



Jonathan Parsons *Good Shit Painting (Diacephnorphine)* 2003 oil on linen 66 × 66 cm  
image courtesy the artist

# Paint is shit

Jonathan Parsons takes a scatological romp through the many smearings and spatterings of the lumpy brown stuff.

## THE WORLD IS CLOGGED WITH HUMAN WASTE.

We live in a global culture of over-consumption where the rich minority discard more than they retain. Painters are all too willing to contribute to this overwhelming tide of mucky production and its attendant slurry of by-products. If you have the temerity to make yet more stuff to clutter our saturated planet, you'd better be sure of its value. Artists, of course, have always been adept at the alchemy of turning shit into gold<sup>1</sup>. Thirty thousand years ago, dirt<sup>2</sup> of various hues was prepared and applied to cave walls and the 'image' was brought into being as an invented technology.

The transformation of excrement into gold has a primeval

and dense history. According to ancient Babylonian doctrine, gold is 'the faeces of Hell' (Mammon = *ilu manman*)<sup>3</sup>. In Freudian psychology, the symbolic meanings of 'giving and withholding gifts' are ascribed to the activity of defecation. In the 'anal stage' of human psychosexual development, the stool is the only material over which the infant has any control and its correct presentation in the pot is therefore the only gift it is able to bestow upon its parents<sup>4</sup>. This interpretation brings out the wonderful symbolic equation: 'faeces = gift = money'<sup>5</sup>. Just as the making and the spending of money is as ceaseless and incontinent as the flow of feeding and excretion, an equivalent incontinence

is the superabundance of verbal information and opinion – something only amplified by current information technology. We are all ‘spouting shit’. In his superbly eccentric and effluvial *History of Shit*<sup>6</sup>, Dominique Laporte shows how the 16th Century purification of the French language effectively produced the equation: ‘language – shit = gold’. I think, however, that if gold equals shit, language needs to retain its effluent in order to maintain its richness. Colloquial speech enshrines the connection in many phrases: ‘making a shit load’; ‘stinking rich’; ‘filthy lucre’; ‘rolling in the stuff’; ‘where there’s muck there’s brass’.

Piero Manzoni directly equated shit with gold. He produced an edition of ninety 30g cans of *Merda d’Artista* (Artist’s Shit) in May 1961. They were priced by weight at the contemporaneous market value of gold. Jon Thompson wrote that this ‘was the perfect metaphor for the bodied and disembodied nature of artistic labour: the work of art as fully incorporated raw material, and its violent expulsion as commodity’<sup>7</sup>. In 2007 can number 19 sold for \$80,000. This means that, at today’s prices, each gram of Manzoni’s shit is worth roughly 45 times its weight in gold. The actual contents of the cans remain a disputed mystery and the work is as symbolic and conceptual as it is mischievous and playful.

A lot of shit in art occupies the slippery territory between image and object and it is mostly used for its transgressive value. Martin Creed’s film *Work no. 660*, 2007, shows a woman defecating in the centre of a blank set. It is part of a series that present bodily functions – such as vomiting – being enacted in a white space. They imply that the only requirements for the production of a ‘monochrome’ are your own body and a gallery in which to deposit its excretions. Wim Delvoye’s series of *Cloaca* machines (ongoing since 2000) have taken this idea to an extreme. They perfectly reproduce the human digestive system as a laboratory of bottles, tubes and metal components, which are regularly ‘fed’. The droppings that emerge at the distal end of the apparatus are shrink-wrapped and available for purchase in clinical Perspex frames. In the mid-1970s, the Swiss-German artist Dieter Roth produced an entire ‘Scheisse’ genre. It included the ‘shit style’ of paintings, ‘the almost perfect *Scheisse*

