

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



A PROFUSION OF

I propose a feast for the eyes, sumptuous,

multiplicitous, and occasionally disgusting.

This is a banquet of works of art that include milk, rice, bread, vegetables, piles of fat, carpets of pollen, sheets of wax or chocolate, shit, urine, blood, and assorted rots. Not all dishes lend themselves to this table; only those servings that are both excessive and incessantly replenished, for this profusion of substance asserts the commodiousness of contemporary appetites, both for pleasure and transgression.

A veritable buffet of organic substances has been appropriated into visual art practice of the past thirty years; most commonly in the context of temporary site-specific installations or performances, but also in painting, printmaking, drawing, and sculpture. Of course, the mediums of art have always included the stuff of the body and its

sustenance — the gloss of egg tempera, adornments of all manner of shell or bone, the various berries of pigments — a fact that always implicitly connected the practice of art with the vitality of nature. For organic substances, whether in the condition of their occurrence in nature or refined by human hands, are the material that, after all, engenders and sustains life and ultimately marks its termination. (To speak of bread, for example, as a symbol of charity and community is simply to elaborate on the actual capability of this baked amalgamation of flour and water to sustain life.) Consider then, in this context, Roland Barthes' encounter with a particularly unsavory meal:

One day I was invited to eat a couscous with rancid butter; the rancid butter was customary; in certain regions it is an integral part of the couscous code. However, be it prejudice or unfamiliarity, or digestive intolerance, I don't like rancidity. What to do? Eat it, of course, so as not to offend my host, but gingerly, in order not to offend the conscience of my disgust (since for disgust *per se* one needs some stoicism).¹

Barthes' distaste for his dinner is overcome by the pleasure of eating with the group, a pleasure so great, in fact, that he chooses to prolong it by eating more slowly than usual. And his experience suggests itself as a potential emblem for our own, as we confront, with initial trepidation, the shock of the actual in much of the art of our century.

Why, we may ask, have some contemporary artists begun to focus specifically on the processes of *decay* in organic substances? How does the idea of the organic — and its reckless abundance — affect the meaning of such substances in or as the artwork? What kinds of cultural models are posited or challenged through the use of organic substances in art?

Legislation of the flow of vital substances is one of the oldest attributes of human culture. The history of rules of diet, or procreation, and of sacrifice, is exactly the history of communal definition, within which the regulation of substances ingested, ejaculated, and excreted by the individual body has reflected both the explicit and implicit values of a given society. Western culture is indelibly marked by such legislative practices and their ritualizations, from the entombment of the Egyptian pharaohs with food for their journey into the afterlife, to the kosher laws of the Hebrews, to the Christian ceremony of the

Buzz Spector



Top, in background: **Caravaggio, Cestello di frutta (Basket of fruit), ca. 1596**, oil on canvas, ca. 46 × 64". Collection of the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan. Bottom: **Daniel Spoerri, Kichka's Breakfast I, 1960**, mixed media assemblage, 14 1/4 × 27 1/4 × 25 3/4". Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Philip Johnson Fund.

SUBSTANCE

Eucharist. And representations of the organic, in its delicious abundance or its evocative decay, occupy the whole of the tradition of still-life painting.

The introduction of actual organic substances into Modern art practice, however, begins, in a way, with those handfuls of horse manure and rotten fruit and vegetables tossed by the audiences at various Dada events, or, more specifically, the stuff hurled by those audience members who knew that such gestures were what the performers intended to provoke. Of course, just a few years before, Marcel Duchamp's biomechanical depictions, including *Passage de la vierge à la mariée* (Passage from the virgin to the bride, 1912) and his several versions of *Broyeuse de chocolat* (Chocolate grinder, 1913–14), suggested equivalences between the inputs and outputs of machines and those of human beings in their sexual conduct. (And indeed, one of the most transgressive qualities of Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain* was the unmistakable assertion of its prior function as a receptacle for human urine.)

With the great Surrealist exhibitions of the 1930s, organic materials began regularly appearing in works of art, as a provocative literalization of their makers' interests in biomorphism and dream imagery. Here again, Duchamp's design of the central hall of the "*Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*," at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris, 1938, is well known for its 1,200 coal sacks hung from the ceiling and a simulated lily pond surrounded by actual ferns and weeds. Writing about the installation, William S. Rubin noted that next to the pond "stood a sumptuous double bed, above which hung [André] Masson's *Death of Ophelia*, echoing the implications of the pond and the empty bed."² In similar fashion, the live snails and heads of rotting lettuce in Salvador Dalí's sculptural tableau *Rainy Taxi*, installed in that same exhibition, operated as figments of a dream; their biological actuality subsumed to the dictates of the well-dressed plaster mannequins also along for the ride.

But with the outbreak of World War II, the global carnage overshadowed the concerns of European vanguardism; the younger European and American artists of the 1940s and early '50s, dismissing the academicized mannerisms of the Surrealists, abandoned as well the radical conception of installation so favored by them. Thus Duchamp's maze of twine entangling the 1942 "First Papers of Surrealism" in New York resembled nothing

so much as a festooning of cobwebs over a moribund display of artifacts.

