

David Attwood
A Decadent Defecation

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*A Decadent
Defecation*
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While I've long been sceptical of the idea that art, or at least the art that I make, should be a mode of self-expression, it suddenly occurs to me that perhaps this show is personal to some extent, an unwitting self-reflection on my own bathroom, and what it might say about me. The tiles that clad the wall of the shower are cracked and wobbly, mould grows on the ceiling because the extraction fan doesn't work, the door of the front-loader bangs in to the bath, and using the basin requires contorting between the shower screen and washer. In one's more fragile moments these conditions can create a feeling that one's societal status is low, that one is unsuccessful and without prosperity –that one is a piece of shit.

As a body of work *A Decadent Defecation* culminates a clumped cluster of recent projects that have involved shit, or alluded to shitting. The first of these was titled *Two Harpic Lemon Toilet Rim Blocks* (2017), a series of interventions I made in the public ablutions of various arts institutions across Melbourne. Armed with pairs of lemon scented toilet rim blocks, I visited commercial galleries, artist run spaces, institutions and museums, innocently inquired about the whereabouts of the nearest lavatory and in the sanctuary of the engaged cubicle went to work. I was thinking about these interventions as a form of ambivalent institutional critique, where the blocks might double as both gifts and piss-takes, futile efforts to polish turds. The work soon extended beyond art spaces to include my own toilet too. Everybody shits.

The catalogue of images that I amassed through my iPhone documentation of these interventions revealed a spectrum of materials; at the extremes, the State Gallery's bathrooms were decked out in marble, terrazzo, and polished chrome, while the typical ARI toilet featured lino, laminate and greasy tiles. While this distinction in décor is no surprise given the different budgets involved, it became fascinating to me that such a primal, universal procedure (shitting) should be so susceptible to the material hierarchy that pervades so many other aspects of our everyday. What would the most expensive, beautiful, opulent place to take a shit look like? Could these conditions conjure the most perfect shit? Or is a shit a shit?

My Beloved's Shit (2018) is a photograph I took of a loved one's faeces. I was thinking about shit and its relation to intimacy. Shitting remains one of the most private acts we perform: We shit in the smallest room of our house, into a system built to ensure it disappears out of sight and out of mind as quickly as possible. To take a shit with the door open, when your partner's home, requires a deep familiarity, a closeness. While the shit of a stranger is repulsive, the shit of a loved one is much more tolerable. Wiping the shit from the ass of one's kin quickly becomes second nature to even the newest mother or father. Similarly, the cleaning of an elderly incontinent parent is an act of nurturance and care. We are offended by having to remove the shit of an unknown dog from our front lawn, but are quite content to fondle the warm turd of a beloved pet through a thin plastic bag. Our relationship to shit is contextual.



David Attwood, *Two Harpic Lemon Toilet Rim Blocks*, 2017

And so *My Beloved's Shit* was intended to be an intimate gesture of deep adoration, one that might speak to the love and acceptance of even the most repulsive part of an other. After living with the photograph for some time I eventually presented *My Beloved's Shit* publically as a large billboard. I thought the billboard would be a way to move something private in to the public domain, on a large scale, not as a means of exposure but more as a means of proclamation. At the same time I was thinking about the way that the billboard typically operates as a mechanism for advertising, and was interested in the way that *My Beloved's Shit* might temporarily hijack this space for non-commercial use. Not only did the billboard not advertise anything, the space where the car/beverage/supermodel would normally reside was instead occupied by a huge, particularly repugnant, poo. The implications that resulted from this switcheroo and the potential for shit to speak satirically to 'the commodity' became something to look at further.

Of course the seat is already warm here with regards to shit and the commodity; Duchamp, Manzoni, Delvoye, Cattelan, to name just a few, have made deposits in this area. Not long ago I discovered a legend of sorts involving Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* (1961) that would greatly influence my thinking about his work, and about the potential for shit as a material more generally. 'Legend has it' that Piero's father once told him that his work was shit, that he was a shit artist –to which it would seem Piero responded quite literally. While Manzoni's *Artist Shit* has been overwhelmingly historicised as an ironic, satirical and even obnoxious provocation, the 'legendary' descent of Piero's father to his son makes me wonder whether the work might be interpreted in a different way, as more about a sincere humility and earnest self-deprecation. There's no denying that shit is funny and a widespread motif for disapproval and degradation, but perhaps it can be used for other, more profound ends too.

In the late 80s and 90s John Miller became well known for a series of scatological works, wall mounted sculptural reliefs covered in a thick, rather poo like burnt sienna paste. Writing on his own work in an article for *Art Journal* titled 'The Fig Leaf was Brown' (1993), Miller raises a number of theoretical points on the topic of shit, of which the most significant for me relates shit to control and morality. Miller talks through the way that we use shit colloquially; 'shit-head', 'eat shit', 'get your shit together' and so on, and how here

shit's potency changes depending on whether it is contained within the body or excreted. It is thus "closely associated with notions of control and willpower, or a lack thereof."¹ Miller eloquently concludes that "Within a humanistic or a religious framework, shit tends to exert a negative connotation, because, like pornography, it reminds humankind of its inescapable animal nature. Outside such a framework, the moral question is non-existent."²

Curator Dan Cameron, writing on Wim Delvoye's seminal shit-work *Cloaca* (2000), echoes these ideas around control and morality, suggesting that our deep-seated cultural anxieties towards shit are closely related to other biological uncertainties, "including (but not limited to) guilt concerning sex, embarrassment over nudity, shame about aging, fear of disease, and death. Because none of these things can be avoided, they remind us of the vast aspects of our most intimate lives and by extension the world at large over which we have no control whatsoever."³



David Attwood, *My Beloved's Shit* (Billboard), 2018
Photograph by Christo Crocker.

