

In one sense never different and in another sense never the same

Some thoughts on Eva Meyer Keller's comical tragedy *Death is Certain* by Tim Etchells

1.

You enter a medium sized room. In the centre there are two large square tables, each covered in a white paper tablecloth. A simple room no decorations and no pictures on the wall. Flat florescent lighting. Or light from the windows. Or both. The tables stand about 1.5m apart.

On the table which is closest to the door: nothing.

On the other; an ashtray, a toy car, a tin of baking powder, a house brick, an electric drill, a clothes iron, a firecracker, three darts, a can of deodorant spray, a plastic bucket, a sack of soil, a bottle of vinegar, several disposable lighters, a can of Zippo lighter fluid, a hair dryer, a roll of cling film, a glass storage bottle marked with words POSION, a small bag of cement, a mixing bowl (plastic), a few hair clips, a hammer, three balloons (not inflated), a canister of helium, a cheese grater, a roll of sellotape, two cherry lollypops, a lump of playdough, two spoons, a knife, a jar of cherry jam, a roll of kitchen paper, a pair of latex gloves, a plastic rubbish bag, a few sewing needles or pins, a nail file/emery-board, a large sheet of paper, a small bottle of rum, a razor blade, a handful of drawing pins, a container of salt, a syringe and needle, five small stones, a box of matches, a drinking straw, an electrical cable with plug at one end and exposed wires at the other, three dinner plates, a 'tea egg', a small carafe, a spool of dental floss, toothpicks, sugar cubes, a tin of golden spray paint, a pack of cigarettes, a notebook and thirty-five cherries.

The objects on this second table are laid out in a grid. Their arrangement atop the pristine white tablecloth bestows an unstable order to their miscellany of the domestic and the not-so-domestic.

Stood by the tables is a young woman. She is wearing black clothes (a skirt, jumper and boots) over which she has a white cookery apron. She smiles. When everyone has entered the room – fanning around its edges from the entrance, facing in towards her and the tables, she begins.

2.

In the next 40 minutes she will use the equipment from the full table, one, two or even several items at a time, to enact or demonstrate a different death upon each of the cherries. Laid out in lines and 'waiting' the cherries are soon to be her victims - her guinea-pigs in a set of brutal and comical 'experiments', her voodoo dolls, her crash test dummies.

Here is the first death. She takes a cherry, the sellotape and the dental floss from the full table, and steps directly to the empty table. She breaks off a length of the dental floss, tapes one end

of it to the cherry, then tapes the other end to the edge of the table. With the cherry thus secured, she lets it drop. It swings, dangles, hangs. Strange fruit.

Dylan Thomas wrote, in *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London* that 'After the first death there is no other.' but of course this is not true. There are always lots more deaths and in Eva Meyer Keller's extraordinarily simple, frightening and funny performance *Death Is Certain* there are exactly 34 more of them to come.

3.

After the hanging there is a drowning and after the drowning there is an imprisonment in a 'cage' that leads to death by starvation or exposure and after the imprisonment in a 'cage' that leads to death by starvation or exposure there is a tearing apart with hooks and after the tearing apart with hooks there is an impaling (or a crucifixion) and after the impaling (or crucifixion) there is a gassing and after the gassing there is a brutal flaying and after the brutal flaying there is a crushing and after the crushing there is a burning and after the burning there is a lethal injection and after the lethal injection there is another crushing and after this second crushing there is a crude filing away of the skin on every surface and after the crude filing away of the skin on every surface there is a murder by voodoo and after the murder by voodoo there is an absolutely unambiguous impaling on a wooden spike and after the absolutely unambiguous impaling there is a skinning alive following which the raw body is covered in salt, and after the skinning alive following which the raw body is covered in salt there is a dismembering and after the dismembering there is an electrocution and after the electrocution there is a burial alive and after the burial alive there is a combination burning and crushing and after the combination burning and crushing there is a grating or shredding and after the grating or shredding there is a plunge in a car from the top of a cliff and after the a plunge in a car from the top of a cliff there is an embedding in cement and after the embedding in cement there is a dissolving in acid and after the dissolving in acid there is an explosion that leads to dismemberment and after the explosion that leads to dismemberment there is a strangling and after the strangling there is an imprisonment in darkness that leads to slow slow starvation and after the imprisonment in darkness that leads to slow slow starvation there is a beating to a pulp and after the beating to a pulp there is a fall from a balloon and after the fall from a balloon there is a killing with a drill and after the killing with a drill there is a drowning at sea and after the drowning at sea there is a burning alive and after the burning alive there is an eating alive and after the eating alive there is a spraying gold that probably leads to some kind of hideous suffocation and after the spraying gold that probably leads to some kind of hideous suffocation there is a death by immersion in jam.

