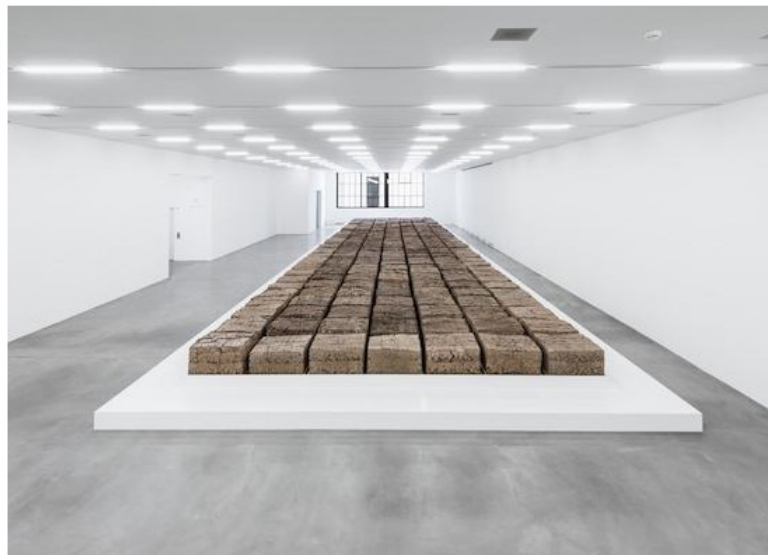


Craft/Work

Shitting Bricks: The Dada Heritage Of Mike Bouchet's Zurich Load

— *Barnaby Smith*, September 24th, 2016 08:31

At Manifesta 11, amidst celebrations of the Dada centenary, Barnaby Smith finds some very dirty art in one of Europe's cleanest cities



All images: Mike Bouchet, The Zurich Load, Löwenbräukunst. Photo (c) Camilo Brau

For many years I was quite turned off by the idea of visiting India. For one thing, I was wary of the cliché of following in the footsteps of any long-out-dated hippie trail and for another, such a trip, for people I knew and from things I read, often meant misguided pilgrimages to visit dubious gurus in the name of spiritual improvement.

Then the opportunity arose, and I took it. A couple of years later I returned. To my surprise I found myself infected with this so-called 'India bug', a vague wistful reverie that involves thinking of the place every day, fantasising about returning and swooning in a general awe at the country's complexities and yes, dammit, the 'colours and smells', the 'sensory overload'. As a consumer, I was sold on the product.

But it wasn't the culture, the land, the food, the sights or even the people that got to me most. It was the mess. It was refreshing – coming with a perspective born of Western complacency and being used to apparent order and cleanliness – to visit a place where waste was not recoiled from and denied, where excrement and grime and discharge and husk are not hidden and unacknowledged. It seemed a lesson in humanity's wholeness, where there was little separation between public and social personas and the shit we produce (both literally and otherwise). The men shitting in the trees by the railway lines near Dehradun, the dead cat in the street in Kochi with its intestines strewn out several feet from its chewed-up belly, the open sewer that is the tracks between the platforms at Delhi station.

This attitude – a reflection really – may seem inappropriate given the nation’s perilous environmental quagmire, ongoing sanitation deficiencies and grievous poverty on its massive scale. But I lived in Zurich for a year, with its pristine avenues, spectacular standards of organisation, delight in bureaucracy and relentless niceties. A visit to India in the wake of this was a blast of worldly reality that, as a tourist, represented a kind of reconnection with the immediate physicality of life, and the people were unapologetic. Shit happens, everywhere, all the time, so why pretend it doesn’t. Of course, these impressions could only be momentary before the magnitude of India’s aforementioned dysfunctions snaps you out of it.

Zurich regularly hovers around the top of those lists that rank the world’s cities for quality of life (one recent such league table by Mercer had it second). My experience was of an impenetrable city of inflexible social traditions, a monument to and celebration of wealth, a widespread baulking at the counter-cultural and largely conservative ideas of beauty and art. If ever there was a city that might squirm at facing its own shit, it was this one. As part of Manifesta 11 for 2016, Frankfurt-based American artist Mike Bouchet insisted that Zurich did exactly that with his thought-provoking, powerful installation, *The Zurich Load*.

Bouchet’s piece saw eighty tonnes of human excrement packed into a series of large brown bricks spread out to cover an area of 79 x 840 x 3,040 centimetres at Lowenbraukunst, a converted brewery on the banks of the Limmat river that was home to the majority of Manifesta’s offerings. The ‘load’ had been mixed with cement, lime and pigment, and there was a notice near the entrance stating that the sludge had been made safe for public presentation. My visit occurred about eight weeks into Manifesta, and thus the worst of the smell had dissipated – I was told by a local, however, that residents in the neighbourhood complained vehemently when the piece was installed and the stench was somewhat riper. Now it was, surprisingly, not overpowering and more like the smell of manure on a farm than human sewage. Also striking was the dryness, with the slabs resembling peat briquettes used for fuel. The fact the bricks were immaculately laid out in perfect order seemed a nod to Zurich’s glorification of neatness and symmetry.



Manifesta takes place in a different European location every two years, making an effort to avoid any city that can be regarded as an international hub of contemporary art. Manifesta's emphasis is on peripheral scenes. Since its inception in 1996, it has been hosted by Rotterdam, Luxembourg, Ljubljana, Murcia and St Petersburg among other places, and has never visited the UK. Each version of Manifesta has a theme, with Zurich 2016 being 'What People Do For Money: Some Joint Ventures'.

