Hell’s Bells and Buckets of Blood: In Memoriam Hermann Nitsch

by Jillian Becker (June 2022)

Action painting, Hermann Nitsch, 1989

The Austrian performance artist Hermann Nitsch died on April 18, 2022.

He is celebrated in Europe. There are two Nitsch museums: one at Mistelbach, a town in the Wine Quarter of Lower Austria not far from where the artist lived, and one in Naples. And there’s a Nitsch Foundation in Vienna.

I witnessed two performances of his in 1979; one as part of a

festival of performance art in a Viennese gallery, which the *Sunday Times Magazine* commissioned me to write about; and one, on his personal invitation, in the grounds of his castle near the border of Austria with (then communist) Hungary.

My account of the festival, with the pictures taken by the photographer who accompanied me, filled the greater part of an issue of the magazine and was the cover story of the week, but it was spiked moments before publication by the editor-in-chief of the newspaper on the grounds that Nitsch's "actions" were far too bloody and lubricious to put on British Sunday morning breakfast tables.

Later I published a description of the actions at the castle as written by one of the characters in a dystopian novel. The book is titled *L: a Novel History*, "L" being Louis Zander, who becomes a Leftist dictator of England. The fictitious author of the imagined history quotes this account of an all-day Hermann Nitsch performance by L's sister Sophie:

> On Good Friday we drove out of Vienna to a castle, an old story-book castle. Its owner was a performance artist, Hermann Nitsch. He was a short round man with a rolling walk, dressed entirely in black, his black hair falling from a patch of baldness on the crown of his head, natural, I thought, but as round as a monk's tonsure. There were some two hundred people wandering about. Round the courtyard were structures made of scaffolding, with iron hooks, and the skinned carcasses of oxen and pigs and sheep were hung from them upside down, against white sheets stretched over wooden boards, to which the four splayed-out legs of each beast were fastened. White sheets were spread underneath them too. Near each carcass lay a heap of viscera.
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> We were all given large goblets of red wine. Either it

was exceptionally potent or something had been put into it. I soon felt strange, a bit dizzy but quite exhilarated and everything seemed very vivid. Music began to pour out through loudspeakers fixed in the castle walls and under the eaves of the old stables. It was organ music. We were told it had been recorded in an Italian cathedral. It must have been a huge sound to start with, but amplified stereophonically, or quadraphonically, it was tumultuous. And as if there wasn't enough if it, young men with instruments came and added to it. They paraded in single file up the wide stone stairs from the cellar, all dressed in church vestments, some like priests and some with monks' cassocks and hoods, banging triangles, beating drums, and whirling rattles. Behind them came six men in white cassocks carrying a cross. A boy of about eighteen was tied on to it with ropes, naked but for a bandage over the eyes. He was set down before one of the ox carcasses. The black priest put a yellow rubber glove on his right hand, then knelt and rearranged the body of the Opfer [victim, sacrifice—the German language does not distinguish between the two] propping up his head until it was close under the dangling muzzle of the beast, parting and spreading the legs so that the genitals were fully exposed, the arms left in the posture of crucifixion. Then the "black priest" took a huge knife and slit the beast's sides. An acolyte handed him a vial of bright blood, and he poured it gently through the carcass. The blood came trickling out of the mouth of the animal and over the head of the Opfer, down his body, and flowed round his groin, staining the white sheet under him and the wood of the cross. The next vial was darker, the colour of wine and blood mixed together. Next the artist-priest took a jug, a bright green plastic jug, full of blood, or blood and wine, and poured it down through the meat. It drenched the youth's head, which became one big sticky mess. The next jug had bits of carrion in it, and they stuck on to the head, and to the boy's chest and thighs and genitalia. Meanwhile the music became even

louder. The “monks” whirled their rattles faster, the drumbeats got heavier and faster, and many of the spectators started blowing whistles. The blood came raining down, and one of the acolytes gathered up the viscera and struggled to stuff them down the carcass, but strings of guts and dark lobes of liver fell out of the bundle into his face. He wrestled with the mess as if it were a live thing, pushing and punching with both hands, becoming as soaked with blood as the carcass itself. And then the blood was passed in buckets from hand to hand along the line of the priests and monks to the black priest, the rain of blood became a deluge, and that plangent music seemed to be pumped out in gushes like a hemorrhage from an open artery. Bits of intestine were flying about, and celebrant, acolytes, and spectators slithered in the mush of blood and fragments of raw flesh. The music stopped suddenly, and the drenched naked body was carried out at last, dripping gore, shreds of liver and lights stuck to his skin and clotting his hair. Even those of us who had stood back were spattered with blood. We moved to the next “altar”. Another Opfer was carried in, this time a naked girl on a white stretcher. She was laid under the muzzle of a pig, and the rite was repeated.

It went on for hours. Sometimes there were two young men, or two girls, or a boy and a girl together, at first lying side by side but then, when both were drenched with blood, one was lifted—with difficulty, because the limbs were too slippery to grip—on top of the other, belly to belly, though they quickly slid apart again.