It wasn't until the late '50s that a number of artists began once again to use organic materials—among other elements—in new methodologies of incorporation, exhibition, and performance. Works such as Robert Rauschenberg's "Combine Paintings" and the multifarious residues and the plastic-encased collections of discarded objects comprising Arman's "accumulations" not only invoked and reflected the contemporaneous critical and philosophical milieu of Sartrean Existentialism and Zen Buddhism (as filtered through D. T. Suzuki and John Cage), but also represented a calculated critique of the symbolic detachment of Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture. However, it was Happenings, operating once again, like the works of the Dadaists, between the boundaries of visual art and theatrical experience, that transported the gestural rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism (with its implicit echo of Jackson Pollock's famous claim "I am nature") from the studio into real time and space.

In 1958, Allan Kaprow published a reflection on Pollock and the meaning of his art:

Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life. . . . Not satisfied with the *suggestion* through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, dogs, movies, a thousand other things. . . .³

Thus the woman who squeezed oranges and drank their juice in Kaprow's 1959 presentation of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* acted "ceremoniously," according to the script, but the table full of sliced rinds, as well as the air "suffused with the smell of the fruit,"⁴ were equally part of the event.

Kaprow's material inventory seems to have been drawn from Rauschenberg's heterogenous assemblies of objects. In discussing how Rauschenberg's works function allegorically, Craig Owens describes them as "dumping ground[s]," and continues:

By making works which read as *sites*, however, Rauschenberg also seems to be declaring the fragments embedded there to be



Hermann Nitsch, *Orgies Mysteries Theatre*, performance view at the Mercer Arts Center, New York, 2 December 1972. Photo: Peter Moore.

beyond recuperation, redemption; this is where everything finally comes to rest. [His work] is thus also an emblem of mortality, of the inevitable dissolution and decay to which everything is subject.⁵

Similarly, Arman's arrays of categorically selected debris—including such stuff as rusty spoons, toy pistols, dolls' eyes, clocks, and squashed tubes of paint—become faintly horrific through their profusion of nearly identical elements. Identifying the equivalence between accumulation and destruction informing Arman's art, Jan van der Marck wrote:

Precise accumulations are conservative; random accumulations connote discard and waste, the preliminaries of destruction. *To waste*, in contemporary army slang, is to destroy and kill. All Arman's works reflect the dialectic of possession and death. Dried flowers in a herbarium or butterflies under glass are the perfect real-life parallels.⁶

By the early 1960s, Hermann Nitsch began exploring with an explicit ferocity that dialectic between possession and death, staging performances in which the meat and

viscera of animals, either already dead or sacrificed in the course of the event, were handled and strewn around the performing space. The blood that stains the sheets and vestments from Nitsch's ceremonies is shocking in its quantity; nevertheless the spattered gestures crossing the surfaces of his paintings, in their sweep, transparency, and simplicity, are oddly reminiscent of Pollock or Franz Kline; and their palette recalls Mark Rothko's fields of shimmering red, orange, or rust. Several of Nitsch's contemporaries, including Otto Mühl, Günter Brus, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler in Vienna, and Carolee Schneemann in New York, were combining erotic and sacrificial references in their activities. Mühl and Brus separately performed in public such taboo acts as shitting, eating their own shit, and vomiting, often as part of sexual tableaux with other male and female performers. Schwarzkogler's notorious acts of self-mutilation occurred within displays of artifacts of torture and murder. In Schneemann's 1964 performance *Meat Joy*, a troupe of naked and near-naked performers rubbed themselves and each other with blood and hunks of meat. All of these artists sought to synthesize the ritual aspects of action painting with the allegorical powers inherent in Pop art's cultural "slumming," through performances that celebrated, in a kind of ritual frenzy, the *actual*. Thomas McEvelly has described Nitsch's performances as essentially revivals of ancient Dionysian rituals, through which "the partaker abandoned his or her individual identity to enter the ego-darkened paths of the unconscious and emerged, having eaten and incorporated the god, redesignated as divine."⁷ Nitsch's own statements of purpose subsume mention of antique predecessors, advancing instead claims of a contemporary metaphysics of ecstasy. In a speech in 1973 Nitsch identified among his intentions "to bring to our consciousness a joy in its own existence. Life is more than duty: it is bliss, excess, waste to the point of orgy."⁸

At the same time, refusing the pictorialization of commercial advertising motifs that informed American Pop's materialist critique, a number of European artists focused on the organic material itself as an analogy for the processes of history. In such work, messiness and dissolution not only bespeak the formal and philosophical ruptures in modern art, but evoke the fractures in human life, experience, and perception engendered by the horrors of World War II. Niki de Saint Phalle's notorious and exuberant "shot works" of 1960, in which she attached tomatoes and eggs to her plaster reliefs and invited spectators to join with her as she shot at them, recalled both Tristan Tzara's Dadaist "cerebral revolver shot" and the actual carnage of the battlefield. Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri exhibited his "snare-pictures," arrangements of found objects fixed in place and wall-mounted, in Milan in 1961. Spoerri's tableaux of just-finished meals, with



Opposite: Ann Hamilton, *the capacity of absorption*, 1988–89, ocean buoy etched with lines and numbers from a phrenology diagram, installation view at the Temporary Contemporary, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Above: Niki de Saint-Phalle, performance view at Impasse Ronsin, Paris, 12 February 1961. Photo: Harry Shunk.

