



---

Review: Anish Kapoor, Royal Academy, September-December 2009

Author[s]: James Cahill

Source: *MoveableType*, Vol. 5, 'Mess' (2009)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.047

---

*MoveableType* is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

© 2009 James Cahill. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



---

 **UCLPRESS**

## REVIEW

**Anish Kapoor, Royal Academy, 26 September – December 2009; *The Art of Participation* (New York / London: SFMOMA / Thames & Hudson, 2008).**

The signature works of Anish Kapoor might, on the surface, appear the very antithesis of ‘mess’. Monolithic and monumental, they indeed seem to epitomise sculptural form and cohesion. Their torqued reflective surfaces, giant parabolic funnels and dense blocks of pigment express an elemental symbiosis of sculpted material and ‘negative space’ that recalls the sturdy organic objects of British Modernist sculptors, notably Henry Moore’s smoothly contoured figures and Barbara Hepworth’s Constructivist assemblages. At the same time, Kapoor’s art exemplifies the ‘New British Sculpture’ genre of the 1980s, which represented a *retour à l’ordre* after Minimalism and Conceptualism in the two preceding decades, its methodology founded upon meticulous fabrication, traditional materials and metaphorical multivalence.

But Kapoor’s recent solo exhibition at the Royal Academy – nominally a retrospective yet comprised in a large proportion of recent works – foregrounded the messier dimensions, both formal and theoretical, of his practice. The show’s theatrical centrepieces – *Shooting into the Corner* (2008-9) and *Svayambh* (2007) – consisted of blood-red wax that ricocheted or seeped into the Royal Academy’s historic gallery spaces.

*Shooting into the Corner* involved a twenty pound cylinder of wax being loaded by an attendant into a motorised cannon at regular intervals and fired through a doorway into the adjoining gallery. A glut of red sludge accumulated over the course of the exhibition, initially half-concealed behind the elegantly framed doorway but later oozing out of it in a gradual tide. The work’s underlying dialectic of sculptural form and entropic formlessness was thrown into relief by the close juxtaposition of the stacked arsenal of unspent wax – resembling a Minimalist modular sculpture *à la* Carl Andre or Donald Judd – and the gory repository of expended missiles. The installation in the Royal Academy also pointedly evoked a sense of theatrical space, implying the ‘framing’ structure of a proscenium arch, or the ancient Greek *skene* which screened (and somewhat shored up against) acts of violence before their grisly aftermath was wheeled onstage.

*Svayambh* (Sanskrit for ‘self-generated’) extended this concept of messy materiality in antagonistic relation to its architectural context. A towering oblong train of the same glutinous red material glided almost imperceptibly along a track through the galleries’ parallel doorways, apparently moulded by their arched outlines while spreading residue around the marble portals. The heaped deposits and smears on

occasion appeared contrived and embellished. Yet *Svayambh* constituted a primal expression of hollows filled in and spaces inverted that resonated with other interplays of convex and concave forms in the exhibition – for instance in *When I am Pregnant* (1992), a covert white protuberance in the gallery wall, or *Yellow* (1999), a glowing plane of pigment and fibreglass that was revealed, from an elliptical viewpoint, to recede into a drum-like hollow.

The friction in both *Shooting into the Corner* and *Svayambh* between the formal architecture of the Royal Academy and Kapoor's viscous medium dramatised an essential dynamic between external generative forces and the outward force of the raw sculptural material – echoing Herbert Read's notion in his seminal study *Modern Sculpture* (1964) of “universal harmony” whereby “form is determined by physical laws in the process of growth ... the work of art should take form as the artist's creative energy wrestles with the material of his craft”.

Kapoor's own hand was invariably camouflaged, mediated through circuitous processes of fabrication. One of the galleries housed a new series of concrete sculptures – densely arranged and resembling enormous worm casts – that had undergone a complex transmission from preliminary sketch via a computer program to a cement mixer and ‘printing’ device, out of which the cement had spewed in gobbets and strands. The working title for the series, *Between Shit and Architecture*, explicated the same opposition as in Kapoor's other recent works between stylised form – here verging on the Rococo-esque – and base material formlessness.

