

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

January 10, 2007

That smell in New York

Filed under: [shit](#) — alecsothblog @ 1:18 am

Last night the upstairs toilet overflowed. We had water and God knows what else dripping through our kitchen ceiling. (I'm blaming [Katrina karma](#)). This morning I woke up at 4:30 to catch a plane to New York. While eating breakfast I read the [NYTimes front page](#):

A Mystery Odor in Manhattan Raises Alarms and Questions

It was the odor associated with natural gas – the telltale, unpleasant sulfur scent that typically signals a gas leak. But this time, it was lingering in many areas of Manhattan, coursing through its buildings and leading to fears that it could ignite.

On the plane I read New York Magazine. The [cover story](#) was on Dash Snow, the downtown bad-boy artist with a De Menil bloodline. In the article he talks about his work:

"I've always been a big fan of the Post, and I remember in 1992, or whenever the fuck it was, Desert Storm, the Gulf War? Remember? I'd always read the Post, and there'd be really rad headlines about it," said Snow. "I was just down for it! I'm down with anyone, even if they're bad people, if they're just, like, anti-American, you know what I mean? This is a series I'm working on," he pointed at some collages on the wall with lots of pictures of Saddam Hussein, whose likeness is also tattooed on Snow's arm. "They're old headlines, and they all have come on them. Yeah, mine."

Snow has been working with his own ejaculate a lot lately; his contribution to the Saatchi show was a piece called Fuck the Police, which featured sprays of his sperm on a collagelike installation of tabloid cutouts, headlines about corrupt cops.

The magazine also features [another artist profile](#). The headline reads, *Is Terence Koh's Sperm Worth \$100,000?* The article describes the "fist-size gold-plated chunks" of his own excrement" and "his use of come as an art material." But mostly the article talks about money:

Koh once posted online how much money he claimed to have earned as an artist in 2004: \$153,782. Even conservative estimates for his 2006 take would break a million dollars. "I love money," says Koh. "Having money is the grease that helps me run my other crazy projects, like my magazine and my Website and the new porn production company I am setting up in my basement."

Is it possible that this mix of art, money and body fluid is the source of the mystery smell in New York? Should I have taken Polaroids of that brown juice dripping through my ceiling to show my dealer?

21 Comments

1. You have my sympathies, Alec. Our entire bathroom stopped working for 2 months in October.

Make pictures, lots of them – send them to your friends, enemies and loved ones.

And collages, they're good too – presents for the plumber when they come late.

Comment by colin – January 10, 2007 @ [5:01 am](#)

2. i wish this insight – that body fluids and excrement – is the new creative would pull me out of my creative funk but sadly i remain uninspired i would clean it, not photograph it

Comment by [asim rafiqui](#) – January 10, 2007 @ [7:39 am](#)

3. Dont worry Asim, I would have cleaned it too, and I dont think my creative fluids would suffer from any hydrostatic imbalance as a result!

Comment by [Jon Anderson](#) – January 10, 2007 @ [8:22 am](#)

4. Sounds as if it is the right time to install a filter in the toilet tank, as seen here <http://www.veliborbozovic.com/cooplamaisonverte6.htm>

Comment by [Velibor Bozovic](#) – January 10, 2007 @ [9:32 am](#)

5. Artists, eh? You have to believe there is something wrong with a society that elevates this kind of adolescent Dirty Protest into a money-spinning artform. Reminds you of rich, neglectful parents over-indulging a sulky 15 year old.

Mind you, this stuff is far from new even in China, where a lot of courage is needed to make *any* kind of protest. For example, in 1994 the artist Zhang Huan "sat naked in a public toilet, covered in fish oil and honey, while flies slowly covered him".

See <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowText.asp?id=23&sClassID=1>

Bravery aside, you can't help but wonder if the authorities got the point ... "Ah, finally I see: it is as if we were smearing the people with fish oil and honey, and making them sit motionless in a public toilet!" Oops, contemplating these "bodily fluid artists" has put me in touch with my inner philistine ...

Comment by [Mike C.](#) – January 10, 2007 @ [9:44 am](#)

6. I'm so glad you wrote this post today...
I was just recently discussing with a couple friends & fellow photographers what actually constitutes art. Is something "art" just because its creator claims to be an artist...or because he says so? I asked this same question on my own blog....if I photograph of a pile of poo, is that art? Sometimes poo is just poo.

There are some really talented artists around—photographers, painters, illustrators, etc.—who all produce amazing work that is thoughtful, beautiful, emotive, provocative, sometimes disturbing or heart-breaking.

So-called "art" for the sake of disgust and shock value— I think it says a lot more about the individual than any other greater statement.