4.

What does Bresson say? That the blanker an image is the more it will resonate when placed next to another.

5.

Deaths are enacted on cherries, one by one. When the last cherry is killed the performance is over. The execution of the performance (small pun intended) is as perfectly simple, as lacking

in frills or ornamentation as the structure. Meyer-Keller moves between the tables in her deadly kitchen, moving from one killing to the next, in a mode that might be described as neutral or functional, but which in any case declines to signal comment on her task. She makes no drama of her decisions, no comedy or tragedy of her actions and no melodrama with her reactions. Slightly brusque, with a faint hint of the laboratory or cook's assistant in her demeanour, her manner might best be described as that of someone simply doing a job. She does what's needed, not more and not less. After an initial acknowledgement of those watching she does not bother much with the informally grouped audience; does not seek eye contact or look for reactions to what she is doing. She is self-contained, to all extents and purposes too busy with her job to have time for social niceties and in case clearly convinced that what's she's doing – demonstration of death on her thirty-five cherries – both speaks for and is clear enough in itself not to warrant further mediation or explanation from her.

Her occasional consultations with the lists and instructions on the sheets of paper which lie on the 'equipment table' serve to remind us (should we need such a thing) that what we're watching is the animation of a system, the following of a recipe, the relentless execution (repeated pun intended) of a task and emphatically not the product of an improvising, free-associating or obsessively focused brain. There is work to be done, and Meyer Keller, apparently, is the one that must do it.

6.

At the core of *Death is Certain* is an absurd low-level-puppetry, a text-book mimesis of 'cherries-as-people' in which Meyer Keller turns the two tables and their contents into a kind of makeshift puppet theatre of death. Although the piece's substitution of cherry-bodies for human ones might best belong on Kids TV or quirky animation it has a deep connection to the origins of theatre in the historical-cultural shifts from human to animal sacrifice and then to inanimate offering in religious practise.

The core process or contention of theatre and of children's play – the preposterous yet resonant and affective idea that one thing can *stand in for* another – is here reiterated time after time in a literal and comic-book simple form. The wine and the wafer for the blood and the flesh. A cherry for a human being. The cherry's skin for human skin, its juice for blood, its stone for bones. Dental floss for a hangman's rope. Sugar cubes for blocks of stone. A toy car for a real one and the edge of a two metre table for a cliff. A bucket for an ocean, some folded paper for a boat and the hot blast from a 40w hairdryer in place of a gale force wind.

7.

Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* writes that in torture the use of everyday objects, locations and materials (including language itself) conspire in the end to unseat a victims' relation to reality. In the process she describes repurposed elements from the world - doors, the corners of desks, household matches, human touch and voices - are soon over-written with a profound and unshakeable malevolence. In *Death is Certain* Meyer Keller stages an echo of this process, at once comical and disquieting, whereby the banal objects collected on her props table take on the history of their brutal and playful misuse, co-opted in inexorable sequence as instruments of violent, albeit entirely imaginary, murder.

The cherry's role as Meyer Keller's victim-puppet of choice is in any event a significant one. A set of material factors (the cherry is small, it is red, it has skin, flesh, stone and juice) make it a convenient miniature human-substitute, at least bearing in mind the unusual demands of the context. But in addition to these factors the cherry comes complete with a web of existing cultural connection, not to death of course but to both sex and perfection – 'losing ones cherry' for losing virginity, and 'with a cherry on top' like 'the icing on the cake' as a marker of unsurpassable excellence or luxury. Through *Death is Certain* the cherry is marked instead with a kind of blank and hapless victim hood; the sexualised, pinnacle-of-pleasure-fruit soon transformed into sacrificial lamb.