To serve this concept, curator Christian Jankowski arrived at the idea of pairing an international artist with a member of the Zurich workforce so that they might work together to create art based on a particular profession. So as you wandered through the multi-venue exhibition, you'd find works in all manner of mediums (from photography to sculpture to video art to sound art and more) the result of collaborations between an invited artist and the likes of firemen, construction workers, doctors, prostitutes and in one case dog groomers. Bouchet worked with Werdhölzi Wastewater Treatment Plant, with his raw material being all the 'human sludge' that the 400,000 denizens of Zurich produced on March 24, 2016.

One of my first thoughts when stood in front of *The Zurich Load* was of India. How strange it must seem to anyone from there that such a thing would be monumentalised in this way, made an artefact for aesthetic contemplation. In Switzerland, where waste and muck is alienated, such a thing might seem subversive.

It isn't though. This is partly due to Bouchet's attitude to his own work, which was affectionate and playful. In an interview, he said his hope was to make human excrement "more benign and less threatening" and also celebrated the fact this was a genuine, almost lovingly constructed, collaboration with the entire population of the city. *The Zurich Load* is also something of a democratic social leveller: the faeces of millionaire bankers mingled and mixed with that of immigrants, refugees and drug addicts. While challenging to the notions of decorum that define this city, ultimately there is little that is shocking, 'edgy' or even particularly experimental in either the finished piece or Bouchet's intention.

That is not to say it does not have its layers (so to speak). For example, it's difficult to look at a work made out of shit and not be reminded of the simple age-old idea of artistic process as purgation. Bouchet's piece presents very literally (and impishly) the idea of the work of art being the result of the artist(s) 'digesting' his or her psyche or experience – the 'catharsis'.

A further dimension emerges when you consider some of Bouchet's previous works and artistic concerns. Preoccupied by consumerism and its consequences, and clearly influenced by Warhol, his *Ask For More* (2013) is simply the Pepsi slogan printed eighteen times on a white background. *Untitled Video* (2011) is a mosaic of 10,000 porn videos. For *Carpe Denim* (2004), Bouchet had his own brand of jeans made in a Colombian sweatshop, and then, having loaded them on to a plane, rained them down upon the city in which they were manufactured.

In the wake of these pieces, *The Zurich Load* seems to consolidate the idea that all 'consumption' must have its final act of digestion: defecation. Too much consumption, for Bouchet, will necessitate overwhelming volumes of shit – actual, existential, cultural, and spiritual. It is telling that Bouchet also noted that while the residents of Zurich produced 80 tonnes of waste in a day, New York City's figure is 1,600, "enough to fill Yankee Stadium".



Indeed, the fact this is *everybody's* waste is what sets Bouchet's work apart from some of history's more notable examples of excremental art. Arguably the most famous is Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* ('Artist's Shit', 1961), which consists of ninety cans all containing thirty grams of Manzoni's own doings. As well as asking provocative questions about the production and consumption of art and certainly designed to shock, Manzoni was cultivating a strange kind of intimacy by allowing his stool to be employed in this way (although some accounts claim the tins are actually full of plaster). There is nothing personal about Bouchet's piece, which relies on the waste of others. He is more the facilitator of a 'come together' message. There is something confessional about using your own.

The Zurich Load is also not a work of nihilism nor does it have ambitions towards iconoclasm, as did Santiago Sierra's notorious 2007 London installation of sculptures made from human faeces that was collected, as it happens, by low-caste scavengers in India. Sierra, by the by, was among the invited artists at Manifesta 11.

One of the reasons Zurich was selected as the host city for Manifesta 11 was the fact that 2016 marks 100 years since the Dada movement was born at the city's fabled Niederdorf nightclub Cabaret Voltaire. Exhibitions and events are taking place throughout the year in the city (including a terrific Francis Picabia retrospective at the Kunsthau), with Cabaret Voltaire playing a role in Manifesta by hosting 'performances' from anyone willing to walk in and step up. Aside from this there was disappointingly little connection between the biennial's vocation-inspired installations and Dadaism's ideals, with the possible exception of *The Zurich Load*.

Dadaism, of course, was in thrall to shit, disgust, and destruction. Indeed, seminal Dada figure Tristan Tzara said, “Dada remains within the framework of European weaknesses, it’s still shit, but from now on we want to shit in different colours so as to adorn the zoo of art with all the flags of all the consulates...” For the Dada founders, excrement and the grotesque represented life, with Bouchet’s piece a gentle reminder to Zurich that to excrete is to be alive. Furthermore, with Zurich’s Dada history being celebrated all around him as he worked with the public water works, Bouchet must have had Duchamp’s *Fountain* on his mind as he forged his smelly construction (which could admittedly be said for ninety-nine percent of conceptual artists over the last hundred years).

Now that Manifesta is over, *The Zurich Load* will be destroyed as, I suppose, it would have to be. But as Antoine Lavoisier famously wrote, “Nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything changes”, which seems to be part of the point Bouchet was making. Every load lives on somewhere.

Manifesta 12 will be held in Palermo, Italy in 2018. [Francis Picabia: A Retrospective](#) runs until September 25