In the evening the artist took us over his castle. He seemed invigorated rather than tired by the long hard day he had had. The carcasses were still dripping out in the courtyard. The boys and girls who had been given the blood-showers were washed and dressed and smiling, and sipping wine. One of the boys told me he felt “purified”, but

another said that he found the experience “horrifying, shameful, disgusting” and that was why he did it. I told him I just didn’t understand. So he said, “Don’t you see—I force myself to overcome my revulsion. It’s a way to transcend myself.”

Some of the great cold rooms of the castle were full of crosses, and monstrances, censers, and priests’ vestments stained with blood. And some were quite empty but for a single sheet-covered slab in the middle, like a pagan sacrificial altar, which was probably what it was intended to be. And there was a chapel with a Christian altar, its cross upside down, and a used Kotex [a padded bandage to absorb menstrual blood] nailed to a board with a rosary draped round it. The room was flanked by a pair of Corinthian columns painted white and gold. There were wooden pews, carved and polished. And on the ceiling was an old fresco of chubby rosy cherubs floating among diaphanous veils and clouds, holding Christian symbols.

I remarked to Nitsch how very “Roman Catholic rebellious” was his art— “orthodox blasphemies” I think I said—and he denied it, to my surprise. He said his “theatre of orgy and mystery” was a festival of human life, of joy in being, of exultation in “the real feelings”. He said his work owed most to the Dionysian rites. He told me that people often asked him why there was so much cruelty in his work, and that he always replied “because there is both creation and destruction in life, both pain and joy, and all flows together in the River of Life”. He insisted that his work celebrated the opposite of cruelty too, that people came there from all over the world to eat and drink and wander in his garden and orchard and vineyards. But he did say that his performances were designed to shock. He said they were intended to be “cathartic, like the old Greek tragedies”.

Although he looked and acted like a story-book figure of

> evil, there was nothing frightening or nasty about the man himself. He was a pleasant, generous person. One visitor, an English historian, asked him whether he did not think it possible that to play with dead creatures, spilled guts, and blood-drenched naked blindfolded people fed dangerous appetites for extreme sensuous experience – such as the sight of people really suffering. But the artist said that doing it openly and publicly as he did was healthy. It was only if a person stored up secret dreams of doing such things that it became dangerous.
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> I said to the historian that I'd noticed he'd used the word "play", and that I thought it was the right word. It was all quite amazingly puerile, really. The acting-out of the erotic nightmares of childhood. Fears of death, fear of ritual sacrifice. He said he agreed with me.
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> To me, once the effects of the wine had worn off, the whole show was just … *hell's bells and buckets of blood*.

When my report on the Austrian performance art festival was cancelled forty-three years ago because the editor judged the sight of Nitsch's actions to be potentially too offensive to British sensibilities and morals, I was disappointed, because although I despised the "art" and was revolted by Nitsch's "actions", I had worked long and hard on the story. But when I came to look at those actions again through Sophie Zander's eyes, and to judge them as does the "English historian" she meets at the castle, I knew that the editors had made the right decision. The "art" of Hermann Nitsch—mimicking cruelty, bathing in blood, nuzzling the spilled entrails of beasts—should not be displayed. It is depraved and corrupting.

In the novel, L recognizes this and his approval is proof of it. Cynically evil, he believes that depravity is a desirable state of mind. His historian "quotes" this note by L, some

lines of it plainly referring to the Hermann Nitsch performance described by his sister:

> There were days when I saw art overthrow art, orgies of destructive fantasy to turn the tragic imagination inside out, insolent near-deaths, lessons in the theology of exultant negation. But there were other days when I watched for hours and the vocabulary of body and blood and shame and pain remained as banal as if existence were not a saga of despair but only its dictionary … Then one day as we were driving near Hungary on the shores of the Neusiedler See, Loewinger [L's valet and chauffeur] asked me if I should like to see the border. At once I knew that I did want to, very much. We got out of the car and stood near the barbed wire. Beyond it I saw the watchtowers of Communism with its machine guns. A world of another order, different preoccupations. On our side, the rubble of old beliefs, altars and crosses, and the aching loss of need. A life of gestures. Make-believe of oppression, costume of sacrifice, cosmetic hunger, aesthetic nihilism. The young cheated of want, relieved from struggle, denied their warfare. Over there, on the other side of the barrier, the sky was military. There was no art. It did not require it. No masturbating with butcher's offal to compensate for being the heir to kind and generous, wise and brave, rich and noble fathers. I thought, on this side there is nothing to oppose to that. Its boasts are dressed in steel. It speaks the world as it would have it, and every order is as sure as a bullet. It is socialism at noon. One day, when the long lunch is over, the pig's trotters, and the *Kaisersemmeln* [bread rolls shaped like crowns] and the *Strudel* [apple cake], and the *Schlag* [whipped cream], and the *Sachertorte* [chocolate cake], have been devoured, and the rude and baffled rebels find that mere obscenities do not knock down the walls of this clean and ordered world,

> this mediocracy, it will be time for the tank and the lash. There is the afternoon. It is the land of homicide.

It seems there are millions now in the West who perversely feel L's longing for a world where "every order is as sure as a bullet," and covet the dry and withered grass on the other side of the fence.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary, The New Criterion, The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter, The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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