8.

From our vantage point at the edges of the room we are soon aware that none of the deaths staged by Meyer Keller is a natural one. There is no old age, illness or natural-causes in the world of *Death is Certain*, only a panoply of killing, murder and execution. Even in those deaths which might arguably lack a fictional perpetrator – a ballooning accident or car crash - Meyer Keller is unavoidably present as the author; the hand of god that throws darts to sabotage the balloon, the hand of fate (if not the giant mob boss) that pushes the car and its doomed cherry passenger right off the edge of the table.

9.

The deaths of the cherries speed up, slow down, get strange, get simple. Within what we might call the crushed parameters or fiercely limited economy of her game Meyer Keller skilfully manipulates the variables, especially in relation to the viewers experience of time and of space.

The dramaturgy of the piece is subtle and rests for the most part on a game of 'keeping things moving'. Within the enacted deaths degrees of seriousness and playfulness, simplicity and complexity are maintained in a state of perpetual flux. We are drip fed a diet of constant, if mainly minimal surprise – broken rhythms of loud deaths and quiet deaths, slow deaths and fast deaths, small deaths and large deaths, deaths that use the performance space in different ways. The economy of the work flickers and fluctuates such that we can never quite say where on any of the above axes it lies. The British performance artist Gary Stevens once described one of his performances to me as being 'A comedy that never quite confirms itself as a comedy' and Meyer Keller here seems to follow and expand upon this rubric. The silly or comical deaths play out in local sequences, eddies and patterns of alternation with those that are more 'difficult', brutal or visceral, without any simplistic escalation, or 'growing seriousness'. The performance insists on its own blankness even in the dramaturgy, presenting, for all its constant change an economy that appears to be un-differentiated and which certainly has no obvious climax, no journey to a 'scene' that's planned as denouement or as final emotional catharsis.

Even in the minimal, and highly focused arena of the table-top which she's defined as her stage Meyer Keller respects and exploits the hunger built into live performance for devices that split and divide a watcher's attentions. So, whilst for the most part during *Death is*

Certain the enacted death of one cherry is entirely completed before the next begins there are occasions as the piece develops where the time-structure is bent and altered, such that one fatality extends to meet, or overlap the next. The fizzing of cherry twenty-four in its glass of hydrochloric acid continues even as cherry twenty-five is being tied methodically to the firecracker that will end it days, whilst the burning and crushing to death of cherry number twenty (folded in a cloth placed under a heated electric iron) continues unattended even as Meyer Keller deftly sees-off cherries twenty-one, twenty-two and twenty-three. This kind of device – the deliberate breaking of an expectation that has been learnt or established in the preceding five, ten or twenty five minutes of the performance - is typical of how performances like *Death is Certain* build their dramaturgy; using logical, consequent building blocks, neatly but playfully stacked. It's the kind of thing that would be impossible without the ways that structuralism, game and systems theory have seeped into popular culture and is a far cry from the kinds of dream-like, associative or more free-form non-logics championed by theatre's Modernists. Like almost everything in *Death is Certain* Meyer Keller's device of leaving cherry twenty to burn while she deals with her next three victims, is a small trick – a tiny, careful play with our attention – but in the stark frame of the performance it is more than enough and highly effective. Indeed, only with her return to the steaming iron and the by-now well-cooked cherry beneath it, do we realise exactly what she's done. It's a moment we witness with the strange delight of remembering something that we've been persuaded to forget – a piece of theatrical hoodwinkery in a context that might have seemed, at first, to admit of none.

Elsewhere in the performance it is our relation to and understanding of its space that gets re-made. At one level *Death is Certain* proceeds through a constant process of socio-spatial negotiation, as a base-line to which Meyer Keller enacts a metronomic to-ing and fro-ing between tables, her props and equipment clutched in her hands. Meanwhile, the shape-shifting, informally constituted audience – made as lynch mob, curious onlookers at a car crash, sceptical, chattering, curious, or simply dutiful domestic science, chemistry or biology students – looks on from some kind of mutually agreed-upon but completely unspoken idea of 'respectable distance', adjusting or even vying for position at times in order to see better some detail in the morbid proceedings.

