

Franz Ehmann: The End

By: Ted Colless

Franz Ehmann's work is staged at the end of a story. A series of menus denoting the last meals of prisoners on death row painted on black paper, like instructions written on a blackboard. Can there be a more evocative sense of an ending? These panels are memorials of a sort, although anonymous and even comic. We are what we eat, up to the point of death. Yet these meals tell us nothing of the ones who, in solitude, enjoyed them. Nor anything of their deaths, nor the crimes they committed that led to their execution.

These menus are estranged signs of an individual's death, and the contents of the last decision that this individual could make. A most personal decision too, reflecting an almost incomprehensible judgement of taste: after all, any interpretation of the significance—or estimate of the value—of such a choice will sound banal and trivial. One prefers junk food, perhaps as comfort food. Another chooses a healthy snack, perhaps out of habit or even to try something new. A final gesture of liberty at the scene of a penalty that is absolute? There is no point to such a choice on the brink of execution. There is no point to any choice. In a grim way, these menus are summative statements on a life: last words and a testament which amount to nothing in particular. As such, their absurdity eclipses their poignancy.

It's because of their 'unexpressionism' that we can't actually describe these written panels as paintings; not like the brooding, anxiously religious pronouncements of, say, Colin McCahon that they superficially resemble or even parody. Instead, these texts are what is left of a practice of painting itself on death row, when painting is stripped of its conventions of figuration, of symbolic form, of expressive facture. With an actual corresponding meal prepared and placed below it, each of these menus is a title or didactic panel accounting for an object. Specific as that object is, it repeats its caption rather like the way the manufactured chair in Joseph Kosuth's famous *One and three chairs* is presented as an instance of the dictionary definition of a chair, photographically enlarged and placed on the wall beside the chair.

Except, of course, that Ehmann's menus are handwritten—the way they might appear on a specials black-board in a restaurant as a sign of the chef's particular offerings for the day. And the meal is hand-made, again as the literal offering by a chef. Although, in this case, the chef is enacting the last wishes of a person now dead: someone who cannot eat what is offered, and thus the meal is wasted. It will sit there for the duration of the exhibition and rot, like food left at a temple for a god to eat or flowers left at a grave. That the meal is left uneaten makes it—like the flowers wilting in a lonely cemetery—an effort at proof that the offering is a sacrifice, not an analytic concept. It will be consumed by time—in the absence of the god. In this case, it is the time of the exhibition. Art, as Ehmann sees it, explicates its essence in this end time. Offered to an audience—to the dead (to dead history, that's to say)—who cannot consume it, art is an absurd gesture.

Ehmann's practice of art is evidently steeped in an atmosphere of mourning, even if that's lightened with the kind of baffled black humour by which Samuel Beckett's characters keep themselves company or occupy their downtime in the narrative dead-ends they inhabit. His admiration for Beckett's theatrical style gives an edge of the sad clown to Ehmann's performances: as he peeps guardedly out from under a trapdoor in a floor covered with broken egg shells, or sits ruefully in only his pants at a bare three legged table like a zombie patient in a run-down clinic waiting for attention, or as he mimics a life-size photo of himself holding antlers to his head and leans forward as if trying to strike up a dumb dialogue with his mirror image.

'Like the staging of Waiting for Godot', he explains, 'it boils down to almost nothing: just a tree, a bit of rubble for the landscape, a road. Franz Ehmann's work is staged at the end of a story. A series of menus denoting the last meals of prisoners on death row painted on black paper, like instructions written on a blackboard. Can there be a more evocative sense of an ending? These panels are memorials of a sort, although anonymous and even comic. We are what we eat, up to the point of death. Yet these meals tell us nothing of the ones who, in solitude, enjoyed them. Nor anything of their deaths, nor the crimes they committed that led to their execution. These menus are estranged signs of an individual's death, and the contents of the last decision that this individual could make. A most personal decision too, reflecting an almost incomprehensible judgement of taste: after all, any interpretation of the significance—or estimate of the value—of such a choice will sound banal and trivial. One prefers junk food, perhaps as comfort food. Another chooses a healthy snack, perhaps out of habit or even to try something new. A final gesture of liberty at the scene of a penalty that is absolute? There is no point to such a choice on the brink of execution. There is no point to any choice. In a grim way, these menus are summative statements on a life: last words and a testament which amount to nothing in particular. As such, their absurdity eclipses their poignancy.'