I was thinking about these cultural anxieties when I made *Human Shit* (2018), a work performed as part of the Kyneton Contemporary Art Triennial. The work involved a mascot that wandered the town of Kyneton each day for the duration of the exhibition. The mascot's costume was based on the character 'Mr Poop' from the 2017 Sony Pictures Animation film *The Emoji Movie*, who in turn is based on the poop emoji – a widely used ideogram of a coiled pile of faeces, complete with eyes and a mouth. The term 'emoji' is Japanese for picture-character, and its resemblance to the English word 'emotion' is purely coincidental, which somehow makes the poop's large eyes and grin even stranger. My guess is that the grinning poo-face makes shit more kitsch, and that kitsch makes shit bearable. Kitsch excludes from its purview the obscenities of being human.

For me the poop emoji emblematises the commodification of shit; like Debord said "There remains nothing, in culture or in nature, that hasn't been transformed and polluted according to the means and interests of modern industry."⁴ I thought of the walking, waving, hi-fiving shit mascot as an exacerbation of these ideas around shit, kitsch and the commodity. A laxative. I was also conscious of the work's relationship to shit-art history, and the ways that it might in some way continue Manzoni's *Merda d'artista*. After all it was of course me inside the turd, beneath the brown, self-promoting, self-effacing, both there and not there, a walking smiling waving *Artist's shit*. Like Manzoni's canned faeces, the extent to which *Human Shit* means to be self-deprecatory is left hermetically sealed.

This correlation between shit and the commodity was again at the centre of a project titled *En-suite* (2018), a group exhibition that I curated for the interior of an automated public bathroom, and presented online. The show included works by Spencer Lai, Claudia Nicholson, JD Reforma, Phebe Schmidt and myself, all of which in some way made use of luxurious high fashion designer wares – products of Missoni, Hermes, Calvin Klein and alike. The public bathroom is in the so-called 'Paris end' of Collins Street in Melbourne's CBD, a boutique shopping strip that features Prada, Gucci, Hermes, Chanel, Louis Vuitton and other equivalents side by side. I saw an irony in the proximity of this rather sordid public bathroom to the swath of nearby luxury-goods outlets, and was thinking that the jarring contrast of the public bathroom to the salubrious designer outlet might in a way denigrate these lofty commodities to the level of other earthlier materials.

Speaking of shitting in luxury, Maurizio Cattelan installed his work *America* (2016), an 18-karat gold toilet, in a public bathroom at the Guggenheim Museum. The toilet was fully functional and available for use by the public during the museum's opening hours. Assistant Curator Susan Thompson wrote that the work's participatory nature provided the viewer an "unprecedented intimacy" with an "extravagant luxury product seemingly intended for the 1 percent."⁵ Cattelan's luxurious gold toilet "juxtaposes the lavish and the base and through its utility ultimately reminds us of the inescapable physical realities of our shared humanity." I wonder, can one talk about shit without talking about humanity?



David Attwood, *Human Shit*, 2018
Photograph by Jacqui Shelton.

Indeed, it is the inescapability of shit that for me makes it so engrossing. The luxury bathroom is ground zero. For despite the apparent aspirations of the luxury bathroom –that is to distance the user from shit and provide a sanctuary from its reality through opulence and grandeur –shit nevertheless pervades. A perversion of the luxury bathroom’s aspirations is at the centre of this latest scat-project, *A Decadent Defecation*. Building on the preceding projects discussed here, the show presents a general conflation of eating with shitting, sterility with the bodily and the opulent with the faecal. In *A Decadent Defecation* ideas around the commodity, materiality, wealth, value, intimacy, kitsch, morality, and luxury –circle, sink and gently fold on each other at the bottom of the bowl.

1 John Miller, ‘The Fig Leaf Was Brown’ in *The Ruin of Exchange: And Other Writings on Art*, JRP|Ringier: Zurich, 2012, p.278.

2 Ibid.

3 Dan Cameron, ‘The Thick of It’ in *Wim Delvoye: New & Improved*, Rectapublishers: New York, 2001, p.27.

4 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Verso: London, 1990, p.10.

5 Susan Thompson, ‘Catalogue [1989 – 2016]’ in *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, Guggenheim Museum Publications: New York, 2016, p.248.

6 Ibid.

David Attwood is an artist working in Melbourne, whose practice includes sculpture, photography, drawing, public intervention and exhibition-making. Recent exhibitions and projects include En-Suite, Island Island, 2018; Human Shit, Kyneton Contemporary Art Triennial, Kyneton, 2018; My Beloved's Shit, Billboard in North Melbourne, 2018; and Two Harpic Lemon Toilet Rim Blocks, un Magazine Issue 11.2, 2017. Attwood holds a practice led doctorate from Curtin University.

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