Kapoor's ultimate title was the altogether more whimsical *Greyman Cries, Shaman Dies, Billowing Smoke, Beauty Evoked*. Yet a sense of the ‘intermediary’ persisted in these works' untreated surfaces and haphazard arrangement on dusty, concrete-flecked pallets. Their resemblance of unfired clay or uncast moulds served to spell out the contingent, inchoate and agglomerative nature of artistic fabrication – even, perhaps, in the case of the most ‘perfected’ works.

The authorial impersonality of Kapoor's art also accounts for its panoramic – and perhaps ultimately dissatisfying – allusiveness. A sense of open-endedness extended to the works' rhapsodic titles, as with *Greyman Cries...*, and to their materials, often described merely as ‘mixed media’. Art historical parallels were neither artfully nor insistently drawn (which is not to say that Kapoor is oblivious to their potential). Yet they remained inescapable: a vista of *Shooting in the Corner* from several hallways away framed and miniaturised the work so as to evoke a canvas of Cy Twombly's, tentatively blotched and dripping. Both in its performance aspect and splattered aftermath, the work abounded with other associations – ancient and modern spectres of sacrifice or carnage; the action-based *Shooting Pictures* of Nikki de Saint Phalle; post-war *art informel* or the gestural abstraction of Jackson Pollock. Of the open-ended allegory of *Svayambh*, Norman Rosenthal in his catalogue entry makes the

telling claim: “In each place that it visits, *Svayambh* evokes different difficult historical resonances.”

*Hive* (2009) brimmed similarly with resonances: its enormous corroded steel drum appeared to suck itself inside out in the style of a Klein bottle, the robust outward faces disappearing through an orifice into a dark internal chamber. The work subtly evinced the crux between the ordered, systematized body and the internal, visceral – and potentially abject – body. An equivalent paradox resided in Kapoor’s celebrated installation in the turbine hall of Tate Modern in 2002, whose graceful tubular form carried a faint subtext of blood vessels and guts, and whose very title, *Marsyas* (referring to the satyr in Greek mythology flayed alive by the god Apollo) conjured a sense of the torn apart body or *corps morcelé* as envisaged by Jacques Lacan. That work’s conflicting implications found a curious parallel in its double-edged interaction with the space of the Tate – while meandering through the turbine hall it seemed, on occasion, to threaten to burst out of its prescribed confines.

Kapoor’s works’ literal encroachment of their surroundings is thus mirrored by an elusive metaphoric extensionality. The dualism was manifested by his early sculptures from the 1970s and 1980s, on display in the first room – cones, orbs, an arching crescent moon and other elemental shapes covered in powdery pigment that extended onto the surrounding floor and walls. Paradoxically, the works’ collective title (*1000 Names*, referring to Hindu deities) and emphasis on ‘pigment’ (as opposed to ‘colour’) implied a specific cultural context and formal literalism at the same time as underscoring their panoptical metaphorical scope. Indeed, one of the sculptures variously evoked a pinecone, a bunch of bananas or the *polumastos* (many-breasted) torso of Artemis of Ephesus. *When I am Pregnant*, installed in the same room, involved a seamless transition between the gallery wall and white bulge, again evidencing a continuity between artwork and site of display (or *parergon*) that paralleled other works’ messy encroachments of their contexts in smears, dustings and smudges.

In his lyrical catalogue essay Homi K. Bhaba persuasively interprets the *Greyman Cries...* sculptures in post-structuralist terms that apply well to most of Kapoor’s other series: “Each object is ... rendered conceptually *incomplete* as its breached boundary reaches out laterally, in a proximate relation, to the next... and the next... and the next... in a chain of signification.” Indeed, even at their most seemingly pristine and hermetic, Kapoor’s works harbour an element of virtual or metaphorical overflow, reaching out to encompass their viewers, their architectural contexts and a panoply of art-historical parallels.

