

The Dross of Humanity: Justin Matherly at Marginal Utility

The future of the world is not my future.
“Show me a mousehole and I’ll fuck the world.” (Railworker at the soft-coal strip-mine Klettwitz, GDR) – Heiner Müller

You are the excrement which fell on the earth through the Devil’s anus. – Martin Luther

Justin Matherly’s recent exhibition at Marginal Utility Gallery— *Would That You Were The Last Of The Filth Which You Had To Remove / Why Does Your Flesh Shit?*—centers around the sculpture, knowing, even the grass We must tear it up so it will stay green. The fragmentary title of the sculpture alludes to the last lines of the opening choral ode of Heiner Müller’s *Mauser*, whereas the title of the show stages a collision between passages from Brecht’s *The Measure*

of the Painting and Sculpture of the Ancient Greeks (1755): “the only way for us [Moderns] to become great and even, if possible, inimitable, is through the imitation of the ancients.” As is well known, Winckelmann’s concept of imitation (mimesis) does not suggest that we ‘copy’ the ancients literally, for they themselves are inimitable. Yet, at the same time, he establishes the Greeks as an insuperable ideal. For Winckelmann the torso is the perfect embodiment of the ideal unity of sensible and intelligible, nature and artifice. For Matherly, it is not ideal unity that is to be imitated, but its inimitability.

His appropriation of the sculpture does not seek to retrieve its ideality, but rather foregrounds

that we re-imagine the torso as a depiction of Hercules sitting in the filth of Augias’ stable. The sculpture would thus not be an image of repose, but exhaustion and disgust. The task of the *Lehrstück* is to engage actor and spectator in a collective interrogation. In this case, the dialectic between old and the new, classical and modern, is held in suspense. (It is not a question of deciding for the new against old or vice-versa.) Like Müller’s comedy *Hercules 5*, Matherly seeks to interrogate both the need for and the loss of such classical models.

Rather than accepting the loss of such a metric, resorting to an art that strategically maneuvers within the interstices of the market, Matherly attempts to reopen the question of an art



Taken (*Die Maßnahme*) and Müller’s *Hercules 5*. The sculpture itself is based on the Belvedere Torso, whose mold Matherly had a chance to inspect at the museum of the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Art.

The density of references (to the *Lehrstück*, to Winckelmann and German Romanticism, to Sade, Artaud and Eisenstein, if we include the three ink-jet transfer prints) may seduce the spectator into an attempt to fully contextualize the sculpture but in reality serve the purpose of interrupting any tendency to approach the work formally. Already at this level, we see the subversive logic that operates on multiple levels of Matherly’s project.

Most immediately the sculpture reads as a grotesque and even comic parody of a neo-classical gesture: the literal attempt to imitate a classical model—the Belvedere Torso—whose paradigmatic status was secured in the 18th century by the writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann. However, for Winckelmann the imitation of the Greeks could not proceed literally through the appropriation of the Greek style. As he wrote in *Reflections on the Imitation*

precisely its materiality. In his rendering, the torso becomes a monument to the dross of humanity, to a being whose flesh shits, to a being who is contingent. By translating the sculptural form into his own idiomatic use of materials (cement, the use of tree-gators to create a mold, the adoption of medical prostheses to create a pedestal), he foregrounds the structural fragility of the sculptural body and the inaccessibility of the Winckelmannian ideal. Rather than contemplate the torso with “a quiet eye” in order to discern the “mysteries of art,” Matherly’s idiom highlights what Winckelmann referred to as the sculpture’s “mangled and mutilated” quality. This effect is heightened not only by literalizing its crippled character, but also by hollowing the sculpture out. The torso is less a ruin as a carcass.

Yet, the purpose of the subversion of the Greek ideal is not merely to debase art’s pretension to spiritual elevation. The sculpture is to function, as the title suggests, as a *Lehrstück* (quite literally, a learning piece). For although the title of the sculpture alludes to play *Mauser*, the reference to Hercules 5 in the title suggests

that—in Müller’s idiom—could be *altgierig* (greedy for the old). Matherly’s interest in Sade lies perhaps in his literally depiction of characters forced to consume, to devour, everything—even the undevourable: SHIT.

Matherly, like Müller, remains committed, beyond all belief, to an art that cannot exist, which is to say, survive, without its utopian function. Like Avi Alpert’s description of Ludwig Fischer in a previous Machete, this commits Matherly to what Alpert rather perspicaciously, with reference to Roland Barthes, terms the pornographic impulse—an impulse to show everything, to devour everything (to speak with Müller) and which thus shows nothing. But it is precisely in showing nothing that the work enunciates the inexistence of the whole—the inexistence of the very ideal to which Winckelmann calls us. Like the railworker of Klettwitz, Matherly accepts the conditions of his existence for the purpose of finding a mouse-hole.

Alexi Kukuljevic