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By Ilya Gridneff

Ilya Gridneff visits one of the granddaddies of transgressive performance art and discovers that, when it comes to upsetting authority, shit, piss and self-immolation have definitely entered their neo-classical period

Few artists can spend seven years in jail for rape and molestation, arrive in London and be welcomed with open arms, perhaps even celebrated, by a two-month show in an established gallery. One exception is Austrian performance artist/film maker/commune creator and lord of the abject, Otto Muehl. His new show at the T1+2 Gallery, East London, opened this week and runs till mid December. This fresh work dabbles with the digital as part of our post-human condition. The result are four short videos, which montage images of grapes, naked women and demonic pictures of the artist himself into a kind of electric painting.

Shocking

As a leading member of the 1960s Viennese Actionists, Muehl pushed physical performance centre stage and enthusiastically broke through any social boundaries or conventions of taste that got in the way. Between them, the Actionists created a channel through which urine showers, coprophilia (shit-worship), bestiality, and animal sacrifice became an accepted part of art's lexicon. Muehl, alongside Hermann Nitsch (lover of limbless lambs and rolling about in offal, or sex under slaughtered bovines), Rudolf Schwarzkogler (whose documented Castration, 1969, was later proven an empty illusion) and Gunter Brus (famed for public masturbation), saw state repression perpetuated through art on canvas. To emancipate one self and one's art from the bourgeois mindset and its coercive system of social control, the artist had to become the art. The severe and confrontational decontextualisation of the body was the ultimate social weapon.

[IMAGE]

Rubbish

The 78-year-old, who lives in a 12-member Portuguese commune, was at the opening night answering questions through an interpreter-cum-interrupter. The discussion was lively, and touched on whether 9/11 was art, why Nietzsche's Übermensch was the 'normal' social type individuals should strive for, Rubbish, and why homosexuality wasn't endorsed in Muehl's 'free' commune. Regarding homosexuality, it was the women who didn't want it. And current art standards? Superficial, he said. 'The artist shits onto a canvas, the musician farts. My earlier work was heavily linked to the war. All the corpses I saw, the way the body was destroyed. The actors in my work were victims, I don't want this to be the case any more.'

Psychic Subversion

Muehl admitted his new work is a natural progression away from earlier, more famous pieces, of which the following is a typical explanation: 'My work is psychic subversion, aiming at the destruction of the pseudo-morality and ethic of state and order. I am for lewdness, for the demythologization of sexuality. I make films to provoke scandals, for audiences that are hidebound, perverted by "normalcy", mentally stagnating and conformist...Pornography is an appropriate means to cure our society from its genital panic. All kinds of revolt are welcome: only in this manner will this insane society, product of the fantasies of primeval mad-men, finally collapse...I restrict myself to flinging the food to the beasts: let them choke on it.'

Muehl's latest work is not potent enough to make an impact in the way his filmed 1968 action did (With Verve into the New Year, Gunter Brus' wife Anni fellates Muehl; in Kind Regard for Mother's Day From Otto Muehl). There, Anni Brus sat at a table holding her baby, while in the foreground Schwarzkogler operated a suction pump attached to Muehl's penis. Nor other Muehl actions like the 'golden showers' of Country Rider's Club (1969), or the diarrheic 'hot lunches' of Scheiss-Kerl (1969) - and 1970s onscreen decapitation of a live goose (listed in the credits as 'eine Gans'), which was then thrust into a (human) vagina.

When Muehl performed his famous goose beheading at the Wet Dream Festival, Amsterdam 1971, where the bloody neck would be inserted into a condom and then into the waiting anus of a naked model, some young rebel (apparently an underground poet) stole the gander and fled. According to Germaine Greer, Mr Muehl, agog but still the consummate performer, responded by shitting on stage and then storming off, shouting in German 'If you are going to interrupt a performance at least better it!!'

