



Dirty & Disorderly

Contemporary Artists

on Disgust

MASS MoCA



Disgust seems to stem out of an instinct: a knee-jerk reaction to something unsettling, filthy, or inexcusable that ought to be avoided. In some cases—as with contamination avoidance—disgust can indeed function as an evolutionary tool of survival to create distance between ourselves and that which may harm us.¹ In many contexts, however, disgust is highly subjective and dependent on one’s life experiences and social conditioning.² If disgust is learned, how and why is it taught? Historically, it has often been weaponized as a tool of oppression, intertwining visceral disgust (or the instinctual, physical sensation of being disgusted by someone/something) with the politics of moral and interpersonal disgust. As a means to create hierarchies connoting “lesser than,” “other” or “filthy” statuses, disgust has been used to defend dogmas of racial purity, caste systems, colonialism, and patriarchy.³ When those in power label someone, or a group of people, as disgusting, they are then frequently seen as undesirable and intolerable, leading to further subjugation and inferiority.

In art, as in culture, disgust has often historically been used to confer moral value: that which is visually unappealing is translated into being naturally bad or evil.⁴ The artists in *Dirty and Disorderly* examine the ways that bodily sensations and cognitive understandings of disgust are often learned—and can perhaps be unlearned. In a celebration rather than condemnation of people who have been labeled as untameable and uncontainable, the artists in the exhibition—Anna Ting Möller, New Red Order, and Nguyễn

Duy Mạnh—lean into that which is discomforting, oozing, fleshy, and chaotic. The artists peel back the visage of disgust to understand the ways that it is a weaponized tool to discern, divide, and hierarchize. By reinserting human fleshiness into histories of violence and exclusion, these artists remind us of the subjective nature of disgust—as something that is constructed and reinforced whether as a means of survival or as a way to control marginalized groups. Unsettling their viewers emotionally and mentally, the artists question where the constructed borders of permissibility lie: between public and private, skin and viscera, and life and death.⁵

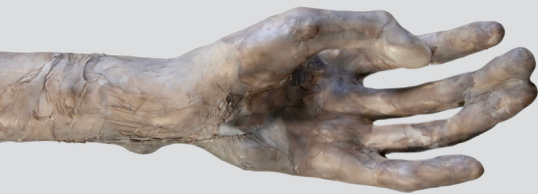
Möller, New Red Order, and Nguyễn reveal the body beneath and beyond skin. The exposed viscera in these works are visually disturbing; however, they align with the similarly troubling histories of violence, displacement, and oppression that New Red Order references. Nguyễn and Möller’s material choices become proxies for human flesh, encouraging both an estrangement and an identification with their body-like forms. Through a variety of mediums—scooby, video, and ceramics—these artists interrogate disgust responses and reveal how they have historically been weaponized throughout time. Möller, New Red Order, and Nguyễn teach us that, sometimes, disgust is only skin deep.

— **Riley Yuen**

M.A., Williams College, 2025.

Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art

Anna Ting Möller's work highlights queer and non-traditional kinships as unpredictable and fluid, working against the straight lines of traditional family lineage maps frequently used by cultural anthropologists. When Möller travelled to China in 2015 searching for their birth mother, they were ultimately unsuccessful. However, they returned to Sweden with a different kind of mother: a scoby (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast) that they have been maintaining for the past ten years. Scobys, commonly referred to as "mother culture" or simply "mother" are used for fermenting kombucha. Throughout their practice, Möller explores their unconventional relationship with this "mother," and points to slippages between material, form, language, and culture in their works *Slut Station* (2023) and *In Tandem* (2025). Möller complicates the conventional mother-child dynamics of care and dependency as this "mother," much like a child, survives solely by Möller's efforts of cleaning, feeding, and monitoring its environment. In Möller's words, "[a] symbiotic culture is... unpredictable and unstable, porous to the whims of its atmosphere. That slippage of control is also an exercise of freedom, a constant surrender to the unknown. My work embraces fragility and transience..."



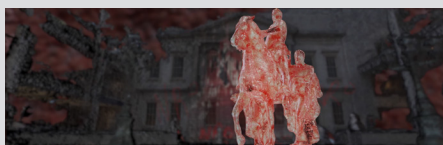
In their MASS MoCA-commissioned work *In Tandem*, two interlocking arcs reference a birthing mother. Above this form is a "scoby skin." Although the scoby bears a visual resemblance to skin, its actual material composition is a sophisticated cooperation between bacteria and yeast, merging the feelings of discomfort of seeing "skin" out of place, off the human body. Also on view is *Slut Station*. In this work, Möller references the instability of language; "slut" is a derogatory term denoting immoral promiscuity in English, but it is translated as "end" in Swedish, referring to the final or beginning station of a train line—a metaphor for both death and birth. While in the gallery, this work experiences a material metamorphosis, beginning as fleshy wet scoby that must be maintained with a timed mist system until it is eventually allowed to fall into indefinite dormancy as it dries into taut "skin" over porcelain and epoxy, embodying the impermanence and malleability of relationships.

