

JASON RHOADES

overconsumption

Elmgreen and Draget's poetics of the everyday stands in stark contrast to Jason Rhoades' adoption of an absurdist exaggeration of American new world aggressiveness. Russell Ferguson reports that at the Cologne 'Unfair'—an alternative to the Cologne Art Fair—in 1993 'Rhoades repeatedly fired a gun in his installation, smashing a number of beer glasses. He caused panic outside the fair when he pulled out the gun in a Cologne bar, later going on to shoot out some shop windows and streetlights' {Ferguson, 2000}. Ferguson's account makes one wonder why Rhoades was not gunned down by the German police, on suspects an element of myth-making. Or, alternatively, perhaps it was explained to the police as performance art: after all the Germans are known for their dedication to *Kultur*.

Whatever the facts of the matter it can be noted that Rhoades has cultivated a persona that could be described as stereotypically 'American redneck' and this auto-parodic persona plays key role in Rhoades' peculiar twist of the anti-aesthetic. One could draw a comparison here with the Swiss artist Sylvie Fleury who has programmed herself to be the ideal late-capitalist feminine consumer making her identity an integral part of her sculptural installation. The connec-

Costner Complex (Perfect Process), 20001



Costner Complex (Perfect Process), 2001

tion with Fleury is not random: speaking about his Impala project, 1998, for which he imported a Chevy Impala into Germany. Rhoades reports that he ‘asked Sylvie Fleury for something for its glove box ... she advised: “You must have Chanel 22, the only *American* Chanel perfume”’ [my emphasis] {Birnbaum, 1998}. Rhoades’ Impala project was realized in Europe and it is interesting to hear his comments on the differences between America and Europe:

What I want is this big American space. Something comfortable and elegant. And now this space exists in-between these pathetic European Kunsthallen that seem completely outdated. These old European art institutions just aren’t meant for artists who work today. If you need something mechanical, like screws, they won’t have what you need. I wanted this truly progressive space that moves forward. So I shipped this car over. {Birnbaum, 1998}

Rhoades plays the arrogant American in Europe despised by the European intellectuals for his crassness and pilloried by anti-globalization protester for his elevation of the car to the status of deity. The centrality of the gas-guzzling automobile to American culture (which helps underscore the causes and effects of 9/11) is reinforced further by Rhoades’ adoption of a Bush-like arrogance towards ‘old-Europe’. His self-consciously excessive Americanness was obviously appreciated by European artists such as Fleury who might also appreciate the machismo inherent in Rhoades’ reference in the above passage to ‘screws’, and ‘cars’: elements that were evident in Rhoades’ work from the start. For instance, his first



Costner Complex (Perfect Process), 2001

New York installation (1993) consisted of a messy mechanic's shop transplanted to the gallery complete with a dirty, greasy engine overhaul performance {Avgikos, 2001}.

The portrayal of America as the land of prodigality *ad absurdum* is also prevalent in Rhoades' mentor, Paul McCarthy, the doyen of West Coast satirical grunge. And the fact that there have been significant collaborations between the two artists affords Rhoades' histrionic redneckness an acerbic-parodic pedigree. The crux of McCarthy's work lies the representation of a kernel of psychotic hubris and grandiosity that lies at the core of any all-powerful culture.

A McCarthyesque parody of American anal-expulsive over-production/consumption is evident in Rhoades' Portikus (Frankfurt am Main) exhibition entitled *Costner Complex (Perfect Process)*, 2001. Rhoades transformed Portikus into a surrealistic species of food processing plant. White-capped workers chopped, pickled and preserved a selection of vegetables. A David Zwirner Gallery press release adds that this:

Gardenia alla Potpourri was then placed on slow-moving Lazy Susans [food carousels] and in turn exposed to the complete filmic oeuvre of Kevin Costner on 23 television monitors. The essence and aesthetic principles of Kevin Costner's work were thus captured in 1000 glass jars/jugs. {Zwirner, 2002}

Like gasoline, food is a particularly American obsession as is evident in the amount of obesity evident on just about any American street. Rhoades' simulacral food factory makes great play of an over-abundance of processed food as a meta-



phor for First World excess. And a surfeit of Costner's all-American boy image projected into the jars will imbue their contents with unending cultural pulp. Costner becomes the mass media mirror of this useless exercise in overproduction.

Rhoades takes the metaphor a step further in his his invention of a new, and especially disgusting, sculptural material he calls 'PeaRoeFoam' (pronounced pea-roe-foam). This substance is made from:

whole green peas, white virgin beaded foam and fish bait-style salmon eggs, which combined with non-toxic white glue, creates a versatile and fast-drying building material that hardens completely and can be used in various applications. With the help of many assistants ... [the] Rhoades studio now has produced 5000 PeaRoeFoam units {Zwirner, 2002}

Again, in a very McCarthyesque manner, Rhoades organizes large-scale operations to produce a truly disgusting product the cultural function of which is to turn a terrifying mirror onto American grandiosity and narcissistic potlatch. Rhoades twists the knife further by packaging PaeRoeFoam in Ivory Snow soap boxes. Apparently these soap boxes are of particular interest to Rhoades as the beautiful "99.44% pure" mother featured on these boxes was the actress Marilyn Chambers:

who in the same year that these boxes came out, had starred in one of the first feature length-porn films ever made: *Behind the Green Door*. The wide appeal of the image of the

Ivory Snow mother, ultimately led to the mainstream success of *Behind the Green Door* and this cultural intersection created what the artist refers to as: ‘a great accident’. Rhoades does not see an ‘accident’ such as this as coincidental, but rather as a trigger that creates changes in perception. {Zwirner, 2002}

‘Mental instability’ seems the wrong term to describe such productions and deliberations, ‘paradox’, ‘imperfection’, and ‘chaos’ (in the Chaos Theory sense) seem more appropriate. Perhaps there is method behind Rhoades’ madness.

PeaRoeFoam is certainly designed to be disgusting. It recalls Damien Hirst’s giant ashtray filled with hundred of cigarette butts in the Saachi Gallery in London. But Rhoades’ reference is culturally specific. It refers to overconsumption which is the bedrock of the American economy and the global pollution and Third World decline that is its inevitable by-product. Although Rhoades describes PeaRoeFoam as ‘virgin’ his use of pure white Styrofoam beads also carries with it the undeniable fact that this is one of the most environmentally unfriendly packaging materials in existence. PeaRoeFoam is more honest because one imagines that this disgusting product will eventually, inevitably putrefy and stink. Rhoades’ metaphorical conflation of cleanliness with corruption in his ‘new material’ PeaRoeFoam is reinforced by his reference to the 1972 Ivory Snow soap box and the ‘99.44% pure’ mother-cum-porn star. It would be foolhardy to frame Rhoades as deconstructing American culture because he is so much a part of it. But there does appear to be a critical edge to his particular spin on absurdist-grunge installationism.