Each of the cherry deaths (like any action on any stage) serves to re-draw the space in which it takes place. Often we are asked to focus solely on the micro-action at the table, albeit in ways that sometimes accept and oftentimes blur or warp the concreteness of the setting. The deaths of cherry number nine (burned in lighter fuel) and of cherry twenty-four (dissolved in hydrochloric acid) are almost presented as real-time and unashamedly table-top science experiments, whilst many other deaths invent the tables' surface as a theatre, taking the opportunity to transform its simple surface by evoking other times, narratives, spaces and places. Cherry number twenty-seven is encased slowly, brick by brick into a miniature prison cell, created from sugar cubes, and lacking doors, windows or other ventilation.

At other times we're directed away from the tables and instead around or even out of the room in which they are sited – up towards the ceiling for cherry number twenty-nine, out of the window for cherry number twenty-five, down beneath the table for cherry number nineteen, to the door of the room itself for cherry number twelve which ends its days on the Earth when slammed repeatedly between the door itself and the doorframe – trapped, banged, crushed.

In a final twist of our perception of space there are deaths which draw us to Meyer Keller herself; our eyes locked on the performer-experimenter, strangely out-of-scale for the narratives in which she plays so decisive a part. We watch her hands and her fingers as she uses the nail file and later the razor blade to strip off the skin of cherries thirteen and sixteen. We watch her mouth open, jaws move and throat convulse as she eats up cherry thirty-three, attending for the first time perhaps to the fact that there is an inside to the person that we've been watching all this time.

10.

Death is Certain stages the simultaneous machinic tedium and creative fecundity of death. Here, as in real life, death is the ultimate and inescapable grim one-liner, the old old, very old gag that just has to be told again, just one more time, and just one more time and just one more time again - repetitious-yet-inventive, in one sense never really any different and in another sense never, ever ever remotely the same.

As in *Titus Andronicus* or in Phelim McDermott & Julian Crouch's *Shockheaded Peter* or in countless serial-killer movies from *Henry* to *Seven* there is a deep pleasure in Meyer Keller's game, linked closely to its ceaseless morbidity. In one sense the enjoyment it offers is simply that of our own survival – after all, the deaths she creates are united, at least for the moment by the single fact that they are not ours.

In another sense the pleasure, and indeed the delight of *Death is Certain* is bound up tightly with the detail and scale of the demises it enacts. Death here is miniaturised, tamed, made 'safe' – converted to a parlour trick. It comes as no surprise to learn that Meyer Keller's subsequent performance work – *Good Hands* (2005) – is based explicitly on recreating close-up table-magic routines and home-science tricks.

Beyond the initial pleasures of 'death miniaturised' the structure of *Death is Certain* encourages the viewer to relish the varying degrees of theatrical ingenuity, wit or even cruelty that the staging of each fatality exhibits. Brutally simple and quick deaths – the hanging of cherry number one or the nailing to the wall of cherry number five – give way to those murders whose means are preposterously complex, or whose mechanisms are sadistically longwinded. The unfortunate cherry number seven waits a long time on the table while Meyer Keller calmly forms the elaborate means of its eventual slaughter using a plastic beaker and drawing pins - a makeshift flaying machine. Later, the hapless cherry number twenty-nine is even allowed a temporary escape from the killing-field of the table, tied to a balloon that Meyer Keller has inflated with helium. But though the balloon rises rapidly it is soon trapped against the ceiling and makes an easy target for the darts that Meyer Keller throws to bring it crashing to the ground.

11.

Watching the game (that is also called a performance) we learn its rules and get a sense of its possibilities. Each new addition to the list of deaths reinvents our sense of what's possible, inviting, even *forcing* us to rethink just what this list is of and how this performance 'works'.

It's a tactic that has been established elsewhere in contemporary performance, not least in the work of French conceptual choreographer Jerome Bels, in who's masterpiece *the show must go on* Meyer Keller is a key performer. Here though the deep exploration of a minimalist premise operates on a new sub-micro-level within which boundaries of brutality and hilarity, complexity and simplicity are nonetheless perpetually redrawn and renegotiated.

