

## ***On the exhibition Men Fuck God by Franz Wassermann***

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To start with, a brief description of the setting: what can we see here? The core of the exhibition is the video titled *Men Fuck God*. The video shows an event that took place in the year 2000. After a short take showing the setting – a dead fish lying on a wooden table – we see a close-up of a man cutting off the fish's head with a scalpel and penetrating the fish through the opening thus created until he ejaculates. The close-up lasts about 20 minutes and focusses on the bloody, bony, slimy opening in the fish. The scene is shot from behind the man, his penis is shown sporadically, we never get to see his head. Apart from the video tape, the exhibition also includes the objects that were used: the suit, the table, the body of the fish cast into synthetic resin and the scalpel. The following article aims at offering three possible ways of understanding or contextualising Wassermann's video work.

### **1. *Abject art***

As it has been said elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> one of the main art-historical contexts of Wassermann's *Men Fuck God* is the so-called *abject art*. This movement, which came into being in the sixties (e.g. Andy Warhol's *Piss Paintings*), makes use of the transgressive force of the so-called abject, which is a sphere comprising everything that draws a line between the human and the non-human. Famous French psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva points out in *The Powers of Horror*<sup>2</sup> that the abject refers to all human responses – disgust, vomiting, all kinds of excretion, slime secretion, blood – that have to do with a loss of meaning, triggered off by the disappearance of the line between subject and object. The prime example for the trigger of this response (of the abject) is the corpse which, according to Kristeva, reminds us of our own mortality in a traumatising way, thus bringing up the matter of the loss of subjectivity. The materialised state of the corpse stands for the object status our body is going to assume after death. However, it is not only the corpse that triggers the response of abject horror; the same happens with an open wound, faeces, litter, sewage, and even the skin on warm milk. These abject beings form the constitutive otherness of the subject, they point at the line between what we are and what we are not. In the arts, a transgressive, subversive quality is attributed to the abject. By crossing limits and being ambiguous, the abject always indicates that there is an identity crisis caused by the disintegration of life and death.

Franz Wassermann has been working for a long time on death, loss of subject status and disgusting allusions to human mortality. In *Men Fuck God* Wassermann's preoccupation with the abject culminates in a special way: during a perverted act of procreation, an ejaculation inside a corpse, death (the dead fish) meets life (sperm). The penetration of the bloody opening produces the disgust of the abject by crossing limits into zoophilia (*Men Fuck Animals*), necrophilia (*Men Fuck Corpses*) and blasphemy (*Men Fuck God*). The presentation of these transgressions in a ritualized scene stylizes them, while the mediatedness of the media renders them artificial. This takes me to another possible way of understanding Wassermann's work.

### **2. *The Porn film***

*Men Fuck God* documents a sexual act and has two substantial elements in common with the porn genre, namely the functioning of the media (documentation, not fiction) and the focus on one single subject: sexual intercourse. But there is also a third common feature, namely the *come shot*, a close-up used in porn films to show the external male ejaculation, and constituting a preliminary ending of a pornographic scene. I deliberately say *preliminary*, because the actual ending of a pornographic scene is usually the partner tenderly taking care of the exhausted ejaculation organ, for example by licking the sperm. But let us stay with the *come shot*.

In the porn industry the *come shot* is also called *money shot*, because it is the one shot the actors get paid extra for. American film scientist Linda Williams<sup>3</sup> describes the function of the *come shot* with regard to three aspects: first, the visual depiction of external ejaculation represents a substitute fetish for something that is in fact invisible, the confession of pleasure, which, according to Williams referring to Michel Foucault, is the central theme of pornography. Secondly, the *come shot* can be seen as a prime example of the fetishism of commodities described by Karl Marx. Due to the fact that products of labour are produced as *commodities*, they are worshipped in a capitalist context just as a fetish is admired in the "mist-enveloped regions of the religious world" (Marx). So for Marx, the fetish is a kind of illusion arising from the central role played by private property in the social processes of capitalism. Workers have no contact with the goods produced by their own

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Stegmayer, „Franz Wassermann. Rede zur Ausstellung“, 23.8.2002. [www.mylivingroom.org](http://www.mylivingroom.org).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core. Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*. Basel, Frankfurt a. M.: Stroemfeld/Nexus, 1995 (orig. 1989).

labour and are thus alienated from what they produce (Williams, 146f.). In this respect, the *come shot* in the porn film is a fetish-like substitute object aiming at avoiding the complex reality of social or psychological relations (Williams, 148). In a way, the come shot as a fetish allows for the repression of all circumstances that contribute to its production. And thirdly, according to Williams, the come shot is the most representative moment of phallic power and pleasure, a function that plays a particularly important role in the feminist analysis of the porn film.

*Men Fuck God* repeats and breaks the convention of the come shot. Except for the very first, short shot, the close-up that is usually linked to the come shot is used throughout the video. For as long as twenty minutes we see nothing but the penetrated opening, although only the last few seconds show the external ejaculation, thus “justifying” the close-up. Thereby, the come shot is being deprived of the prominent role it usually plays in the porn film, where the close-up is just one of many possible takes. The way the close-up is employed stresses the fetish character of the come shot. However, in *Men Fuck God* the take never changes, so the come shot is almost overlooked. Though the come shot is shown at the very end of the video, and is of great importance in the context of the abject, the come shot in *Men Fuck God* bears a deconstructive meaning. In the porn film the come shot is aimed at hiding the circumstances that led to its production. On the contrary, Wassermann’s work raises questions on the constitution of the come shot. How does masturbation in a dead animal create pleasure, which status does pleasure assume by being depicted in other contexts, and is there a connection between pleasure and (patriarchic? male?) aggression? – after all, the scalpel is used not only to behead the fish, but also to symbolise the erect penis, thus doubling it.

### 3. Authorship

The third and last way of understanding Wassermann’s *Men Fuck God* is authorship. *Men Fuck God* can be seen as the culminating point in Wassermann’s oeuvre, as it tackles numerous themes in a new way and develops them further. For example, the fish: as early as 1990, Wassermann’s *Manifest of the Fish* was all about the relationship between icons and the fish as a religious symbol. In this work, fish forms made from artificial material de-construct and de-contextualise the expression of religiousness. In *Men Fuck God*, however, fish is on the one hand portrayed as a symbol through the metaphorisation in the title, and on the other, employed as an index, as the trace of delightful and disgusting matter. It is not fish as a symbol that is taking centre stage here, but fish as a body that can be penetrated.

Another leitmotif Wassermann reassumes is the idea of decay and disintegration. The fish corpse is preserved in synthetic resin, its natural disintegration is artificially prevented and artistically exhibited. The fetish characteristic of the art work is the main topic of Wassermann’s ongoing project *Icons*, in which he sinks works of art into acrylic glass containers filled with water so that they rot. In *Men Fuck God* an inversion takes place, in the sense that a fetish characterised by religious and sexual contexts is being exhibited. One could even argue that we are talking about a ritualised form of destructive art (eg. Gustav Metzger or Günter Brus).

And finally, the preoccupation with the abject is also seen in previous works. In many of his works Wassermann refers to the limits of the subject, to death and dying. For example, in *Barbie and Ken are HIV positive* and also in *Acts of Remembrance/Temporary Monument*, Wassermann makes a contribution to the commemoration of euthanasia victims that were killed by the Nazis.

In contrast to these projects, *Men Fuck God* also picks out as a central theme the border experience of death in connection with the border experience of pleasure. On this note, I wish you transgressive moments in the exhibition.

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