



Art

The Corrections

Serious injury—or at least a dirt stain—threatens on a tour through three anti-art shows

by Leslie Camhi

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Chelsea was a ghost town last week, the art world's usual suspects having decamped for the Art Basel Miami Beach's combination of commerce and glamour. But the neighborhood's chilly, deserted streets—along with a spate of envelope-pushing shows—offered near-perfect conditions for contemplating the death of art. It is, of course, salutary to remember that art has been dying for at least a century now, if not longer. The impossibility of creation (whether after Auschwitz, as Theodor Adorno wrote, or in the recent glare of media attention, or while making do with art's traditional companions, neglect and poverty) is, in fact, one of art's perennial themes.

Some artists are responding to today's overheated market with works that are a form of "correction" (the euphemism currently popular with real-estate brokers to signal downwardly spiraling aspirations). They scrupulously offer little or nothing for sale, tear down the gallery's walls, or cheerfully rev up the commercial ante to the point of patent (as opposed to latent) absurdity.

My favorite, among current shows of this ilk, is **Tino Sehgal's** *This situation*, at Marian Goodman Gallery (24 West 57th Street, through January 10). Good thing my colleague Alan Gilbert [reviewed it in these pages last week](#)—had that task been mine, instead of attending to life's mundane duties, I might have whiled away whole afternoons in it. Sehgal, a former student of both choreography and political economy who's based in Berlin (where the discussions surrounding art, along with the possibilities for studio space, seem to range more broadly than they do here), creates ephemeral, living sculptures from the interactions between "players" who are following his prior oral instructions, and gallery-goers who enter his social petri dish at random. When I dropped in, six graduate-student types (men and women) were slowly twisting, writhing, crouching, and stretching out on the floor along the gallery's perimeter while discussing an abstruse, 19th-century quotation. Their continuous motion seemed the physical embodiment of our mutual turns of thought, as I tried to follow the wandering paths of their discussion, a hall of mirrors in which everything from art's value to the present work were reflected. Perhaps it's a mark of how desperate one gets, making the rounds of the galleries, for a bit of intellectual companionship and stimulation, but I found myself mesmerized by and inexorably drawn into these "conversations."

Further downtown, **Urs Fischer's** *you*, an installation at Gavin Brown's Enterprise (620 Greenwich Street, through December 22), carries an explicit warning. Is it really worth risking "serious injury or death"—as a caveat sitting in lieu of a press release on the gallery's front desk admonishes us—to view this Swiss-born wunderkind's latest bid for art-world notoriety? Ever prudent, I was nevertheless reassured by a woman exiting the work's three-foot-tall doorway. ("If you tried really hard, you might be able to kill yourself in there," she commented dryly, while cautioning the need for appropriate footwear.)

That's because, ducking inside and stepping down, you realize that the "installation" is in fact an excavation—Fischer, with jackhammers at his disposal, has taken up the gallery's floors. In a small antechamber, the effect is only mildly destabilizing. But that's merely the prelude to the big room's main event: a crater stretching 30 by 38 feet, and eight feet deep, rimmed by a 14-

Johnen Galerie

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inch ledge of concrete and the gallery's walls.

The effect is vertiginously Romantic; you find yourself poised, like a figure in a Caspar David Friedrich painting, looking out over the abyss. Dig for it—that's one way to create a bit more space for art in these times, which are simultaneously expansionist and cramped (with mega-dealers and their ever-burgeoning galleries all competing for the same small handful of stars). "Under the paving stones, the beach!" the May '68 graffiti in Paris promised, and there's a whiff of those utopian vistas here, except that, under Gavin Brown's floor, there's just some rusted pipes, a few bricks, and the red-brown New York earth, somber as a graveyard.

Fischer is a shape-shifting artist who works in a range of often "poor" materials (from burning candle wax to loaves of bread to concrete) to address existential dilemmas surrounding the making of art and its reception. His spectacular, strangely Baroque contribution to the 2006 Whitney Biennial consisted of a series of gaping holes cut into the exhibition's walls. *You*, like the art world itself, is scariest on its sidelines; once you reach its bottom, your footing is at least secure.

With it, Fischer joins a long history of artists' interventions in galleries, many dating back to the '70s. But if Michael Heizer's geometric shapes—incised like sheer granite cliffs into the floor—referenced ancient Aztec monuments, and Walter de Maria's *Earth Room* was a pet to be raked and watered, Fischer's wildly expanding and contracting space draws upon the poetry of the abandoned lot—an endangered species in Manhattan these days, and a once-fertile ground for the imagination.

Just down the block, the Maccarone gallery (*630 Greenwich Street*) has been transformed by artist **Paul McCarthy** into a factory. But Warhol, whose Factory specialized in the production of glamorous anomie, may be turning in his grave: McCarthy's merry workers are churning out scatological Santa Clauses in chocolate for a very particular segment of the Christmas trade. Behind a glass enclosure, you can watch them being made, as workers pour chocolate into molds that are spun and cooled. Then the finished Santas exit via conveyor belt to a back room where they're packed (in boxes filled with shredded issues of *Artforum*) and stored.

McCarthy has said he counted on producing about 1,000 Santas a day (more than he could reasonably expect to sell, even at the modest price of \$100 apiece). But inventory was running a bit low last week, as the factory awaited another shipment of *Artforums* to shred, and as word of the project seeped out. Samples of broken Santas were offered at the front desk, and though the chocolates (whose manufacture is supervised by Peter P. Greweling, a master chocolatier of the Culinary Institute of America) are luxuriously rich, it's debatable whether people buying them as art will actually eat them.

McCarthy, the veteran California performance and video artist who looks a bit like a deranged Santa, has said that in the past he's used "dildos, knives, motor oil, milk, butter, cotton, dolls, wigs, masks, and every type of hotdog condiment known to man" to make his reliably alarming art. Here, the shock value of the work resides partly in what Santa is holding—a form that looks vaguely like a Christmas tree but that has also shown up in a monumental bronze sculpture McCarthy made a few years ago, called *Santa With Butt Plug*. (And what about the chocolate Santa's large bell, hanging beneath his jolly belt?) But the greater subversion by far is the cheery metamorphosis of fine art into commercial enterprise, with this desacralized icon of childhood and materialism at its center. Full disclosure: I bought one as a holiday gift for a friend, an artist obsessed with the archival preservation of his work. But I'm still wondering if it's naughty or nice.

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