

The Sacrifice of Hunger

by Shana Lindsay

In 2006, the Berlin-based collective Artists Anonymous posted a tripartite work, *Hunger*, on the Saatchi Gallery website, consisting of a colorful diptych and an even more colorful text. The diptych has panels that differ only in color and medium, one being an oil version and the other a photograph, each featuring a trendy, young, female archer aiming her arrow at the viewer, surrounded by small fantastical figures, both child and adult, in a thicket of fecund vegetation with edible and inedible plants interwoven with less recognizable plant-like patterns.



The text is a fake press release advertising two fictional charity events, one for a ghastly erotic scatological banquet to “benefit” famine-stricken children, the other a “celebrity fund raising event against child slavery” [sic] in the form of a snuff-film-inspired sacrificial bloodfest. The document is infused with publicity-speak, religious associations, and the discourse of pornography. In both text and image, Artists Anonymous suggest that Western consumer culture superficially attempts to enhance its reputation by promoting compassion for the exploited and deprived through the specularization of human suffering and the spectacularization of inept “sacrifices” on behalf of the needy. The *Hunger* group, in other words, is not about starvation or its cure, but rather puts forth a critique of the manner in which we sanctify desire, consumption, and spectacular violence in the media and contemporary art.

Far from being culturally outmoded, sacrifice is made in both rhetorical and performative (ritually authentic) ways on a daily basis. *Hunger* is informed by a theory of sacrifice involving a process of loss. As literary critic Susan Mizruchi has written, “sacrifice is the quintessential ritual form, and its mark or signature is its articulation of nostalgia. The idea of return is implicit in sacrifice, in its attempt to restore a lost relationship between humans and gods, or to atone for some spiritual offence” (Susan Mizruchi, “The Place of Ritual in Our Time,” *American Literary History*, vol. 12, No. 3 [Fall 2000], 466). The diptych and more obviously the text both hinge on issues of nostalgia and sacrifice.

Food is a universally sacrificed material, perhaps in large part because it is widely thought to both express and bridge the divide between gods and humans. Food is understood as a primary conduit, not just between human and divine, but also between generations (ancestor and descendent, child and adult), and between peoples because it is the most widely traded commodity. All of the *Hunger* components suggest such bridging. Thus, operating within the logic of sacrifice, the *Hunger* group commingles themes of nostalgia, nourishment, worship, and atonement with entertainment and self-aggrandizing artistic practice.

The phony press release advertises two events to take place in Africa in the near future, the first of which will be “Eat Our Left-Overs 2006,” a banquet benefiting the continent’s hungry youth to be co-hosted by Artists Anonymous and the world’s top modeling agencies. Emphasis is placed throughout on the delectable beauty of the models to be featured in the spectacle, soliciting our desire. Our future good deed (charitable donation) is sought by promising scopophilic gratification on two levels: we can freely admire the beautiful bodies of the models and take in the spectacle of their sacrifice. First, we are informed that the “exquisite” models will make sacrifices: for one month, they will starve themselves—presumably more than they normally do—in “solidarity” with the famished children, all the while becoming more aesthetically pleasing. Thus, there are two models of starvation: involuntary (the children) and crafted (the models). After a month of painful self-denial, the models will travel to Africa and gorge themselves on a lavish feast. Then, according to the *Hunger* press release: “Using their purified bodies as vessels of bounteous plenty, the gift of nutrition will be passed directly from their beautiful forms into the hungry little mouths desperate for every drop of nourishment they receive. Each merciful goddess filled with a different flavour of specially prepared luxury pudding will feed these famished little souls with a feast beyond their wildest dreams.” The sexy, generous models are sent as “ambassadors of good will and charity,” but the charity function might as well be called “Eat My Shit” (an expression in both English and German) because, shockingly, they will provide the children with their feast anally, and the event mutates into an eroticized scatological banquet, continuing: “Their wonderful naked forms ritually oiled and bent forward in pious prayer, displaying their celestial organs of reproduction and birth to the heavens. Behold, directly above each holy orifice, a black hole transformed into a wondrous star of nourishment and plenty. Hundreds of hungry mouths will be satisfied from this tiny opening, each starving little boy and girl licking and lapping up God’s plenteous and delicious gift.” Artists Anonymous force us to read this disgusting feast as sacramental, as communion with God: “Echoing Jesus’ miraculous conversion of water into wine, each woman’s ‘left-overs’ will be replaced with ‘heavenly ambrosia,’” which will have been previously cooked by London’s leading pastry chefs. Food is therefore ecstatically reinscribed by the event’s orchestrators as a pan-connector, as “heavenly nectar,” a Dionysian substance powerful enough to heal the wounds of our separation from the imagined One we used to be before we were torn apart by colonialism, capitalism, and secularization. The food represents the vector that returns us, heals us, makes us whole again. It is logical therefore that Artists Anonymous locate these events (and our concerns and fantasies) in Africa as well as women’s bodies, both with their tropes of origin.