This is most clearly demonstrated by Kapoor’s large stainless steel mirrored sculptures, *Non-objects*, housed in the Royal Academy’s largest gallery to create a hall of warped mirrors. Their sweeping shapes and immaculate surfaces suggested a formal Modernist counterpoint to the messy wax and pigment pieces: one of the

largest curved mirrors strongly invoked the epic *Torqued Ellipse* sculptures of Richard Serra. But the *Non-objects* were also about form being teased apart, perspective distorted and proportionality upended. A disruptive element runs through Kapoor's most formalist flourishes; and as curator Jean de Loisy appositely notes in the catalogue, "Kapoor breaks with the autonomy of traditional sculpture – as did Alexander Rodchenko: he too used reflective surfaces for his hanging constructions, to emphasise the contextual nature of his sculpture."

In the case of Kapoor's mirrored sculptures, the isolated grouping of similar works magnified the effect described by Bhaba of an unrealised whole and of literal and metaphorical openness. But at the same time it ran the risk of repetitiousness and created a sense of the works cancelling each other out. Indeed, the exhibition's essentially thematic arrangement (as opposed to chronological or eclectically diachronic) precluded cross-reference between divergent works.

The vital unifying component of Kapoor's exhibition was the Royal Academy itself, with art object and situation continually merging. The grandiosity of the gallery spaces was integral to the impact of Kapoor's art (as testified by the less impressive installations of many of the same works in 'white cube' gallery spaces in the past, documented in the catalogue). Kapoor's art simultaneously inveigled the immediate architectural context and the viewers themselves: De Loisy describes *Shooting into the Corner* as predicated explicitly on the "tripartite relationship between object, interpretation and the special nature of its location". It is perhaps for this reason that Kapoor's work is so suited to public environments – as Bhaba proposes, "the temporality of everyday, urban spectatorship is a crucial element in the disclosure of meaning".

The very open-endedness of the works – their invitation of manifold interpretations working to preclude any single interpretation – drew attention to the fundamental contrast between what Kapoor calls their 'objectness' and the 'non-object', or between the artwork's physicality and our virtual immersion in it. Our reflection and reformulation in a mirrored surface, engagement with theatrical spectacle, or winding negotiation of densely arranged sculptures, effected a breaching of the notional boundary between artwork and viewer analogous to the works' overspilling of borders in other respects.

The explicit dramatisation of the dynamic between artwork, viewer and context is nothing new. Popularised by minimalist and conceptualist artists (e.g. Dan Graham whose mirrored installations closely prefigure Kapoor's), it has been theorised more recently in postmodern terms by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) and by Claire Bishop's response 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' (2004). The envelopment of the viewing public in the artwork has arguably been a fundamental characteristic of much of the groundbreaking art of the last century. The subject is explored in depth in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, published to coincide

with an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2008-9. In this wide-ranging study edited by Rudolf Frieling, that expands upon the content of SFMOMA's show, four specialist essays preface a catalogue-style survey of some of the most important 'exponents' of this theoretical trend.

Boris Groys's keynote essay proposes that the tendency towards collaborative and participatory practice constitutes a transformation of the "fundamental condition of how modern art functions - namely, the radical separation of artists and their public", and a dismantling of the "comfortable aesthetic distance that allows uninvolved viewers to judge and artwork impartially from a secure, external perspective". The idea that the move towards collaborative and participatory practices restores to art the "binding value" it possessed as a religious entity, implies a conservative or restitutive corollary to this process of dismantlement or erasure that applies well to Kapoor's work. Groys argues that the challenging of this separation and attempts to destabilise or 'complicate' it may be traced back at least as far as Wagner's seminal essay 'The Art-work of the Future' (written in the aftermath of the failed 1848 revolution), in which he advocated a synthesis of all the artistic genres (which he viewed merely as mechanized bodily functions) as a route to the unity of artists and the people, in a community that for Groys "represents nothing other than the staged demise of the individual".