Comment by [chantal stone](#) – January 10, 2007 @ [10:50 am](#)

7. Alec, really soooo [nineteen sixty one](#):

Comment by [Brian Ulrich](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [11:25 am](#)

8. I don't have any children, so I'm not the number one expert on all issues child related, but as far as I know, there's a developmental stage where children say "dirty" words just to get their parents' (or other adults') feathers ruffled. I don't see – maybe someone can enlighten me – how art like this is any different from these kinds of games that children play.

Comment by [Joerg M. Colberg](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [12:54 pm](#)

9. nice blog. i've only had time to look at your portraits, at your site, which i liked very much. my saying has always been if it doesn't have people in it it's not worth photographing. of course that's not really true.

my other saying is it's not art unless it pisses somebody off. that's not really true either. but just about anything can piss 'somebody' off.

Comment by [charley](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [2:51 pm](#)

10. I know an artist that had his girlfriend video tape him jerking off, and at first I casted the work to the side deeming it trite "shock value" work, but then I started thinking more and more about why I was deeming it such. The more questions the video brought up in my mind the more I started to understand the purpose of work like that. I'm not saying all art work that has to deal with cum or shit or sex is going to work the same way, but if its work that is made as an action to provoke thought, then yes I think it could and should be labeled as art. Thoughts?

Comment by [Chad](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [3:01 pm](#)

11. I just jerked off – \$\$\$ please...

Comment by [Timothy](#) — January 10, 2007 @ [5:30 pm](#)

12. I have met Dash Snow in New York at a Jeffrey Deitch art parade. We have mutual friends, but I've never been that psyched on the art work that comes out of that scene. As puzzling, or frustrating as their success may be, there is always the question of longevity. I dont think any of this work is shocking, the only thought that comes to mind is why? and if I cant come up with anything good, then it's time to move on. I think this work gets made because not everybody can get away with making it. But that doesnt make it any less cheap. (no pun)

Comment by [Isaac](#) — January 11, 2007 @ [12:25 am](#)

13. Thanks for the link to the story re hip NY artists.
These people sound like giant babies.

Comment by [Michael W](#) — January 11, 2007 @ [2:36 am](#)

14. Art is the only valid criticism of art. — Ad Reinhardt
see/listen :: <http://www.tell-a-mouse.be/sacrifice/contribs/r-licht.htm>

Comment by [ralph li](#) — January 11, 2007 @ [5:55 am](#)

15. Alec, regards shit week.

My girlfriend just got back from Argentina and described a character called 'The Shitter' hidden at the back of nativity scenes. It's a tradition apparently, kinda fascinated me.

A quick web trawl produced this:

....In Catalunya, there is one figure, however, who does not share the vaguely biblical dress: El Caganer. Also known as: The Shitter. Tucked into a corner of the creche, (in the nativity scenes) the Caganer squats with his pants around his ankles, a freshly-laid pile of excrement beneath his bare butt...

there is a postage stamp image of him at

<http://almendro27.blogspot.com/2005/12/el-caganer.html>

Don't tell Martin Parr, he'll start collecting them.

Nick

Comment by [Nick Cobbing](#) — January 11, 2007 @ [10:19 am](#)

16. Jesus H. Christ. That's all.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — January 11, 2007 @ [10:45 am](#)

17. [...] There was an interesting post on Alec Soth's Blog about the New York Magazine's article on Dash Snow, Ryan McGinley, and Dan Colen. The NY article goes onto describe Snow's process of ejaculating on newspapers clippings of corrupt police called, "Fuck the Police". Soth goes on to describe another artist in the magazine that uses excrement in his work. To which Soth asks, "Should I have taken Polaroids of that brown juice dripping through my ceiling to show my dealer?" [...]

Pingback by [mBrLOG » Blog Archive » Dash Snow](#) — January 11, 2007 @ [5:13 pm](#)

18. I was just writing on a subject very close to this. Short version is that work like this doesn't shock anything anymore. The internet makes much more shocking things on the very same subjects available to anyone with an internet connection. It doesn't push anything and has no value as outrageous or edgy. It is interesting that he's starting an internet porn site. Full essay: <http://www.dovate.com/blog/?p=359>

Comment by [steve](#) — January 12, 2007 @ [8:14 am](#)

19. There's an article on artnet regarding this.

<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/finch/finch1-10-07.asp>

Ouch?!

Comment by [brad](#) — January 12, 2007 @ [11:59 am](#)

20. when i dropped out of normal college to go to art school and learn how to work a camera, they needed a portfolio to show that i was an artist...i hadnt done anything artistic in probably 10 years so i became hopeless and me and my roommates got drunk and threw a bunch of food and other junk on some pieces of paper and then took slides of those and sent that in as what i thought was a joke since i wasnt going to get in...but lo and behold, i did.

Comment by [dan](#) — January 15, 2007 @ [5:06 am](#)

21. also- seen some of dash snows stuff...not my thing, but the dan colen stuff was really great i thought, and ryan mcguinley is very good too.

Comment by dan — January 15, 2007 @ [5:08 am](#)