These shifts of register or dramatic mode also function to keep those watching both amused and on their toes. Death and death and death and death; even if the joke is the same, it is always engagingly different. The fatalities are slippery, hard to get a fix on precisely because the frames of reference are continually shifting. We watch modern deaths and ancient ones, deaths that we know of from the real world and those that seem closer to fiction or to fairytales, deaths that we only read about in newspapers, deaths that only we saw in the movies, deaths that were somehow always always there when we turned on the TV.

The deaths escalate, shift means of operation. Bloody, even theatrical deaths in which cherries are burned, crushed, ripped apart, electrocuted, drilled or pulverized creating slurries of juice, wrecked flesh and burst skin alternate with simpler, more cerebral or even conceptual deaths – the burials in 'cement', lethal injections or imprisonments that lead to 'starvation' each of which makes no mark on the cherry-body to which it is addressed. There is even at one point a voodoo killing in which a lump of plasticine the same size and shape as a cherry is stuck with pins leading to the imagined discomfort and eventual demise of cherry fourteen – a weird comical manoeuvre that effectively doubles or spirals the entire performance back on itself (a plasticene body standing in for a cherry that is in any case a 'stand in' for a human one).

For the most part the cherries function alternately as pure sign and pure idea and as terribly, vividly visceral *things* – as bodies. The 'where' of the deaths flickers between the physical, messy, emphatically concrete space of the table and the icy, abstract sign-space of the watchers heads. In the perfectly simple and absolutely complex operations of mimesis we are aware, but constantly drawn to losing sight of the fact, that all these deaths are *always* in any case *only* in our heads. We're complicit authors to the work on every level; encouraged, as we are by Meyer Keller, to imaginatively grant life and sentience to the inanimate and unconscious cherries, only to be forced to withdraw the gift again suddenly at each and every moment of execution. There is blood on our hands, or at least, in our heads. In a grimly mathematical operation the deaths are always here and always elsewhere, always fake and always in a certain sense threatening to convert themselves to real, always a joke and always not funny at all.

Finally perhaps there is a kind of pure delight in the processes of revelation and realisation that take place as we watch – death may be certain but its exact nature and means are always a question, always in abeyance. Stood in the room we're watching Eva Meyer Keller in her black clothes and white apron grab props from the table, watching her use or arrange them, and guessing just what just she will do. There's a delight in the guessing and in having the guesses confirmed and alongside it an almost self-contradictory delight in the toy horror of what follows - an 'oh no. She isn't going to do that is she?!' mixture of awe, shock and fun. Our pleasure – as in all comedy - is always deeply and closely linked to the timing and process of our understanding – to the rhythm of delayed knowledge and sudden grasping, slow dawning certainties and post-facto 'I should have known's. Sometimes we guess long

long before the image comes that those sugar cubes will make the prison cell for the endless incarceration and death by starvation of cherry number twenty-six, and at other times not guessing at all and even not knowing until the very very last moment of its construction/enactment that the translucent plastic cup, the cling film and the cigarette will be used to form a kind of low-tech gas chamber for cherry number six . Watching the piece we exist in a state of almost perpetual delighted realisation – ‘Oh. That’s what she’s doing’ and ‘Oh.. oh. That’s terrible.’ And ‘Oh. Very smart..’ These realisations, at once comical and terrible, can often flip between these two polar possibilities at unexpected moments.

12.

I’m laughing. A shock-laugh. A now-I-realise-laugh. An oh-my-god-how-terrible-laugh. A jesus-fucking-christ-there-are-really-people-that-die-like-that laugh. A witty-use-of-that-prop laugh. An I-never-saw-that-coming-laugh.

13.

Perhaps you start to notice - after the disembowelling (or cutting-in-half?) of cherry number seventeen or the garrotting of cherry number twenty-six, or even at some other time – that there is cherry-juice on her apron, or that as she pauses she is wiping the cherry juice from her hands.