The idea of a surrender of authorial egoism may be related closely to the work of an artist such as Kapoor, whose sculptures are characterised by quasi-Modernist aura of 'impersonality'. But as Groys makes clear, Wagner also insisted on the central role of the author in preordaining his demise (contradicting Roland Barthes's later argument of the 'Death of the Author'), as well as on the power that the author paradoxically acquires over the audience when he implicates them in his work. Groys cites as a contemporary realisation of Wagner's utopian vision the Cabaret Voltaire led by the Zurich Dadaist Hugo Ball, in which simultaneous readings of poems in different languages combined into an indecipherable, primordial noise. Groys furthermore argues almost sophistically that the failure of a figure such as Guy Debord to enact his own demise (Debord abandoned his collective, the Situationist International) amounts *per se* to a failure of authorship. From a review of the equivalent participatory strategies of Dada and Futurism, Groys looks at work of the Fluxus and Situationism movements, identifying their twofold Wagnerian aims of "the collaboration of different artists and the synthesis of all artistic media". He finally turns to consider modes of participation in the virtual realm, a theme picked up on by Lev Manovich in the final essay of the collection.

Rudolf Frieling's essay, which discusses a broad spectrum of New Media and Conceptual artists, rigorously addresses the radical confusion and muddying of boundaries entailed by participatory trends, writing of a paradigm shift marked by Dada, Situationism and Fluxus "from work to process, from performance to performativity, from intent to indeterminacy." Echoing Groys, Frieling acknowledges

the impossibility of dispelling the author altogether as long as “artists wish to operate within the art world”. Therefore amidst the dissolution of traditional dynamics, a number of fundamental principles persist (the existence of a ‘work’, the notion of the central creative progenitor). Frieling also highlights the endurance of the frame (whether institutional or ideological) as an instrument of containment and definition, quoting Hans Haacke's conception of artists as “unwitting partners in the arts syndrome ... they participate jointly in the maintenance and/or development of the ideological make-up of their society. They work within that frame, set the frame, and are being framed”.

The focus of *The Art of Participation* specifically on New Media and performance artists, while thorough, inevitably overlooks the way in which the ‘plastic arts’ and the work of artists such as Anish Kapoor can elevate the presence and actions of the spectator to the same level as the art object. Groys’s furnishes the most historical context, relating the repetitive authorial self-elisions of Dada and Modernism with ancient sacrificial rituals, whether tragic or carnivalesque. But one is left desiring an historically broader study. Frieling's use of the ancient Greek terms *kairos* (propitious, uncontrolled happening) and *tuche* (chance encounter within a constructed situation) to reflect traditional and radical contemporary forms of participatory experience, fails to extend to a consideration of the ancient origins and parallels of contemporary modes of participation that many of the artists discussed re-enact, whether consciously or otherwise.

In both Groys’s and Frieling’s essays, ‘participatory art’ is posed in frustratingly (if necessarily) abstract and free-wheeling terms. Their studies ultimately explicate the means whereby participatory experiments constitute a playing out of processes that are universal in art (as touched on in passing by Frieling when he writes that “participation in art is a given in nearly every instance in which art is publicly exhibited.”) Excepting a few salient but underdeveloped insights, the study does not examine how ‘participation’ in the most basic sense can be seen to be intrinsic to any work of art. It only hints at the way in which art such as Kapoor’s stands, Janus like, at a crossroads between the conceptual experiments of the last fifty years and the sweep of art history. From prehistory onwards, viewers have at once shaped and been enveloped by artworks, actively projecting meanings at the same time as being reminded of their own physical and phenomenological presence.

**JAMES CAHILL**

**James Cahill studied contemporary European art at the Courtauld Institute, where his research focused on British artists' explorations of the obscene since the 1950s. In 2009 he co-authored a monograph on British artist Angus Fairhurst, and is currently preparing a catalogue essay for a collective exhibition at Blyth Gallery, Imperial College London. His research continues to focus on**

**contemporary British art, and he combines freelance writing with a role at one of London's leading contemporary art galleries.**