



REBECCA HOLBORN ON LUKE SANDS
"RAT BAIT STATIONS" MINERVA, SYDNEY

Luke Sands has an oral fixation. *And,*

Artist Piero Manzoni's 'Merda d'artista' (1961), a work today held in collections including the Tate and the Museum of Modern Art NY, was originally sold off as 90 + cans of labelled product that he claimed to be 'Artist's Shit'. Of the layered interpretations of this work today, the one I would like to discuss in relation to the work of Luke Sands, is that of the containment of waste. And this should be differentiated from true bloodletting, or forms of bodily export that do not involve the process and procedures of consumption. By contrast to this work of Manzoni, Sands' work, 'Xmas' (2021), exhibited at Guzzler (Melbourne), consists of two industrial steel posts, stuffed with food which has been left to rot. The posts are leaning sculptures, dominating the space of the gallery from dirt floor to ceiling. In this work, rotting food has been compacted into the pipe, brown with furry white mould developing in the mix. In fact, it looks a lot like what I imagine to be inside those cans of Manzoni's 'Artist's Shit', especially now that it was been over 60 years since it was (supposedly) canned; beyond the age of preservation. It's incredible those cans have not exploded, and perhaps that is what could happen to these pipes, but this gaseous methane, this rotten core, may eventually lose its lunch from these cartesian pipes, open-ended as they are. There will be no explosion, but there could be an offence. Is this Sands' attempt to meet Manzoni on the square?

When I first considered this work, I felt it was an ode to a friend. As alchemy demands of us, there is a textual code within a materialist's communicative state, and here it seems to be 'rotten to the core'. Sands uses the gallery itself to discuss this spatial conflict within the broader schema of the administration, not just with the sculptural placement but also with the smell and instability of its substance.

A work by Lucio Fontana, 'Spatial concept (Concetto spaziale)' (1965), has a gold metallic surface and violent stabbings. The work, held at the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne), is art-informel, and stands out for its performativity and affective impact. Both

Fontana and Sands are concerned with spatology, but in Fontana's work the artist has drawn a circle, which appears to be cartographic because he puts all his stabbings within this designated space and, like a theatre, outside of that space is nothing, omit the remaining administrative page. The stab marks are also made with a force of order determined by instinct and the machinism of his motor functions. By contrast, Sands, who is orally fixated, is a sensory machinist. Sands' directionless cartography is the canvas itself, the frame, and probably the gallery. He is interested in a specific institutionalism, and that differentiates him as dealing with matters that are unlike those of Fontana's life.

The details of Sands' materiality, in their slightness, are vast. This can be examined in his 2019 chewed canvas, produced with wine, coffee and tea as lubricants. Where Fontana slashes his canvas, Sands' teeth cut it. Fontana's differentiations are clean and leave behind clearly determined evidence of a frenzied attack, serial; whereas Sands' canvas holes are gnawed with mouthily scatterings of wine, coffee and tea which stain the canvas, as his method to obliterate this canvas space.

For Fontana, the conflict, the war, was boots on the ground, and the literal movement of people, around his country, around the world, and often into the grave. For Sands, he is talking about a power that is not immediately visible, in the ether or otherwise; let's say – the institutions, internet, artificial intelligence, surveillance, or the sociology of cultural governance. And it is personal, but it is more than diaristic, capturing what is invisible. In the 2019 chewed canvas, Sands also begins the work compositionally, in that he selects the ratio of the canvas and the material but the remaining composition is determined by the instinct of pulling



Luke Sands, *Rat Bait Stations*, 2023. Photographer Jessica Maurer. Courtesy Minerva gallery and the Artist.

bits out of the canvas, now slumped on the floor, and he touches the canvas with his mouth as he chews. Sands shares this compositional and cartographical intent with Fontana, but Fontana appears not to touch his canvas, and can look to determine each compositional action.

Artist Natalia LL is another artist whose work is mouthily. She created the series titled 'Consumer Art' (1972–75) in which she ate different foods, including bananas, sausages and melons. These images of her with food in her mouth, suggestive and feministic, are worth considering in comparison to Sands' work because, like Sands, she utilises affective sensory experiments, but also focuses on her own mouth as a sensorial instrument.

In all these works there is a theatre of subjugation, but the artists' submission is an affective one, designed to satisfy and encourage the actions of the frame. So, the subject is in fact in control, which delights the frame, like a dog needs its bone. This desire for the subjugated object to make or endure a bodily mess is not uncommon. In Richard Kern's filmic artwork 'Submit To Me' (NY, 1986), the artist places the dom behind the lens, with performing subs filmed in a collection of minuets. In this film, Kern documents the power of a bodily liquid horror that I can relate with Sands' work. The

but the accompanying (dis)associative hysteria also works to control the room.

Kern uses more blood in his follow-up film 'Submit To Me Now' (1987), intensified with a staged self-mutilation and bloody death (interestingly, this includes the removal of throat organs). But, in Sands' work, I have not seen this sort of blood loss – so far. In the work of these artists this viscosity has been



Richard Kern, *Submit to Me Now* (1987). Film still. Courtesy of Richard Kern.

related to trauma, boundaries, God, and the medicalisation of the subjugated object. In Otto Muehl's film 'Kardinal' (1967), Muehl is making an artwork on top of a human which is visceral, ritualistic and almost medicalised. He is undertaking a procedure which involves him smearing and slapping visceral materials and other actions. This is how Muehl described his own work:

"I set my sights on the human body and realized things were moving at last, during my first material action, I soiled a female body with mud, paint, rubbish and paste, and tied it up in old rags and ropes dipped in mud." (Otto Muehl, 1963)

The blood that I am referring to in these works is staged. It is not real human blood, it is for the purpose of senses. Sensory mechanisms are triggered in this sort of blood demonstration for what Hermann Nitsch called 'sacrificial hysteria' (1962). As Kern said, it is for 'entertainment', and [sensorial] pleasure. Kern describes the films as funny, and others describe them as romantic comedies. I will extrapolate and call this special-affects.

