

Food Decay and Disgust: Paul McCarthy's "Bossy Burger" as Contemporary Still Life

Dr. Anja Foerschner

In Vanitas still lifes food, as a perishable substance, served as an important symbol for the transience and emptiness of earthly life. Edible icons of American consumer culture are also a vital aspect of Paul McCarthy's performative installation "Bossy Burger" (1991), which offers surprising parallels to the traditional paintings. Used in considerable amounts and an excessive manner in the performance, the food is left to rot in the installation. Important thereby is the emotion of disgust, which is triggered by McCarthy's violation of rules of restraint and cleanliness as well as by the decaying remnants. Setting us apart from our natural constitution and mortality, disgust is similar, or even inherent, to the concept of Vanitas. McCarthy's work thus serves not only as a critique of the absurd abundance of consumer life, but, in terms of the Vanitas concept, unmasking it as a self-referential, illusive void with questionable persistence.