[IMAGE]

Symbolic Shit

Sure - nothing can outdo a good shit. For shit is the vital symbol the Actionists used to attack an authoritarian regime set on prohibiting both the self-determined individual and a free society. Shit is one of the first substances a child plays/creates with and, as Freud reminds us, described as bad/evil to the young. State conditioning restricts the natural order and sets a parameter by which what is inside becomes evil; as through the Catholic logic of original sin, we then spend life in denial. For these grown men to play and worship shit, in the most 'depraved' manner, decades later still usurps the grander narrative of art history and other foundational stories authority relies on. Sexuality and gender - the other constructions denying individuality - mean that to wank in public, piss on each other, are again attacks on the systems conditioning men by other deceiving men. Through covert actors the state may prohibit its subjects with languages, codes, practices, rules and laws, but art can transcend this...

Shocking

In 1968, Austrian Actionist Gunter Brus fled Berlin and a six-month prison sentence after his Art and Revolution - in which he'd wanked publicly while singing the Austrian national anthem - was deemed degrading to symbols of the state. It wasn't art though that got his peer Muehl into proper trouble with the establishment a while later. In 1991, Uncle Otto was imprisoned for seven years after a highly politicised rape and molestation trial. The Actionists' 'indecent' performances meant going to jail was a common experience, but Muehl's crimes occurred in his consensual commune set up in Vienna, 1970. To gain entry new members had to endure an initiation where they shed their 'character armour', the thinly constructed 'self' society builds for you. The shedding was facilitated through a stylised, Actionist psychoanalytic process. By 1972 the commune was so popular its 600 members moved it to Friedrichshof, with others founding similar set ups in Berlin, Hamburg, Geneva and München.

Hypocrisy

Marriage was the enemy for it represented the ownership of women. Monogamy muzzled sexuality and reduced revolutionary potentiality. Men did not have their own bed and had to find a partner each night, but this promiscuous mating (designed to deny intrinsically capitalist intimacies) ultimately led to Muehl's downfall.

Things had to change as the failing, natural order meant prettier members of the commune became more sought after, bonds between individuals were formed, and Muehl himself became a scarce resource of sorts, replicating capitalist laws of supply and demand. Despite Muehl's ardent rejection of coupling, a position he stressed continually at the private view, the

master himself married Claudia Weissenstener in 1988. They had a son, Atilla, born in 1985, and it was this new generation that brought the real problems. How to initiate polymorphic perversity into their lives became a question shadowed in Freudian rhetoric, where Muehl, already daddy number one, saw fit to elicit sex with the new breed.

Some say it was women's jealousy that led to the 1991 trial and sentence. But being incarcerated lent credence to the reality of Muehl's convictions, as it appeared to confirm his claims that the state will lock up those 'revolutionaries' bent on emancipating the individual by whatever means necessary. The pseudo-martyrdom it created cemented his heretic status, and increased his artistic legitimacy to the point where, after his release, Muehl could enjoy two painting exhibitions at the Louvre, the most recent in October 2001.

Sinecure

Looking at the Actionists' work exposes the sinecure that is YBA's Sensation exhibition and other work filling morally panicked newspaper columns. If, within the praxis generated by post World War II anxiety, Viennese Actionist body art illustrated the crisis of individuality under the oppression and exploitation of organised authorities religious and political, then surely the somnambulist praxis that has followed Gulf Virtual War 2 is in need of a bigger dump than it's currently prepared to take? The colon of contemporary art, constipated as it is with curators and artists, and releasing more and more effluent into the gentrified toilet bowl of London's East End, seems to have outgrown its function much like that in the Carnival Man's tale of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. Here, a man teaches his anus to talk but eventually the anus takes over the mouth and reduces the man to a blob of flesh. The anus concludes victoriously: 'It's you who will shut up in the end. Not me. Because we don't need you around here any more. I can talk and eat and shit.'

Otto Muehl is showing at the t1+2 Gallery, 4 Steward St, London E1, until 18th December

t1+2 art space: <http://www.t12artspace.com>