In ritual, what is offered or sacrificed is also a surrogate, a substitute for the real thing; hence it constitutes sustenance and also articulates lack. In their study of ancient Indian and modern Western writings on sacrifice, Brian K. Smith and Wendy Doniger have noted: “Substitution, the use of a ‘stand-in’ in place of an ‘original’ which then ‘represents’ it is at the very heart of sacrifice” (Brian K. Smith and Wendy Doniger, “Sacrifice and Substitution: Ritual Mystification and Mythical Demystification,” *Numen*, vol. 36, Fasc. 2 [Dec. 1989], 189). Food (its overabundance and its lack) is both the cause of suffering and a cure in the *Hunger* text. It does not help much in the form of practical nourishment, but mainly as representation of, and atonement for, excessive desire. Food, therefore, has both positive and negative values, emblematic of both the rift and the healing.

The relationship between contemporary Western consumption and sacrifice exists on many levels. It is seen as a means to assuage guilt and to save us from our lust for luxury, sex, and objectification, etc. The fake press release suggests the self-serving nature of star-studded charity events that are reported in the media, often with images of young *couture*-wearing beauties interspersed with heart-breaking images of “the suffering,” for which a thousand-dollar meal tag (read: material sacrifice) represents for the purchasers and their admirers momentary self-denial to atone for the self-indulgence that oftentimes results in the victimization of others.

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At the end of the *Hunger* tract, we are asked to give up a little bit more, to sacrifice just a bit of our money in order to help the enslaved children of Mali who presumably toil for our own treats on chocolate plantations. But that appeal rapidly degenerates into media hype for a snuff film for which many of the “benefited” children will themselves be victims of sacrifice. Here is the final paragraph: “Working together with a world famous Mexican based Spanish conceptual artist, we are hoping to produce the world’s largest and most opulent child snuff movie. Thousands of young lives will be sacrificed to highlight the plight of these poor forgotten children. No expense can be spared to show in detail the tortures and agonies these poor children must suffer daily. All donations payable totally tax-free to our account in Switzerland, the home of freedom and compassion” [sic]. Artists Anonymous’s reference to a “world famous Mexico based Spanish conceptual artist” is a veiled allusion to Santiago Sierra, who has made a controversial career by using underprivileged people in some of his works such as the photo-documented performance *250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Paid People* (1999), which featured unemployed men from Havana, hired at \$30 apiece to have a line tattooed across their backs. Sierra claims to raise consciousness by his art, which often involves marking outcasts or submitting people to tests of endurance and humiliation in accordance with their social position, such as in his *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blonde*, for which he bleached the dark hair of illegal non-European street vendors in Venice, or a piece that involved spraying polyurethane on the draped genitals of prostitutes, who were asked to assume various positions of sexual intercourse on the floor of an unused church. While Sierra’s subjects are usually compensated, they are quite modestly paid; conversely, his uses of them have made him a financially successful international art-world celebrity. The *Hunger* text is in part a parodic *exposé* of the hypocrisy of Sierra’s public art performances, which reenact coercive power relations with the alibi that he is involved in an act of revelation. Artists Anonymous suspect the motives of the viewers and supporters of such projects as well as those of the artist, implying that the sacrifices made by the people in Sierra’s works (including the artist’s own) do little to change the plight of those laborers, prostitutes, and drug addicts whom they represent. Instead, the performances merely augment the cult of personality surrounding the artist. The *Hunger* text reconfigures the specularization of suffering as sacrifice and therefore suggests the redemptive motives subtending Sierra’s popularity. Yet, by finally killing the children, the press release reduces to absurdity any notion that such spectacular sacrifices could actually ultimately benefit the victims. The text thus makes the artwork part of a project in which we perpetuate and consume the suffering of others, all in the name of redeeming our crimes against them, while we never truly deprive ourselves of anything substantial in order to remedy the situation.

