

## Dark Mofo

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## Can blood, guts and gore in art be beautiful? Nitsch shows it can

Stephanie Convery



The controversial Austrian artist's Dark Mofo performance was a confronting but exhilarating examination of life and death

**Warning: this article contains images that some may find disturbing**

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In a cavernous warehouse, a man in white is gutting fish on a table covered by a white sheet. The fish are laid out, entrails displayed, in a pattern on the table and on the floor, which is also covered in white canvas. A crowd of hundreds presses around it, straining to see; they part to make way for a naked man who is carried through them on a wooden structure, blindfolded. He is laid upon the table, entrails placed over his genitals, and blood, milk and wine poured into his mouth. All the while, a distorted organ blares.

The hype and controversy had been building around 78-year-old Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch's [Dark Mofo](#) performance piece, 150.Action, for weeks, with animal rights activists calling for the event to be cancelled due to its use of a bull carcass and the bloody images circulating in the news media. Amid all that, it was difficult to hear much by way of a defence of the artist and his work, outside of Mona's David Walsh himself.

But Nitsch's work is worth defending, not simply because the calls for censorship are hypocritical but because the piece itself is deeper and more considered than its mainstream critics suggest. And also, because it moved me.



📷 The bull carcass is hung from the wooden chariot structure. Photograph: Dark Mofo/Lusy Productions, 2017

For all the blood, it's a remarkably technical performance. A man I think of as the conductor blows a whistle to indicate set changes, to signal to the sound technician to change the tone of the organ, or to indicate to a gaggle of musicians that they should start playing a long, sustained, deafening chord. He and the man who had been gutting the fish, who I think of as the butcher - a tradesman, not a horror movie-style spectre - are responsible for pouring blood, milk and wine into the mouths of the performers as they are led on and off the main canvas by others.

About halfway through the 3.5-hour performance, an enormous bull carcass (already on the market when purchased for the artwork, and killed humanely at an abattoir prior to the event) is wheeled in on a trolley, in front of which a blindfolded, naked performer lies. The bull carcass is attached to a pulley and hauled above the crowd to then be hung from a wooden, chariot-like structure, as the orchestra rises to an even greater crescendo. Once the carcass is hung, the blindfolded performers are placed against it and again the blood is poured.



Finally the bull carcass is removed from the wooden chariot and placed on the ground, opened wide and filled with tomatoes, grapes, entrails and other animal parts. The performers circle it and dive all at once into the filled carcass in a frenzy, grappling at the pile of fruit and animal remains, at each other. They stop when the conductor blows his whistle, pause as if in reflection, wait for their cue, then dive into the mess again.

If this sounds intense, that's because it is meant to be. A sketch of the piece can only tell so much: Nitsch is adamant that the performance itself - being there, experiencing that intensity - is the most important part. The Actionists were trying to create a more "direct" kind of art, art that was as close to life as possible - literally so - the blood and guts and movement and feeling of it. The rituals make more sense in that context when you understand that Nitsch is essentially painting, using bodies and the things that fuel them to represent the life cycle: milk, wine, blood; birth, life, death.

Many years ago, I spent some time working on a cattle station in remote Australia. I saw something of that experience in the action on Saturday - of a place where squeamishness was useless, of the close proximity to life and death, of a clear-eyed understanding of the essential interrelatedness between the two. Nitsch's work is meant to be performed in nature for this reason - though perhaps given the conversations around the industrial food chain that his Dark Mofo action has sparked, its performance in an old warehouse on Saturday afternoon was somewhat apt.

The use of blood and entrails and an animal carcass as materials, and the fact that the performers are writhing around in it, perhaps offends a bourgeois liberal sensibility - but much of that, I believe, is due to our alienation from the reality of where our food comes from. We have built walls for ourselves between the act of consumption and the reality of the food we eat. As [Ben Brooker wrote for Overland](#) in April:

*■ ■ The moral hypocrisy of decrying 150.Action while continuing to eat meat is so obvious as to be hardly worth stating. How many animals, I wonder, will be consumed at the popular Winter Feast, the 'culinary centrepiece of Dark Mofo'? Equally, we might ask why the critics of 150.Action appear to have been untroubled by another MONA work that uses meat, [Jannis Kounellis' Untitled](#).*

I don't agree with Brooker's conclusion that Nitsch's work is ultimately reactionary but I also don't believe that eating meat is essentially reactionary. And while consumption is a crucial part of Nitsch's work - as consumption is to life itself - to reduce the work to that issue is to sell it short. Nitsch says he wants to change people but, [when I spoke to him on Friday](#), he likened this to inviting a friend to a meal: "Before, he was hungry, and now he's got food and he's not hungry anymore. So I changed him." He is not interested in politics, because politics are "too short".

In closing the gap between living bodies and the dead bodies (of animals) that fuel them - crucially, that we consume every day - the artist illuminates our blind spots; breaks through the social codes that prevent us from acknowledging the reality that life as we know it is dependent on death, on sacrifice. There is no moral stance accompanying his presentation of that - it's just an expression of what *is*. It is up to the audience to decide whether they are willing to accept that reality or continue to compartmentalise it. A totalising embrace of life - "intensity", as he calls it - is all Nitsch is asking. Moral judgment may then follow but he is not interested in making that moral judgment on the audience's behalf.





📍 Hermann Nitsch in conversation at Federation Concert Hall in Hobart on Sunday. Photograph: Dark Mofo/Lusy Productions, 2017

For my part, I never thought I could experience a performance like this and find it profound, even beautiful, but I did. I did not think I would leave the performance feeling elated and yet that's what happened. The intensity of the work is such that when it releases - when the final ecstatic frenzy is over - there is a kind of euphoria. It's not relief so much as exhilaration.

There's a clear equivalence in Nitsch's work between human and animal bodies but it's not a reductive equivalence; in the proximity between animal and human, between life and death, in the context of a carefully developed ritual that draws on deep symbolism that speaks to the way humans understand the world and our place in it, there is a deeper respect for both. In that way, Nitsch's work is a kind of coming to terms: removing the blindfold, unblocking the ears; a literal embrace of the very elements of life. In that unflinching directness, there is knowledge to be gained. And in that, there is freedom.

*Guardian Australia was a guest of Dark Mofo*

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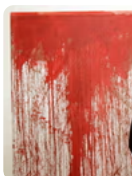
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