New Red Order's work examines obstructions to Indigenous futures and interrogates settler colonial histories. In their video *Culture Capture: Crimes Against Reality* (2020), the artist group uses the technology of photogrammetry, a mode of digitally rendering three-dimensional forms by collating overlapping photographs of a single object through a computer program. In this work, New Red Order "captures" the likenesses of James Earle Fraser's (1876–1953) sculptures, *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* and *End of the Trail*, as well as the mythically heroic narrative of "American" origins that they represent.⁶ While the monument of Theodore Roosevelt perpetuates colonial tactics of racialized hierarchy, *End of the Trail* romanticizes the violent displacement and marginalization of Indigenous communities.⁷

Culture Capture: Crimes Against Reality (2020) incorporates scans of the sculptures interleaved with images of Fraser at work and the statues themselves, imploring viewers to question which histories have been considered worthy of protecting, documenting, and sanitizing, and which continue to be trampled over. New Red Order asks us to interrogate the grounds, both literal and metaphorical, upon which monuments are built, and whose

"American" narratives they stand for. Beyond considering who these monuments have been built *for*, New Red Order asks us to examine *against* whom they have been constructed, or at whose expense. In their video, the sculptures morph from their aged bronze forms into blood-splattered objects and finally into an unruly fleshy blob. This amorphous entity bounces against the walls of an invisible box, perhaps looking for an escape, pushing against the boundaries that have been forced onto it. The replacement of bronze with elastic flesh and blood exposes the enduring legacies of settler empires as malleable and mutable.

As much as monuments are believed to commemorate an "American" legacy, they are also symbols and reminders of brutality. As the figures dissolve, merge, and implode, New Red Order highlights explicit histories of violence against Indigenous people and constructs a digital dismantling of these settler legacies.



New Red Order, stills from *Culture Capture: Crimes Against Reality*, 2022.

Photo courtesy of the artist



Nguyễn Duy Mạnh's installation takes the form of a lavish banquet table. It initially appears to be an inviting scene for a large party of guests. However, upon closer inspection, Nguyễn's refined ceramic techniques belie the objects' grotesque and violent appearance. Using traditional Vietnamese ceramic styles and iconography, Nguyễn then subverts the tableware, making it appear to be viscerally chopped, peeled, maimed, and shredded, revealing bloody red interiors under the ornate porcelain surfaces. The disfiguration of his works is a lamentation of what Nguyễn sees as the collapse of traditional values and the violence that consumerism does to traditional art forms, as Vietnamese cultures of craft are sacrificed in favor of mass-production.

The work on view at MASS MoCA—*Phách Lạc* (2017–2023) which translates to “Lost Spirits”—is part of a larger series of ceramics that references a Vietnamese idiom, “Hồn Xiêu Phách Lạc,” describing a state of immense fear or being stricken with terror. This idiom draws on the Vietnamese traditional belief in the

existence of two kinds of spirits that exit the body upon death: *hồn* (heavenly spirit) and *phách* (earthly spirit envelope).⁸ The title, taken alongside the wounding of traditional art forms depicted in the work, reflects Nguyễn's horror when confronted with the loss of tradition in favor of maximized efficiency and consumerism under capitalism. The ceramic works on this banquet table are the embodied, earthly *phách*, alluding to Nguyễn's belief that “pottery, like people, has cultural value and contains spiritual life.” By rendering ceramics as bodies capable of being wounded, he gestures towards the ways that human-made objects both reflect human histories and experience their own material lives. The dignified tableware, at one point proud expressions of culture, are slumped, slashed, melancholy, and tortured; delicately crafted but violently wounded. The messy, bloody landscapes that mark the surfaces of these elegant ceramic forms implore viewers to empathize with them and question what has been left behind or defiled as byproducts of modernization and capitalist materialism.