their fishbones, bread crumbs, and shriveled curls of fat appearing on "tabletops" with dishes, utensils, and cigarette-filled ashtrays, connote a kind of personal archaeology reminiscent of Rauschenberg, but they are additionally unpalatable because the dried residue of these meals indicates an all too corporeal decay. In a 1961 installation called *Grocery Store*, in Copenhagen, Spoerri rubber-stamped various foodstuffs, canned, bottled, and fresh, as works of art. In his 1966 artists' book *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, Spoerri accepted as collaborators the rats who devoured two of the snare-pictures shown at Galleria Schwartz, and went on to note:

Taboos have as their objective the preservation of traditions and forms, an objective that I reject: at the Galerie Koepcke "Grocery Store," sandwich rolls, in which garbage and junk were mixed during the kneading, were baked and sold as "taboo catalogues."⁹

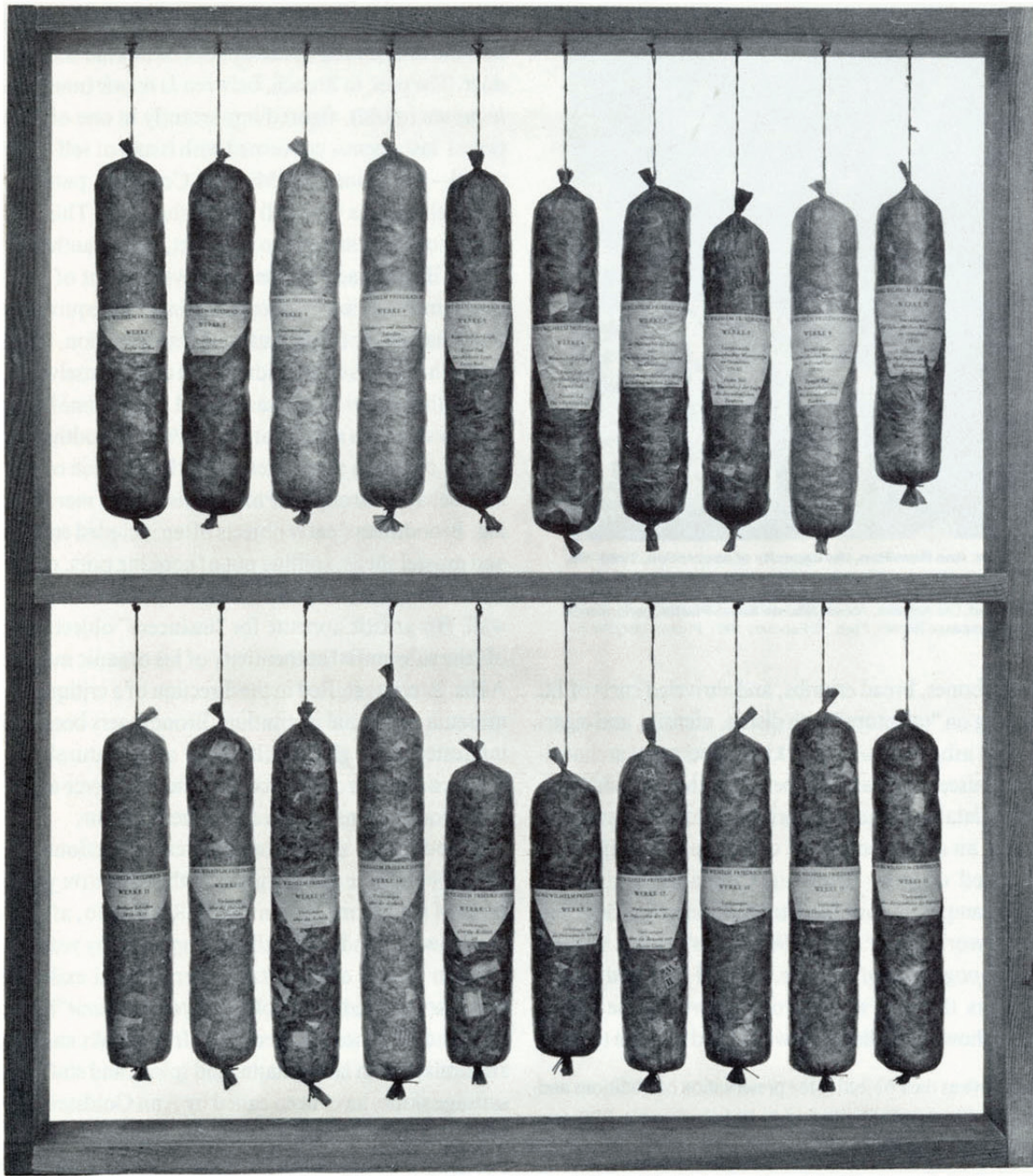
In the work of Piero Manzoni, the artist himself becomes both exemplary producer *and* production. In a 1960 performance in Milan, Manzoni invited the public to eat boiled eggs that the artist had marked with his thumbprint. Later, he canned his own shit and offered it for sale, sold balloons filled with "artist's breath," and planned to offer vials of "artist's blood." Manzoni's retinue of bodily substances functioned as "traces" of being, through which he proposed the body itself as "a message." Manzoni also signed things — and people — into being as living works of art. Declarations of authenticity accompanied Manzoni's bodily autographs of a number of his friends and associates, including Marcel Broodthaers.

