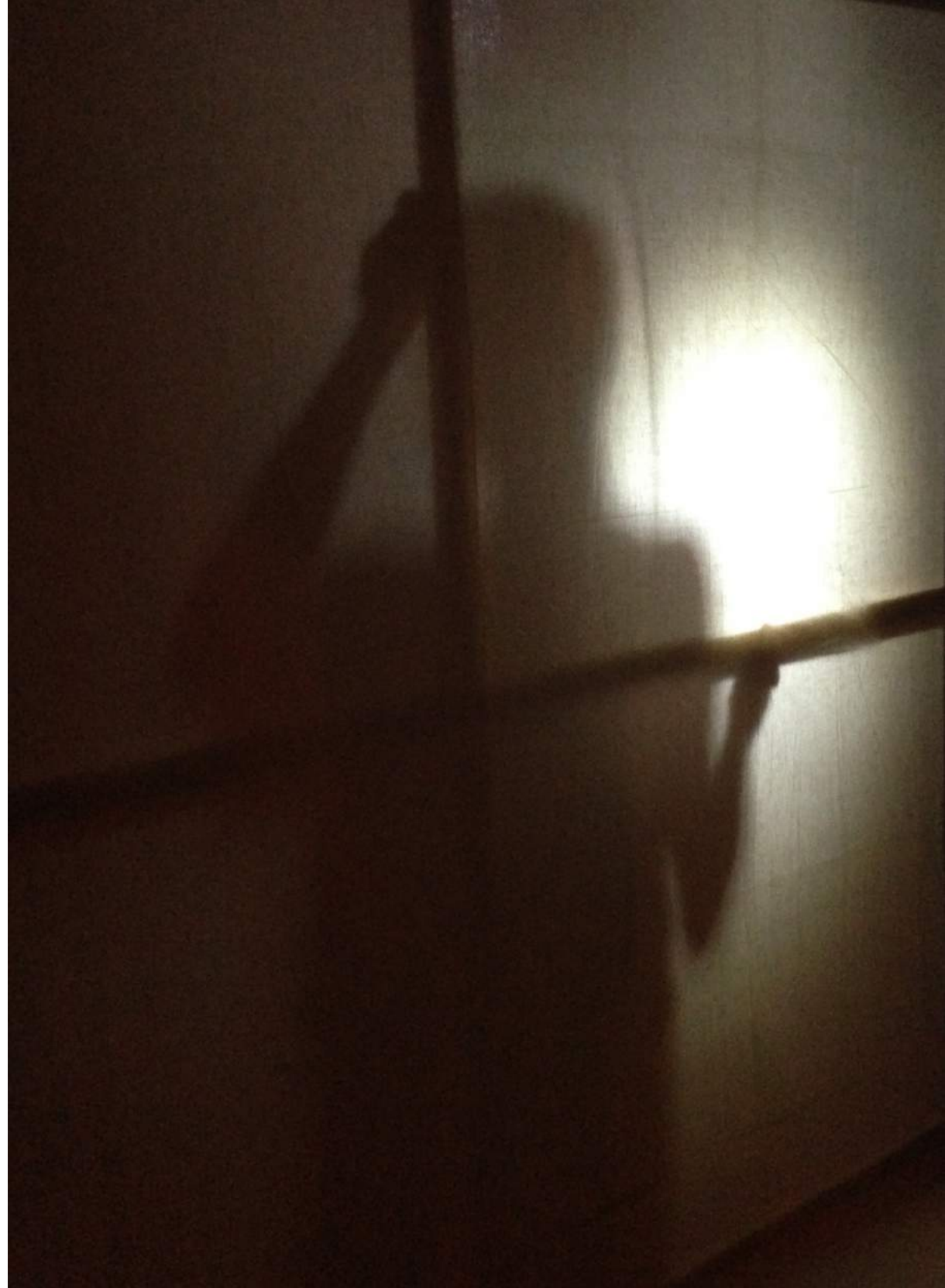


A MIRROR OF NOTHING  
OTHER THAN ITSELF

A KIND OF DEATH

*Joshua Freddie Vaughan*

PLAYER: THEY'RE HARDLY DIVISIBLE, SIR — WELL I CAN DO YOU BLOOD AND LOVE WITHOUT THE RHETORIC, AND I CAN DO YOU BLOOD AND RHETORIC WITHOUT THE LOVE, AND I CAN DO YOU ALL THREE CONCURRENT OR CONSECUTIVE, BUT I CAN'T DO YOU LOVE AND RHETORIC WITHOUT THE BLOOD. BLOOD IS COMPULSORY — THEY'RE ALL BLOOD, YOU SEE. — ROSENCRANTZ AND GILDENSTERN ARE DEAD, ACT 1, SCENE



March, 2016.

Maxwell Rushton performed “Inside Out”, in front of an audience of fifty or so people, an action which involved that he paint a Rorschach Blot in blood, on an 8 square meter folding canvas as part of the residency program (Exchange) that has spawned this publication, The Exchange.

With the smallest of tremors Maxwell took his place on the stage. With no pomp or spectacle, he began to siphon off a pint of his own blood, fresh from a vein on his arm.

His demeanour throughout was calm; collected in total focus, with a charm that utterly captivated the fifty or so members of the audience. After collecting one bag full of blood, he began to spray and sprinkle it onto the huge folding canvas, measuring 4 by 2 meters in scale.

After this, Maxwell and I folded the canvas in half, methodically smoothing the blood over the sections not blocked by the supports of the frame, staining fabric dark crimson.

The process was repeated once again, as he used another bag of blood he had prepared, and with the same peaceful focus spread blood over the canvas, folded it in half and smoothed it into the fabric, saturating it.

Blood smells like iron, it smells like life flowing and it saturates the air. When you are letting as much blood as max collected, fresh from his veins, the smell is overpowering.

It is not surprising that the letting of blood has spiritual connotations; supposedly originating in ancient Europe and

Asia, but with documented occurrences in Aztec America, modern day India, and Celtic England, blood is a primal, and overpowering medium of the deepest connection to nature and the other.

It is not hard to understand these practices, in light of the sense of focus and transportation that I felt, and that the audience testified to feeling post-event - both hypnotic and transfixing in a way that is hard to express.