What, then, is the relationship between the *Hunger* diptych and the text? Why does the extreme, triple-X-rated publicity text and the promise of a further sacrificial spectacle involving African children accompany the less overtly offensive diptych? The answers lie in the media, subject, and iconography of the diptych. *Hunger* consists of two virtually identical images bearing slightly different colors. The large panels are executed like many of the artists’ two-dimensional works, first painted in oils based on a negative image. Then, the painting is photographed and printed as a negative (of that already negative image). This reverses the tones and the colors (black to white, yellow to blue, green to magenta, etc.). The technique results in what Artists Anonymous call an “afterimage.” In the *Hunger* painting, the face of the woman has a nearly bleached *grisaille* appearance, and the vegetation and food surrounding her are mainly in an unearthly purple; in the photographic reproduction, the face becomes nearly blackened, and the plants and food are verdant.

The central figure is based on a photograph of one of the members of Artists Anonymous. She is youthful and slim and draws back an arrow in a bow aimed at the spectator. She wears tall, flat-heeled boots, a miniskirt with a geometric print, a fringed belt, and sports hair that appears to be either dreadlocked or braided and pulled away from her face. The figure’s face is hard to make out, and though she appears to be of African descent, the race remains somewhat unclear. She

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stands before a backdrop that looks like a jungle, the image evoking a fashion shot, in which the overall “look” could be described as contemporary-urban-tribal. Iconographically, the raised bow and arrow and the verdant setting conjure the ancient Greek goddess Artemis, patron of the grove and the hunt. Small-scale figures accompany her; some have wings (as did the oldest Greek representations of Artemis), while other male figures, like satyrs, have horns. In ancient times, Artemis was a fertility goddess associated with hunting as well as childbirth; she was also feared for bringing the plague. This “Artemis,” who aims her deadly arrows at us is conceived here as she was in ancient times, as both giver and taker of life.

Some of the imagery is reassuringly beautiful, while other passages are nightmarish when they beckon us to read them and then repel us as we do. Below her, to the side, a male lowers a female into liquid, “a river of ketchup,” by the artists’ own description; this gives the appearance of a baptism. On the opposite side, the man seems to lower his mouth to devour the girl who sits before him. The scene delivers a disturbing frisson when we discover the head and outreaching hands of a girl at the bottom, between the feet of the huntress, who appears to be receiving food into her open mouth from the anus of a horned male figure, reclining and foreshortened, genitals prominently displayed, lying above her.

As in the text, ancient and modern are brought together in these images through references suggesting a contemporary state of perceived disunion and possible repair. A sense of displacement from an original home and a longing to return are expressed in both works through dualities: hunger/nourishment, adult/child, human/goddess, modern/ancient, positive/negative, oil/photograph. These dyads, the works suggest, might be harmonized through ritual sacrifice. As the ancients once declared in their Artemis cult worship, Artists Anonymous sardonically repeat: lest we go hungry, we must sacrifice. But we delude ourselves (as had the ancients), as they seem also to say that in making phony sacrifices, we merely strengthen the great god of our age, spectacular capitalism, and extend its voracious appetite for more victims.