Still a practicing poet at the time he was declared a living artwork, Broodthaers, influenced by Stéphane Mallarmé and La Fontaine, was fond of bestiaries. In his

verse, anthropomorphic cockroaches, serpents, jellyfish, and mussels served as metaphors of human social conduct. The pun, in French, between *la moule* (mussel) and *le moule* (mold), figured importantly in one of Broodthaers' last poems, concerned with issues of self — versus social — definition. As Michael Compton puts it, the "mussel secretes the shell which shapes it. This mussel plainly creates itself and so is perfect, that is, authentic."¹⁰ But in Broodthaers' terms, the development of bird-in-egg or mollusc-in-shell became punningly equivalent to the social myth of individual self-determination, in which many thousands of individuals will cast themselves in, or adjust themselves to, the same mold. By the time he began his new career as a visual artist, in 1964, Broodthaers saw the art object in similar terms, with the value of the art idea debased through the materialism of its merchandising. Broodthaers' early objects often included empty egg and mussel shells, spilling out of cooking pots, covering tables or chairs, or glued to canvases and hung on the wall. His artistic appetite for "insincere" objects played off the substantial authenticity of his organic materials. As his interests shifted in the direction of a critique of the museum as a social institution, Broodthaers became less interested in the given multiplicity of his natural subject matter and more concerned with the commerce and classification systems of objects in the museum.

Broodthaers' mock museological collections found their bibliophilic counterpoint in the collective publications of the German-born Dieter Roth, who, after fleeing to Switzerland during the war, spent many years afterward in a kind of voluntary international exile. Roth issued several "editions" of his "*Literaturwurst*" between 1960 and '71. These minced pages from books and magazines mixed with lard, gelatin, and spices, and stuffed into sausage skins, have been called by Ann Goldstein "food for thought."¹¹ Roth's ongoing documentation and publication of his life-as-art would eventually become his *Collected Works*, but in the 1960s he was still experimenting with "etchings with chocolate and bananas, books with texts printed on plastic or foil, bags filled with glued, dyed cheese, lamb cutlets, etc., and self-portraits and sculpture made out of food."¹² The artist's subsequent prolific output of offset volumes, presenting his activity in the form of an ongoing digest of reproductions, thus engages viewers in a melancholic contemplation of decay as a metaphor for the irrecoverable distance between experience and memory.

A similar use of substance as autobiographical relic characterizes the work of Joseph Beuys. His legendary World War II plane crash in the Crimean snows, and ensuing rescue by Tartar tribesmen who swaddled his bruised body in fat and felt, dictated the reading of these same materials from the time they first appeared in Beuys' art, in 1960, suffusing these resonant creations with a



Dieter Roth, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: Werke in 20 Bänden* (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: work in 20 volumes), 1974, paperbacks shredded with spices and lard in sausage casing, framed in wood, ca. 39 × 33 $\frac{1}{6}$ × 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Collection of the Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

mythopoetic reflection of recent German history. As Donald Kuspit puts it, "material was never given neutrally for Beuys, but always invested with memorable, primitive significance."¹³ In an essay concerning Beuys' pedagogical philosophy, Eric Michaud quotes the artist:

Fat . . . was a great discovery for me. . . . I was able to influence it with heat or cold. . . . In this way I could transform the character of this fat from a chaotic and unsettled state to a very solid condition of form. In this way the fat underwent a movement from a very chaotic condition to a geometrical context as its end. I thus had three fields of power and, there, that was the idea of sculpture. It was power over a condition of chaos, over a condition of movement, and over a condition of form. In these three elements — form, movement, and chaos — was the indeter-

minate energy from which I derived my complete theory of sculpture, of the psychology of humanity as the power of will, the power of thought, and the power of feeling; and there I found it — the schema adequate to understanding all the problems of society.¹⁴

Connecting this "schema" to Beuys' idea of "*Gestaltung* (the putting into form) as an end," marking "the general process of thought, of man, and of human society: the passage from an indeterminate or 'chaotic' state of energy to a state that is determinate, or 'crystalline,'" ¹⁵ Michaud goes on to examine the problematic relationship between Beuys' idealized conception of "social sculpture" — within which the model body stands in for the body politic, and in which everyone can be an artist — and the estheticized

politics of fascism. From such idealism, Michaud suggests, it is all too easy to equate difference with debase-ment or deviance.

On another front, criticizing Beuys' conflation of personal myth and artistic meaning, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh dismisses his "seemingly radical ahistoricism" by offering a series of morphological comparisons between works by Beuys and such contemporaries as Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre. But Buchloh fails adequately to distinguish Beuys' works in organic substances from the "mixture of heterogenous materials within the sculptural unit"¹⁶ characteristic of Modernist sculpture. In other words, qualities of viscosity, hardness, or pliability mean something quite different when applied to grease, steel, or plastic, on the one hand, and honey, bone, or fat, on the other. However misguided Beuys' mystical presumptions may have been, the substantial usages in his work can't be properly understood without consideration of how they relate to the idea of the body *as such*.