Illusion or not, Sands' containment demonstrates his boundaries. Whether he has control of this containment, I don't know. But his work implies that he is more concerned with the power of the senses, rather than taking a direct traumatic action of this sort. As Natalia LL said, she is interested in the cognitive phenomenon, and she created a registration system for these cognitive functions, activities and gestures



Natalia LL, *Consumer Art*, 1972. Photograph. Courtesy lokal_30 gallery and Natalia LL Archive.

viscerality of liquid, blood, vomit, excrement [the 'Artist's Shit'] ... provides a paraphilic infantilism to the sub, which is both sensorially disturbing and disturbingly psychotherapeutic. Expressionistic and affective, the liquids provide a sensory satisfaction,

which demonstrate this. One of these works, 'Intimate Registration' (1969), registers in minute detail a couple making love through serial photography. More snouzal than mouthal, Sands' rat poison works inhabit the atmosphere. Those who look at this body of work become truffle hunters. History allegorises the rat for its human failure, its subhuman condition, and its phantasmic urinal miasma. More specifically, Sands described the toxicity and 'chromatic intensity' of this material, in an interview with art historian David Homewood in 2020.

In his 'Blue Paintings' (2020), Sands' rat poison mixed with PVA and acrylic paint is an institutional Tasman blue colour, and the monochromatic sur-



Otto Muehl, *Kardinal*, 1967. Film still. Courtesy Otto Muehl Estate.

face is presented with curved borders, which Sands explains are in the shape of pills; these shapes are known as obrounds or stadium shapes. Sands has chosen this shape because they are designed to be easy to swallow. The substrate is either board or aluminium.

Homewood challenges the aesthetic inquiry a viewer may make between Sands' 'Blue Paintings' and modernism. And I too recognise that these works share a common domesticity and that they have features of being decorative, but only in so far as they are designed to be appealing – their best coercive and attractive selves. At this point, it might be good to consider the Stendhal syndrome, and the overwhelming psychosomatic fainting response to a beautiful and sublime artwork.

Although a modernist inquiry is understandable, the formal emphasis is for me on the minimalist and post-Fordist aesthetic index rather than the modernist: labour, precarity, and exploitation. His labourial production is repetitious and duplicitous, and embodies an operative sublimity that could possibly be medicinal.

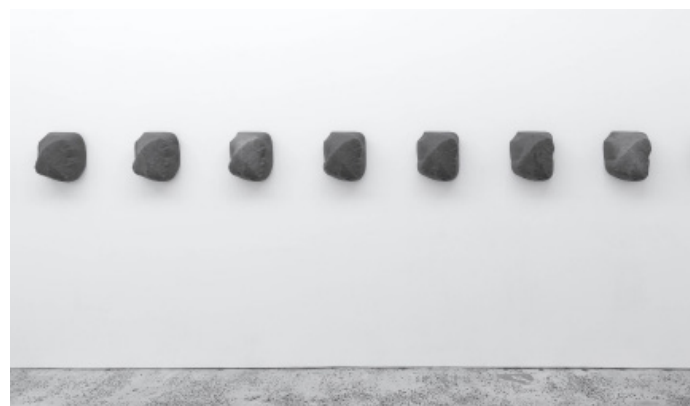
And so, you examine the surface, as if it were a work of Goya. And, if you haven't already read the room sheet, you might see that you yourself are the rat, and that you are in a rat trap.

Sands' indexical experiments with bait stations since 2020 are more direct. Here he inverts the curious Thing, his found object bait stations. Some of the bait stations have remnant dirt, cobwebs, and caught up leaves and bugs from the site of reclamation. It is not his Thing, it is for them, the visitors, and he presents them so. Neatly ordered exhibition content. As an action, he replaces the intention of the crafting in the 'Blue Paintings', because curiosity itself will be enough to draw them in, and he doesn't need to worry so much about illusion, as people will throw their own ideas onto these existing Things.

Exhibited at Minerva, Sydney in September, Sands' new 'Rat Bait Stations' are his nature morte. These unaltered bait stations, found at St Patrick's church in Melbourne, a Cathedral church, are crafted by the manufacturer to look like granite, which, like a Green Man, is camouflaged amid nature, and placed hidden in the surrounds of the church. They look like bluestones, which incidentally are symbolic as healing stones for a psychic consciousness that can connect one person to another.

Inside each bluestone is a complex cartesian architecture for rats. A small door is the access point at the base of the bait station, and from here the rats are led through a series of hallways to the bait, which they will enjoy but which they will die of later. The station can be serviced and maintained by the rat bait administrator.

Still life and dead. So, this is where we see the blood; though you can't get blood out of a stone. Sands' work will nullify them through its sublimity and poison, but also because they are themselves dead. And so, hysterically, we will faint in the gallery, staring at a sublimely dead object. ***



Luke Sands, *Rat Bait Stations*, 2023. Photographer Jessica Maurer. Courtesy Minerva gallery and the Artist.