poem’, ‘shit’ piano music, and the shittily titled *Intensified Scheisse and Kacke* [crap] *book*, 1975. In 1972 he produced the *Karnickelköttekarnickel (Rabbit-shit-rabbit)*, which was an edition of 250 rabbits formed from a mixture of straw and rabbit dung.<sup>8</sup> Mike Kelley’s paired photographic pieces *Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood and Manipulating Mass Produced Idealized Objects*, 1990, depict a man and a woman stimulating themselves—or wiping their arses—with soft toys. He describes the images as ‘obvious’ and a ‘prototypical depiction of infantilism’ and ‘although there’s a sexual component... it’s the aesthetics of repressed sexuality’<sup>9</sup>. The piece embodies an adult regression to the ‘anal stage’ of infancy. In *Shit Face Painting*, 1974, Paul McCarthy regressed with material and ‘slathered his bearded face with runny, lumpy, shit-brown paint and writhed naked over large sheets of canvas’<sup>10</sup>. More recently, McCarthy’s transgression and regression have taken the form of monumental sculpture. His *Complex Shit*, 2008, is an inflatable pile the size of a house, reflecting the scale and convoluted mess of human and art history.

Some artists photograph their faeces. In their 1983 photo piece *Shitted*, Gilbert and George sit, open-mouthed, beneath a deluge of brightly coloured turds. The inside of their mouths are the same colour as the shit, evoking the nasty taste of a hangover. Before their use of digital imaging and printing technology, Gilbert and George employed a highly complex technique of exposing grids of photographic paper to a succession of different negatives using bespoke cardboard masks. The final images were revealed only at the end of the process when the white paper was developed.



- 1 For a comprehensive discussion of how to think about oil painting using the language of alchemy, see: James Elkins, *What Painting Is*, Routledge, 1999.
- 2 ‘Dirt is matter in the wrong place’, Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, sixth edition 1925, cited in Peter Gay (Ed.), *The Freud Reader*, Vintage, 1995, p296.
- 3 Ibid, p297.
- 4 Ibid, pp265–266.
- 5 J Laplanche And J B Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Karnac Books, 2004, p36.
- 6 Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, MIT Press, 2002.
- 7 Germano Celant (Ed.), *Piero Manzoni*, Charta, 1998, p45.
- 8 <http://www.dieter-roth-foundation.com/biography/1972-to-80-germany-iceland-austria>
- 9 J Welchman, I Graw, A Vidler, *Mike Kelley*, Phiadon Press, 1999, p24.
- 10 Daniel Baird, *Paul McCarthy-ism*, 2001 <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2001/05/art/paul-mccarthy-ism>



The individual sheets were then masked again with gum resist and carefully soaked by hand using coloured dyes. It is a fascinating process, akin to painting, and was vividly captured in Gerald Fox's *South Bank Show*, 1997. At one point, as they are soaking an image of excrement, the artists are discussing how it took them one whole day, back in the 1970s, just to mix the perfect shit brown colour. George confirms: 'George Michael's Arse Brown, we called it'. In Julian Cole's biographical film *With Gilbert and George*, 2007, Gilbert says of the colour: 'we wanted to make it, er, like a smelly...jobby'.

In 2007, the Viennese collective Gelitin wallpapered the Galerie Nicola von Senger in Zürich with *Das Kakabet*—hundreds of separate photographic prints of stools. Each excremental shape resembles a single letterform, which they describe as a 'new font'. The gallery was plastered in a mass of wayward statements like 'Let's go bananas'. The installation produces a queasy sensation in the viewer as perception oscillates between the texts and the images that comprise them.

But what of painters? Jean-Michel Basquiat's graffiti tag 'SAMO©' stood for 'same old shit'. The anal stage of psychosexual development is connected to controlling behaviours and urges. If this is not successfully negotiated, the infant can respond negatively, by excreting 'maliciously'.

This can lead to an 'anal expulsive' personality characterised by messiness, recklessness and defiance. Stuart Cumberland has stated: 'Perversion is the key; the artist gives his or her perversion the dignity of a philosophy'<sup>11</sup>. 'Wielding a wide brush or roller loaded with dripping paint I do not consider myself to be so different to the suburban so-called sexual deviants... my paintings reflect a studio... where the commonly repressed desires to slosh about and make a mess are processed and mediated'<sup>12</sup>. What Cumberland seems to be suggesting is that painting is the ultimate sublimation of the anal expulsive tendency; presenting 'inappropriate gifts' in a socially acceptable format. The perversion of shit-smearing can thus be dignified.