Perhaps more than any other artist, Beuys paved the way for a multitude of elaborations on the conceptual energy of the organic, as his projects moved through a range of manipulations — from the small to the large and from the decayed to the fresh. In his 1965 performance *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* (How to explain pictures to a dead hare), for example, Beuys' "lecture" to the dead animal could only be heard by his human audience, despite the artist's sardonic claim that his explanation was directed to the hare because he didn't like explaining the pictures to people. By claiming both animal and substance as symbols of the self, equating the hare's burrow with sculpture and the honey that covered Beuys' own head with the character of thought, Beuys' performative gesture "resurrected" both carcass and smeared fluid. But by the time of *Honey Pump*, 1977, the installation Beuys assembled for Documenta 6, the fresh honey coursing by the gallon through the plastic tubing could be seen as standing in for the blood in a model circulatory system. And the enormous scale of the installation encouraged a reading of the space it encompassed as analogous to a vast body, with visitors passing through its throbbing tubes and rumbling pump like so many individual cells. In whatever form or size, the operations of Beuysian nature are always transformational, asserting that the role of the artist is to enact "again and again, and in a variety of media, the movement from death to life."¹⁷

Whereas the evocation of ideal social formations persistently informed Beuys' manipulation of the organic, Jannis Kounellis, in early installations, introduced living plants, animals, and occasional human performers into the gallery in works and situations that served simultaneously as allegories of historical fragmentation and

celebrations of the vitality of real life. His introduction of 12 live horses into a vanguard gallery space in 1969 offered visitors these animals as a kind of living equestrian statuary in a site where such statuary would be least expected. And in his installations that featured burlap sacks or open piles of beans, coffee, corn, peas, and rice, accompanied by bins of coal or piles of charred wood (simultaneously source and residue of fire) and small pieces of gold, Kounellis invoked the “progressive” chain of trade, of commerce – from the raw (beans) to the refined (charcoal) to the distribution (via horses) to a final, evaluative token (gold) – proffering a symbiology of the cycle of consumption on both a personal and a social level.

In a similar vein, Mario Merz employs the spiral form based on the Fibonacci sequence (1–1–2–3–5–8–13–21–) that, progressing to infinity, dictates the growth patterns of many organisms in nature, from pinecones and flower petals to the shell of the nautilus or the scales of an alligator’s skin. Merz’s installations, especially those involving heaps of fresh vegetables on progressively rising spiral tables, signify development and propagation, both in nature and in human consciousness. In these elegant homages to the human capacity to divine nature’s logic, Merz also implicitly points to the limits of human understanding. Such works subtly posit that the role of the artist – and of art – may be, quite simply, to echo rather than imitate or mediate nature’s given structures.

To submit oneself to the powers of the “given,” then, rather than attempt to master it: this is the meaning that has underwritten the work of many contemporary artists who use the organic. In one of Wolfgang Laib’s “Milkstones,” from 1981, for example, the milk filling a shallow depression within a sheet of white marble promulgates a complex of symbolic associations. But the pale and empty stone is capable, in itself, of symbolizing milk, at least in terms of a chromatic resemblance. Filling it with an inorganic white liquid such as gesso would also suggest milk. What does it matter that actual substance be present in, or as, the work of art? In an interview with Suzanne Pagé in 1986, Laib asserted: “All these [organic] materials are full of symbols – and still they exist in themselves – they are what they are. . . . These materials have incredible energies and power that I never could create.”¹⁸

Yet there is prodigious human energy invested in the creation and presentation of these works. At the end of each day, someone must remove the clotted and dirty liquid from *Milkstone*, wash the slab clean, then refill it the next morning with fresh milk. Likewise, Laib’s piles and squares of pollen must be regularly reseeded to cover the tracks of the night-feeding insects that regard these artworks as a most admirable repast. And simply to collect his pollen, Laib spends more than six months a year (from mid February through September) in meadows and



Piero Manzoni marking eggs. Photo from Germano Celant, *Piero Manzoni*, exhibition catalogue, Rome: Galleria nazionale d’arte moderna, 1971.