As the final drops of blood were applied, and the second unfolding of the vast canvas commenced; there was, perhaps, a moment of hesitation- dissipating into resolve, then gasps, as a pair of crimson wings arose from the spreading canvas.

In the artist’s conversation we had a month later, James Sirrell stated that the event was “something like sex or death....atavistic, pure”<sup>1</sup>. But as with Maxwell’s work, there is a tension that inhabits the conceptual workings of his art, that takes it beyond a simple recourse to a notion of purity.

What was it that made the work so unique for us? It involved multiple stages, encompassing an act of performance, an act of painting and evolution over one month (as he layered on blood to achieve the distinctive random tonal variation that signifies and typifies the Rorschach ink blot) and yet it was none of these aspects alone.

Art, obviously, should strive to be more than just the sum of its parts, but what was striking about this work - whose

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1 “In Conversation with Maxwell Rushton” Exchange Pod-cast, 2016



source imagery is intentionally a non-unique image, an appropriation of Herman Rorschach's now ubiquitous ink blot- was the complexity bought to bear on something that was not in fact Maxwell's intellectual property.

As pointed out by Patrick Gill, who was part of the conversation we had with Max, there is a contradiction that animates his work; a kind of tension between the unique choice of material (Max's blood) and the ubiquitous imagery he chooses to use<sup>2</sup>.

## Blood is compulsory

What was it that we saw?

The more I consider it- the performance and then the gradual development of the blood-blot - the more it seems to be the gestation of a logo. A visceral, gory, bloody logo of an artist grappling with the idea of becoming a brand.

This is not something new to Maxwell. His entire body of work following his graduation from Leeds college of Art in 2012, is about becoming a brand. His work *Buy In, Bleed Out* is similarly made from blood on canvas, with his personal logo scored into the crimson background, creating an immaculate line that delineates perhaps a moment of change from artist to brand.