Of course, shit-smearing and painting with excrement have been positively encouraged as an adult practice, with notable results. In 1963 Mary Barnes contacted the psychiatrist R D Laing and eventually became a patient at Kingsley Hall, a psychotherapeutic centre set up by Laing and his colleagues as an alternative environment to the psychiatric hospital. From 1965–70, Barnes underwent 'regression therapy' there and suffered two radical breakdowns. It was during this time that she discovered her gift for painting, first using her own excrement and then oil paints. Finally she began painting on any surface she could find at the centre, working with a compulsive speed and energy. Her work was first shown in 1969 at the Camden Arts Centre in London. 'My paintings are an important part of my life, which lay buried for 42 years', she said<sup>13</sup>.

According to the *Basic Colour Terms* model<sup>14</sup>, the colour 'brown' is psychologically salient and perceptually distinct. To me, there seem to be more kinds of 'brown' than any other colour. This, I think, is because they are basically shades of red, orange, yellow and, at a push, green. I exploited this in my *Good Shit Painting (Diacylmorphine)* of 2003. When you use pure pigments, it is possible to achieve an optically 'bright' brown. I'm sure this is familiar to anyone who's glimpsed into the stool pot after a particularly good night out.

Martin Creed, talking about *Work no. 660*, said: 'You find yourself trying to make your work, to produce things to help to you to live. And nearly every day, whether you like it or not, you make shit... It's the first sculpture... Working is a matter of trying to come to terms with... what comes out of you'<sup>15</sup>. Instead of creating symbolic substitutes for shit,

11 S Cumberland and J Miller, *Stuart Cumberland Four Circle Paintings*, The Approach, 2011.

12 Ann Bukantas (Ed.), *John Moores Painting Prize 2010*, National Museums Liverpool, 2010.

13 <http://mary-barnes.net/>

14 Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*, University of California Press, 1970.

15 <http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/6/martin-creed/view/>

Chris Ofili uses elephant dung for its inherent symbolic value. By sticking it directly onto his pictures and using it as props to display the canvases (much like the staddle stones that used to keep vermin out of Old World grain stores), he can tap into a world of references, amongst which are his own Nigerian heritage and 'the painting as object'. William L. Pope ate the Wall Street Journal during one performance and then, presumably, shat it out. In sculpture, the soiled and scatological is everywhere, from the colossal droppings in Beuys' *Lightning with a Stag in Its Glare*, 1958–85, to Kapoor's mechanically extruded concrete turds piled up onto shipping pallets. When I first heard about Marc Quinn's *Shit Painting*<sup>16</sup> I imagined a fabulous bronze sculpture composed of a painterly cluster of beautifully cast turds. Instead, what Quinn had exhibited was the pushing around of his own excrement on raw canvas, which was then uninspiringly sealed beneath a veil of resin. It really is just shit. Peter Cook had something to say on the matter of shit as paint as his Derek and Clive alter ego. In *Back of the Cab*<sup>17</sup> Clive/Cook rants: 'So, I said: you know what I call you, Mister Picasso?... I said, I call you "Mister Pick-Arsehole"... 'cause as far as I'm concerned you take shit out of other people's arseholes, shove it on the canvas and sell it to other cunts.'

The poet Craig Raine conjured a more refined, but equally striking, image of the 'palette's latrine' with 'turds of fresh pigment'<sup>18</sup>. Pigment itself doesn't come in 'turds', but post-1840s industrially manufactured paint in collapsible metal tubes certainly does. Reflecting this, Raine's image is very accurate. Paint is like highly rarefied shit. In its formal behaviour (being squeezed from the tube and with solvents on the palette) the resemblance is total. It even stinks. As Creed stated, shitting 'is the first sculpture'. We all extrude little brown jobs every day, but only a few of us dare to pick one up and smear it. Is this more sophisticated than just letting it drop, or is painting the reverse: surrendering to neuroses? What is certain is that this cultural action has the potential to instantly turn it into gold...

Manipulate your shit  
and you can give the 'gift' of Painting.

<sup>16</sup> It was included in the exhibition *Marc Quinn*, Tate Liverpool, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, *Derek and Clive Come Again*, Virgin Records, 1977.

<sup>18</sup> Craig Raine, *History of the Home Movie*, Penguin Books 1994, p3.