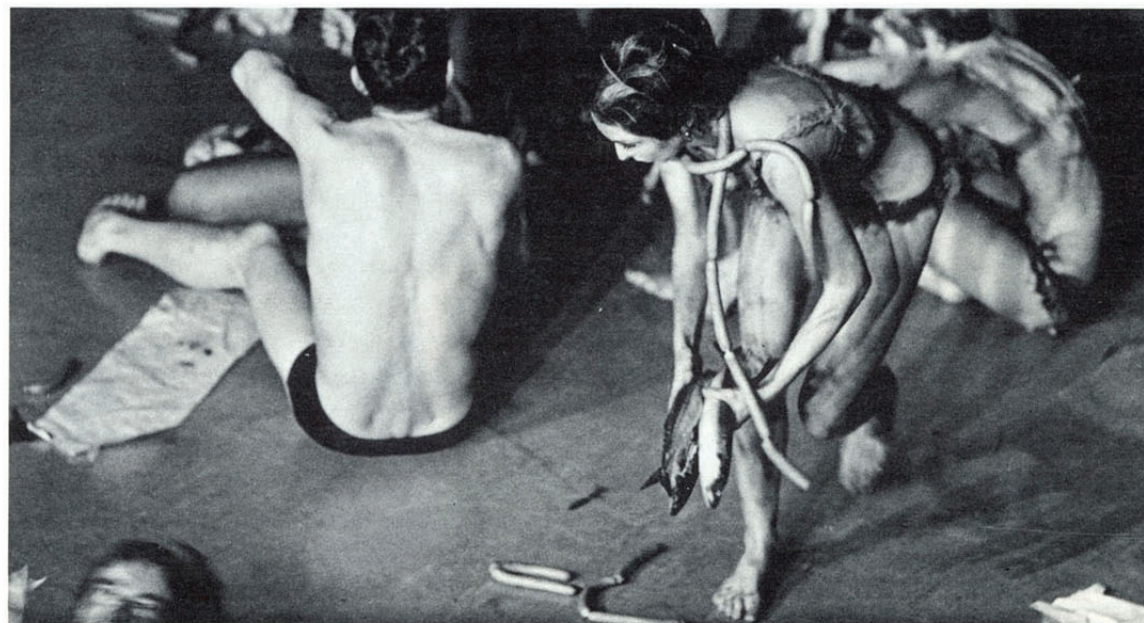
forests near his home in rural southern Germany, collecting, one by one, the tiny granular deposits from hazelnuts, buttercups, dandelions, and pine trees. This painstaking annual harvest yields only “four, five, or six jars of three or four different kinds of pollen.”¹⁹ It is, perhaps, the invisibility of this intensive labor – for it can nowhere be read in the pieces as installed – that is the unspoken power of Laib’s work. For if one conjures up an image of effort at all, it is that of a kind of shamanistic discipline, a ritualized gathering of vital substance as if for an offering or sacrifice.

Ironically, it is the specific materiality of Laib’s work that deflects our attention from its means of production, its labors and services, to its immanence, its “absolute” availability. But there is another deflection in Laib’s art, a diverting of use or function, whose willfulness suggests another organizing principle: that of the libertine diet of the Marquis de Sade. Laib’s nourishing fluid or fecund

power is poured but not consumed. Fresh milk gleams in its stone receptacle; once curdled, it is flushed away. The copious inundations of golden grains pollinate no blooms. There is no suckling or fertilization in these lavish displays, whose incipient degradation necessitates constant replenishment. The Sadean diet too, like Sadean sex, is mechanically efficient; any collapse into vulgar disorder is continually avoided. Time and again the players in Sade’s erotic tableaux are admonished by one of their members to restructure their activities, so that their unbridled lusts are gratified within codes of transgression. In *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 1793, Madame de Saint-Ange interrupts the proceedings by declaring: “If you please, let us put a little order in these revels; measure is required even in the depths of infamy and delirium.”²⁰ In short, the pleasure of Sadean erotics can only be realized through its disciplined codes.

We understand the equivalence between acts of procreation and ingestion as one of penetration and incorporation. But the essential transgression of Sade is the diversion of sexual goals from conception to bliss. A similar diversion of diet and digestion from its life-sustaining function would be fatal, so Sade instead inverts these processes through his ecstatic coprophagy and profuse elaborations of menu. The staggering buffets of the libertines have the “function of introducing pleasure (and not merely transgression) into the libertine world.”²¹

Laib’s installations embody an extraordinary plentitude. His systematic replenishings suspend decay. If, in the works of Spoerri, Roth, and Beuys, the organic and its potential dissolution bespeak both the powers and vulnerability of human life, Laib’s work, with its constant, excessive reinfusions, posits the possibility of stopping time. It is precisely the convergence of vital sub-



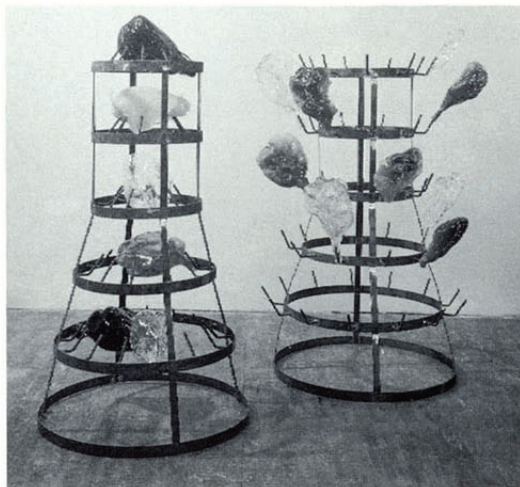
Carolee Schneemann, Meat Joy, 1964, performance view at Judson Memorial Church, New York, 17 November 1964. Photo: Peter Moore.

stance and stopped time that allies this kind of work to the discursive space in Sade. Angela Carter describes the Sadean orgasm as a momentary “annihilation of the self,” a self to which one returns all too quickly:

Orgasm has possessed the libertine; during the irreducible timelessness of the moment of orgasm, the hole in the world through which we fall, he has been as a god, but this state is as fearful as it is pleasurable and, besides, is lost as soon as it is attained.²²

The diabolical Sadean mixture of pleasure and pain is only briefly overcome, but in that moment something of life’s terrible splendor is revealed. By rejecting the instrumentality of Sade’s libertinism while accepting its union of sacred and profane, some artists seek to invoke the best of his vision. Here, the ecstatic experience is recuperated in sculptural terms.