The weird neutrality of the *Inside Out* is what I find fascinating- by this, I refer to the tension I discussed earlier- Maxwell is using his blood to create something that cannot but deny the creative autonomy embodied by the artist.

<sup>2</sup> "In Conversation with Maxwell Rushton" Exchange Pod-cast, 2016

The Rorschach Inkblot, created by Herman Rorschach as a means of plumbing the depths of a patient's mind during psychoanalysis in a form of interpretive dialogue ("look at the blot, what do you see?") is meant to be neutral abstraction that says nothing about the analyst and everything about the patient.

As far as this work is concerned, the old adage of putting your blood, sweat and tears into something a couldn't be more appropriate, and yet the work is a-priori not about Maxwell. I cannot get over this paradox, and I cannot emphasise it enough. And I love it; because if the work is not about Maxwell (even though he has invested his time and blood to create it) it must be about the viewer.

*Inside Out*, as it is known, becomes then a work made by Maxwell, not about Maxwell, incorporating his blood to make an image traditionally about the person viewing it- it neutralises the potential for exploring that most sacred of realms, the interiority of the artist.

We like to think that viewing a work of art allows us access into the artist's mind. There is a rich history of abstraction that explicitly deals with access to the an interior realm (Hilma Af Klimt springs to mind, as does Rothko, Arshile Gorky and many others), but this work apparently denies that, by virtue of the mechanisms I've explored.

Which brings me back to this notion of neutrality- *Inside Out* neutralises the access the viewer has to it, in a cycle of negation that first denies Maxwell's interior world (and as such the engagement of the audience with that com-

ponent) then sneakily denies that the source of meaning is the spectator, by virtue of the work being so intrinsically of and made by Maxwell- thinker, Slavoj Žižek calls this the 'double negation'.<sup>3</sup>

That said, is this not the perfect brand logo? The image that leaves you wondering, the image that has no meaning, except for what you invest in it, and yet is entirely constructed with the purpose of impressing an abstracted idea of something on the viewer? Think of the Nike tick, and accompanying slogan "Just Do It"- but do what?

The extension of this principle par excellence, is the work of Jeff Koons- an artist who has perfected the creation of the ultra-perfect, ultra-alienating art-thing, the simulacrum that references a pop-cultural image we are all aware of and has nothing what-so-ever to do with the man who authored its creation, even in the case of works that explicitly involve his image.

Of course, Jeff Koons is required for the existence of his sculptures, but it is perhaps more fitting to say that the realm in which Koons's authorship is played out is that of 'meta-authorship'; a kind of authoring of the impersonal and unrelated (assuming that good old fashioned 'authorship' implies a base level link to the personal, a relation to the interior world, to the immediate psychic 'stuff' of the artist)

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3 *Žižek's famously maverick style of philosophy incorporates jokes as a kind of dialectical device- one such joke talks about the man who asks for "coffee, but no milk". The waitress replies, "sure, but we have no milk, so I can offer you coffee with no cream instead". SO what we have here is a request for a thing that lacks and getting another thing that lacks instead. Inside Out operates a similar negation of expectations. What is he offering? Art which lacks affiliations to the corporate world, but in stead tricks us, and becomes art that lacks meaning?*

Maxwell, for his part, is quite lucid about the question of authorship. He states that he is essentially channeling meanings and ideas that exist within society already<sup>4</sup>. The choice of using a Rorschach (an old image, that whilst is ubiquitous, is universally known) is therefore quite specific. It is maybe a perfect choice, for the burden of meaning-making is placed on the viewer; he is an arbiter of meaning, then.

It is said that a fee in blood is required to cross over into the higher realms- to free ourselves from the mundane everyday world, to become that arbiter (or synonymously, shaman) we must sacrifice a part of ourselves. I think it is no coincidence that Maxwell uses blood to illustrate his passage into becoming a brand, a logo.

This is what is most exciting in Maxwell's work- he is, by virtue of an ancient ritualistic shedding of blood, paying for his passage into the world of the simulacrum, the world of the brand.

And of course, to be a brand is to be neutral. It is to be anything to anyone.

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4 *"In Conversation with Maxwell Rushton" Exchange Pod-cast, 2016*