer's attraction to childlike play and nursery doodling, with materials such as shapeless clothing, molten plastic and clumps of clay, we might be tempted to conclude that the divinity in this excremental aesthetic is exclusively maternal: would not the delivery of faeces and of babies have a semiotic correlation here, by inversion of the alimentary and reproductive canals (a familiar Freudian phantasm) expressed in the pelvic architecture of those tunnels and conduits that erupt or bloom on the partitions of her exhibition spaces? Could all this shit be the symbolic golden hoard of a mother goddess? Actually, no. 'Shit is shit,' Dwyer says, without qualification of it as the substance that

only a mother could love, and we ought to take her word on that. Perhaps, then, instead of maternal love as guarantor of the aesthetics of shit, we should be alert to a mode of adoration that focuses on the alimentary tract rather than the sexual and reproductive system. Our mentor here, overtaking Timaeus's metaphysics, might be the mad medical genius of Tom Six's notorious 2009 camp horror movie, *The Human Centipede*. He is a specialist in separating conjoined twins, and has an ambition to surgically re-assemble humans into something like an original Platonic sexual unity — a pleasing aesthetic form for him, fashioned with tasteful surgical finesse and fussy clinical hygiene from three unwilling, kidnapped participants attached in a daisy chain, mouth to anus rather than in a genital embrace. And yet, even in this compelling scenario of anti-obstetrics, the surgeon expresses a kind of maternal delight in his creature's first awkward steps and first shit.

The artistry that is antithetic to maternity is more disturbingly depicted in this movie's brutally explicit and unrelentingly squalid sequel, *Human Centipede 2* (2011). Its metafictional madman — an obsessively masturbatory fan and fantasist of the first film — abducts his subjects and forms 'the full sequence' of 12 individuals in excruciatingly crude vivisection employing a staple gun. This psychopath's determination is entirely artistic, emulating and completing the work of the first film. With the second human centipede, *eros* is transfigured into an appalling aesthetic rage, yet without revenge or jealousy or suspense. Sexuality (assigned usually to such an orgiastic assemblage of bodies) is transferred into a phantasmic but engineered extrusion of the alimentary canal flushed with laxatives to ensure the transit of digested food throughout. The only colour in the film is that of the shit that explodes from this appalling monster, which, when it occurs, is an aesthetically triumphant moment. Perverse as it may sound, the aesthetic manifesto of this movie has more affinity with the spectacle of *Master Chef* than with that of the Marquis de Sade's chateau. Its artistic ingenuity addresses the 'divinest elements', such as those revealed in Rome's *cloaca maxima*.

But how does divinity pass through the alimentary tract? In one of the most tortuous of theological doctrines canonising the Catholic Eucharist, known as 'the mystery of the real presence' (and its corollary dogma of 'the accidents without a subject'), it is heresy to believe, as Aquinas put it, that in this sacrament is not the true body of Christ but only a sign for it. As the theologians of the 16th-century counter-reformation Council of Trent put it, the consumed host is transubstantiated miraculously into Christ's body. And since it is a body and not a sign that is consumed, Holy Communion is a literally material and causal process of consumption. And excretion? Can the devoured body of Christ be wasted? Whatever may be excreted from the communicant's alimentary canal must be materially equal to whatever is consumed. The communicant's shit is as holy as anything shed from the body of Christ. And, incidentally, any of Christ's leavings — nail clippings, hair, faeces — must also possess the full divinity of his incarnation, for divinity cannot be fractioned. (Hence the adoration of the magic blood collected in a cup beneath the crucifixion, and the cultic treasures from Christ's circumcision, which, with numerous medieval cathedrals as claimants of Christ's foreskin, implied a considerable endowment!) Dwyer's aesthetics of excrement now invoke an excremental theology rather than a maternal mythology. And like Aquinas, let's be clear, the excrement is there in body not as a sign, but as material and medium that are consubstantial. This shit is a miracle.

¹ Personal communication by email with the author, 9 April 2013.
² Georges Bataille, 'Formless', *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. and ed. by Alan Stoekl, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 31; and Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982.
³ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. by Desmond Lee, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1983, p. 100.
⁴ Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. by Nadia Benabid and Rudolphe el-Khoury, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Documents Magazine, Boston, 2000, p. 6.