In Rona Pondick’s installations and sculptures, small rodlike masses, simultaneously excremental and phallic, are often situated upon luxurious cushions or beds. These feces-penises assume the status of repressed fantasies given concrete form, as Pondick provocatively applies the shape of an evacuation to the site of ejaculation. But Pondick’s forms aren’t actual feces. They are, in fact, made or cast from wax. *Mine*, 1987, is a knee-high ovoid of lumpy brown wax (the mass itself literally thrown together as Pondick tossed balls of softened wax from across the room to create it). The impacted mass resembles quite explicitly an outsized, gargantuan turd, and yet recalls the “dissociating reality” Barthes ascribes to Sade: “when written, shit does not have an odor; Sade can inundate his partners in it, we receive not the slightest



whiff, only the abstract sign of something unpleasant.”²³ Indeed, *Mine* would be less horrifically believable if made up of actual feces, since it could then only be understood as a construction of filth and not also as a model of impossible evacuation/penetration.

In a review of Pondick’s 1988 installation *Beds*, at the Sculpture Center in New York, Kirby Gookin suggested that the structures of the arrangements within its three rooms were each “a parodic episode . . . which simultaneously venerates taboos and denigrates the sacred.”²⁴ In the brightly lit first room, an arrangement of plush white nylon pillows resting on a block of wood resembled a bier, upon which—as if lying in state—rested a limp and turdlike form wrapped in slightly stained gauze. In the next, darker room, sheets of lead draped over three vaguely wedgelike rows of stacked sandbags sagged into the valleys between individual bags, as if pressed down

by the weight of a body. On the summit of one of the side rows, three brown wax turds became ejecta displayed as objects of veneration. One of the twin stacks of black satin pillows in the small third room concealed yet another fecal object. The narrow passage between these looming stacks was an inviting recess. As the visitor penetrated this plush softness, the waiting turd assigned the encounter a sodomitic quality.

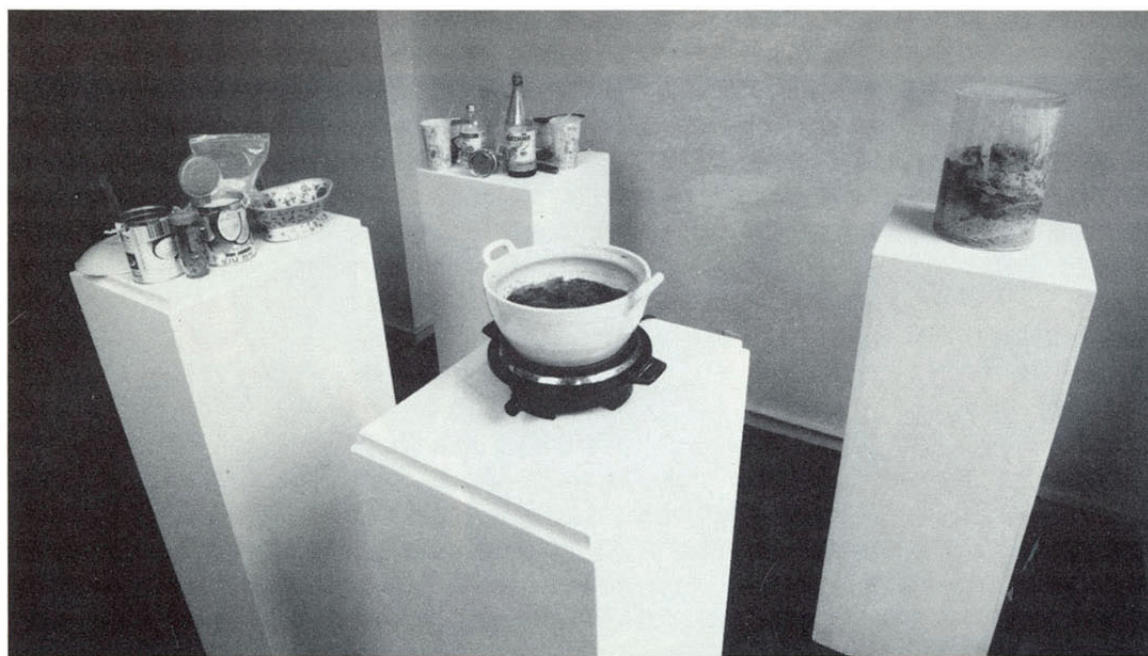
Pondick’s objects fluctuate between definitions, their irreconcilable material and formal references violating both the social and the artistic order. Recalling Georges Bataille’s “intellectual scatology” through its unmistakable references to ejaculation and excretion, Pondick’s art comes so dangerously close to nonart that one might literally wriggle in discomfort standing before it.