- 1 The conceptual core of disgust is a topic that has been heavily theorized; some scientists argue that disgust is triggered by things that remind us of death and mortality such as decay and decomposition. (See Alexandra Plakias, "The Good and the Gross," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16, no. 2 (2013): 263). Other scholars have considered disgust as an evolutionary tool of survival that causes us to instinctually be repelled by things, particularly spoiled foods, that may harm us. (See Daniel Kelly, *Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011): 17.)
- 2 As Carla Cevasco has observed, 18th-century white settlers felt disgust towards Native American foods, which then transferred onto Indigenous bodies, leading to false images of savagery and incompetence. It is important to note, however, that "colonists often experienced troubling sensations of satiety or even pleasure when they consumed Native foods. Their struggles to confine their repugnant experiences within familiar language demonstrate how "the violence of [one's] appetite, ...threatened boundaries of colonial and Native cultures." (Carla Cevasco, "'Nothing which hunger will not devour': Disgust and Sustenance in the Northeastern Borderlands," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 268–269.)
- 3 For example, the taboo of menstrual blood as "unclean" prevails in cultures all over the world, and by association those who menstruate are shamed and stigmatized for their natural bodily processes.
- 4 For example, Peter Paul Rubens' and Francisco Goya's depictions of Saturn devouring his son utilize grotesque imagery, blood, and gore to further demonstrate the moral degeneracy of Saturn. The repellent qualities of disgust are very often complemented by the fascinatingly perverse pleasure of being able to revel in the socially illicit or grossly hedonistic, as in the case of Hieronymus Bosch's popular painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1500). See Noël Carroll & Filippo Contesi, "A Taxonomy of Disgust in Art," in *Art, Excess, and Education*, ed. Kevin Tavin, Mira Kallio-Tavin & Max Ryyänen (Palgrave Macmillan: 2019), 3.
- 5 The related word "unsettle" is often used to describe a feeling of unease, anxiety, or worry—things that are unsettling are those that disturb people. The word "settle," meanwhile, is laden with racial and historical baggage of colonialism: settler colonies entailed the violent displacement and erasure of native people for the sake of "settling" the land. To unsettle in this context, therefore, is to acknowledge and dismantle systems and logics of coloniality.
- 6 The no-longer-standing monument to Theodore Roosevelt valorizes the historical figure, depicting him on horseback and flanked on each side by an African and Native American man. The *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* was recently removed from its former position in front of the American Natural History Museum in New York City. During the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent Black Lives Matter movement there were hundreds of protests against and defacements of American monuments, particularly those dedicated to confederate figures. Among these was the statue of Theodore Roosevelt, which was elected to be taken down in January 2022. (See *Contested Histories' Case Study #186: Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt*, New York City, United States.)
- 7 Shannon Vittoria, "End of the Trail, Then and Now." The Metropolitan Museum of Art, February 19, 2014. <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/the-american-west-in-bronze/blog/posts/end-of-the-trail>.
- 8 The title can also be connected to Operation Wandering Soul, in which American troops fabricated "Ghost Tapes," simulating the souls of the unburying dead in agony in order to incite terror and crush the morale of North Vietnamese soldiers. Despite claims without evidence that the operation had been a success, the American Army Concept Team admits that the soldiers of the Liberation Army of South Vietnam saw through the hoax. For more information, see Konrad Kellen, "War on the Mind: A Commentary," *Armed Forces & Society*, 6, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 313–325.



Anna Ting Möller explores the intersections of materiality, transformation, and bodily processes by working in symbiosis with a kombucha mother to create ephemeral sculptures/installations/performances that challenge conventional notions of life, death, lineage and care. Focusing on themes such as the sexualized and grotesque, Möller's art critiques societal constructs, particularly the fetishization of the Other. Their work has been exhibited at Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm; ArkDes, Stockholm; ICPNA, Lima; Jyväskylä Art Museum, Jyväskylä; Tutu Gallery, Brooklyn; and UrbanGlass, Brooklyn, among others.

New Red Order is a public secret society that collaborates with informants to create exhibitions, videos, and performances that question and rechannel subjective and material relationships to indigeneity. Facilitated by core contributors Adam Khalil (Ojibway), Zack Khalil (Ojibway), and Jackson Polys (Tlingit), New Red Order orients their work through the paradoxical conditions of Indigenous experience, and explores the contradictions and missteps that embody desires for indigeneity in the myths, dreams, and political foundations of the so-called Americas. They have presented their work at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, among others.

Nguyễn Duy Mạnh's artistic practice is a process of self-study and experimental exploration in the field of visual arts. Throughout his practice, Duy Mạnh is concerned with highlighting the vulnerability and disintegration of values and culture. He represents the trauma that disrupts an individual's spiritual life in the face of ongoing reality. He has presented his work at Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi; The Muse Art Space, Hanoi; Ngo Quyen Art Exhibition Center, Hanoi; Galerie BAO, Paris, and The Outpost Art Organization, Hanoi, among others.

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Contemporary Artists on Disgust**

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Curated by Riley Yuen, M.A., Williams College, 2025,
Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art

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Front & back cover: New Red Order, *still from Culture Capture: Crimes Against Reality*, 2022. Photo courtesy of the artist