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'Like the staging of Waiting for Godot', he explains, 'it boils down to almost nothing: just a tree, a bit of rubble for the landscape, a road. The waiting room of life.' This is also the scenery of death row: a cot, a table, a light bulb. Pared down to the most economical functions of imprisonment, and the barest signs of life. A terminus



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rather than a transit lounge. To live on death row is, in effect, to have already died. And so the occasion of one's last supper is also a paradoxical celebration.

As a last meal, ordinary fare becomes extraordinary. The special abundance of this final meal—which, no matter how Spartan, will be treated as a feast—is an omen that we finally realise has been encoded all along in the narrative of our life, lurking there like a worm. Our last meal is the ironic fulfilment of our desire to live because it annihilates the routine meaning of food as nourishment: it is the end of nourishment. Choosing one's last meal is the choice that a mortal finally makes to die. In this sense it is the morbid archetype and epitome of all cuisine, revealed in the everyday meal as much as in the banquet as their common, secret destiny. Their core value. Eat, drink and be merry.

In this view (which can be Epicurean as well as Stoic), all eating—whether in moderation or to excess—is a rehearsal for the last supper that kills one's appetite. As such, the food presented at a last meal is a correlate of the food of the gods. Gods who have immortal bodies don't need to eat, since they have no needs. Their desires (to love or hate us earthlings) aren't prompted by somatic investments. If they consume the dead animals, vegetables or humans sacrificed to them then it must be a signifying act beyond anything physiological, and not participating in the corruption, decomposition, impurity of those bodies. Because they are already full beings, the gods on Olympos or in Valhalla don't need to fill up on anything just as they don't need to defecate. They eat or drink to signify their indifference to the qualities of food.

Ambrosia, manna . . . whatever it may be called it is an immortal food, a food without qualities. It may taste sweet, but only in a superlative sense that ironically cannot be measured by degree. There is no comparison possible because it is pure and absolute sweetness. It is the sweetness that all mortal things have in lesser form. Thus, any of our encounters with a pleasingly sweet thing in our mouth could be measured as a shadowy, relative, lite version of the sublime, radiant, immortal sweetness that can be tasted only at the terminus of somatic pleasures. From this perspective, a true food is distinguishable from the common, routine, life-sustaining substance processed by bodies. We might first think of the Communion's bread and wine. But a true food would negate the mortal body that consumes it. It would be a poison administered as an execution, an exemplary execution like Socrates' cup of hemlock that, for Plato in the Phaedo, serenely affirmed the philosopher's vocation to sublimate bodily existence, civic duty, erotic attachment and so on into the immortal forms of thought. 'To philosophise [to pursue truth] is to learn how to die'. Anything else is pseudo-philosophy; for Socrates, that meant the seductive rhetoric of Sophistry, whose practitioners had merely a knack for persuasion akin to the skills of a chef cooking up a pleasing meal.

For an artist like Franz Ehmann who is also a chef, art and cuisine likewise face this challenge of terminating their rhetorical pleasures in order to utter a truth. Strange as it may sound, there might be a Socratic impulse in this exhibition, in an alliance between aesthetics and a principled death. How are criminals' deaths 'principled'? By the institutionalisation of their death through the rules of imprisonment and execution. The menus and the meals that signal their anonymous executions become an allegory of the institution of art. In Ehmann's show, the exhibition, the gallery, the market—these forge the prison house and death row of the artist. He is waiting his turn. But the story hasn't ended yet.