Similarly, the glass or wax castings from animal, and occasionally human, lungs in Maureen Connor’s recent sculptures and installations seek to despoil the cool formality of the abstract steel forms in which they are situated. The welded steel armatures of Connor’s series of “Lung Racks,” 1988, resemble bottle-drying racks and clearly refer to Marcel Duchamp’s famous ready-made. But these contemporary appropriations are “assisted” by the simulated organs, sometimes wrapped by or stuffed into feminine undergarments, impaled on their protruding metal arms. The covert eroticism in Duchamp’s original appropriation is rendered explicit through this juxtaposition. But equally important, the steel forms of *Lung Racks I and II* also resemble vaguely skeletal structures. This adds to the horror of the real-looking lumps of flesh with which they are studded. The organs of the body are epistemologically degraded by separation from it. This dead tissue also confirms the death of the absent body, but does not by its mere presence offer an explanation of the meaning of that death. Accident, murder, and sacrifice are indistinguishable as agencies behind the presence of Connor’s glistening viscera, cast from actual organs in materials that convey the moisture, pliability, and sheen of their source. As such, they are convincingly abject, a pathetic residue of the formerly alive.

In *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva notes:

It is thus not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite . . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject.²⁵

Connor, like Pondick, rebuts her own sculptural syntax with her shocking references to the actual, the real. Hence, abjectness encroaches upon the abstracting distance of formal structure, invoking a Sadean concept of nature in which the only limit to both our pleasures and our terrors is the body.



Top: Maureen Connor, *Lung Racks I and II*, 1988, steel, glass, and wax, left: 51 × 29 × 18"; right: 58 × 49 × 34". Above: Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled*, 1988, mixed media, installation view from "Outside the Clock: Beyond Good and Elvis," at Scott Hanson Gallery, N.Y., 1989. Opposite: Rona Pondick, *Princess*, 1987, wood, pillows, and bronze, 24 × 24 × 46".



Ann Hamilton's room-sized tableaux use immense quantities of natural residues, together with machines, furniture, and human performers. In a 1984 studio tableau entitled *Detour*, Hamilton positioned six performers in a variety of motionless confrontations with machines and materials, including a pile of feathers and a six-ton heap of gravel. Perhaps the most disturbing apparition was a performer seated on the bench of a porch swing resting on the floor. Both human and swing were completely covered with burdocks. Visitors to the scene could see the twitches and movements of the performer breathing beneath the prickly burrs. In *the lids of unknown positions*, a 1985 installation at Twining Gallery, New York, Hamilton completely covered a 24-by-10-foot wall in mussel shells (reminiscent of Broodthaers), glued with lips outward. Hung on the wall with the shells was an old rusted lawn-roller. And two performers were engaged in troubling visual predicaments: one perched atop a lifeguard chair, head thrust through a hole in the ceiling; the second sat at a table, head apparently buried in a mound of sand piled on it. (The visitor's alarm at this apparent enactment of suffocation was tempered by the realization that some access to air must be hidden in the table.) The stoic unresponsiveness of Hamilton's performers to confinement, exposure, or displacement can easily be equated with the disciplined endurance of Sadean sexual partners.

In Hamilton's 1988–89 installation *the capacity of ab-*

sorption, at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's Temporary Contemporary facility, visitors passed through three chambers covered, successively, in animal, vegetal, and mineral residues. The walls of the first room were draped with sheets of beeswax-coated paper; the second was festooned with fibrous clumps of pond algae; and the third was blackened by graphite powder, the "lead" of pencils. Water flowed through these spaces, literally and figuratively: 150 wall-mounted glasses of water, each containing a tiny whirlpool, in the first; a long, narrow wooden table whose surface was covered by running water, in the second; and finally, in the third, an enormous rusted metal buoy (tied by a clumsily knotted cord to a performer in the second room) rested on a floor composed of thousands of lead typographic characters. As with Laib's work, the thoughtful visitor might grasp the prodigious labor entailed in this vast assembly, but for most of its audience, *the capacity of absorption* was a fantastic texture of systematically—and symbolically—connected effects, producing an absorbing reverie of (erotic) pleasure.

Yet seeded discreetly within the installation were moments of shocking transgression: a video image of an ear constantly inundated by pouring water; and a cardboard puppet, jerked by a machine, whose repetitive twitching suggested spasms of both ecstasy and pain, for example. Kenneth Baker has described Hamilton's work as "interrupt[ing] the thoughtless flow of everyday life

with something so troubling or lyrical that it paralyzes mental habit."²⁶ Her art evokes a world that is always coming into form, but that is also fragmented and particular. Hamilton's profusion of substance reveals the morbid interiority of our idea of plenitude, evoking Michel Foucault's reference to Sade's "limitless presumption of appetite."

Before us lies the splendid and terrible array of the world, whose overwhelming variegation exceeds our physical capacities, if not our appetites, to know it. If that world is constantly in flux, the actual nature of its substance remains constant. No theory of symbolism will suffice that does not acknowledge these conditions of meaning. That all the artists discussed here seek to unite symbol and substance does not imply, however, their alignment with such utopian visions as that of the end of time. Timelessness is an instrumental fiction of those who propose activity itself as our *raison d'être*. But with a claim upon consciousness that is deeper than this, the art of the organic emerges out of the most intensely experienced discontinuities between our words and our world. □

Buzz Spector is an artist who lives in Los Angeles. He contributes regularly to *Artforum*.

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24. Kirby Gookin, "Rona Pondick," exhibition review, *Artforum* XXVII no. 4, December 1988, p. 120.
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Mario Merz, *Spiral Table*, 1982, aluminum, glass, fruit, vegetables, branches, and beeswax, 18' diam.

The following two pages contain "Control: Gran Fury," a project for *Artforum*.