Or perhaps you start to notice her quick walks away from the table when some aspect of her job is done, or notice the way she does not wait to watch the results of her actions. As if the result – so certain as her title suggests, so inevitable - is thus not even necessary to observe. She knows the score and has no need, it seems, to watch and learn. She puts cherry number eighteen on a plate and shoves two bare electrical wires beneath the dark purple membrane of its skin. She takes the plug at the other end of these wires and puts it in a socket at the wall, then flips the switch. Connected thus directly to the mains cherry number eighteen bubbles, sparks and steams. There are tiny flashes of light from inside it and, for one single moment, it looks like for all the world like a strangely illuminated still-beating heart. And then silence, stillness and a faint acrid smell. But Meyer Keller does not pause to observe a single moment of this miniature spectacle – she has already moved on to cherry number nineteen which will be buried (alive, so to speak) in a shallow grave of earth from a compost bag. The lesson – if that’s what all this is - is apparently meant much more for us than it is for her.

She seems to have little or no feeling for what she does, little or no opinion, not even much interest in her task beyond making sure that it is executed well, efficiently, in sequence. If these are ‘experiments’ we might guess that they are ones that she’s done before – all this is re-enactment perhaps, staged here for confirmation or faint amusement not to satisfy some burning curiosity. There is nothing unknown. Even when she wraps cherry number eight in a tissue and then crushes it in her own hands she doesn’t show much attitude or involvement. She’s an enigma. Frightening, maybe. Witty, perhaps. But more than anything else – blank. A calm worker. A cipher. A young woman. Perhaps her manner is something like the cold shell adopted by those who work in cancer-wards, morgues, torture chambers or death camps. But that’s too much – its probably something much more like the cynical attitudes of blokes who operate fairground rides or the bored manner of girls stood taking tickets for the ghost train.

The punters always scream and scream and squeal but the pros have seen it all before. Certainly there's something slightly *more* to Meyer Keller's presence than simple blankness – it's a knowing *performance deployment* of blankness, a front of indifference, a kind of sadomasochistic strategy whose purpose is hard at first to fathom.

But in the end, for me at least, the purpose of her blankness is clear, very clear. Perhaps it becomes so at the point where she puts down the razor blade after skinning cherry sixteen, walks to the props-table and brings back salt to pour on the raw, so-very-naked 'body' that remains. Or perhaps the reason for her blankness becomes clear in the moment where she pauses, having pushed cherry number twenty-three down deep into a beaker of cement that will harden, we imagine, (long after the performance is over?) to become its grave. Or perhaps the reason for her blankness becomes clear at some other, unspecified or unspecifiable point, it does not matter; what matters is that in the end it does become clear. She shows the task her relative indifference, invests or projects so very little in it, in order that those of us who are watching will be sucked, pulled, forced, or, if you like more dainty words *invited*, into the vacuum she creates. I'm thinking, for a moment of the absolutely static, distant cool-cruel eye of Michael Haneke's camera as it observes the death of the father on the living room floor in the movie *Funny Games* (1997), or of Martin Sheene's steely impassive always-watching presence on the boat through barbarism in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), or of the performer Edit Kaldor sat with her back to the audience, typing at a computer screen throughout her brilliant solo *Or Press Escape* (2002). (Advice to actors: if there is something that you want or need from the audience, never ever ever ever look like or signal that you want it or need it). With her apparently feeling so little, the way is left open to us.

14.

For me watching *Death is Certain*, there are always moments where the laughing stops; replaced temporarily, by sorrow or even by tears.

In these unexpected moments the absurdity of cherries-as-people, the preposterousness of all the work's homemade table-top puppet-theatre deaths, seem to vanish in a short-circuit connection, a jump – via the old magic of mimesis and substitution – to the real world, the one outside the four white walls of this performance space, this room with a young woman, a crowd of onlookers, two tables and so very much equipment.

Such moments of emotional connection are hard to map precisely onto the structure of the work because their occurrence is as much a product of private association, private connection or even private *imagination* as it is a product of what takes place before us (or what is told to us) in the unfolding action of the performance itself. In a key sense the work – like much other contemporary performance – operates as a blank or open field in which those gathered and present are free to form associations, its list of deaths a kind of Rorschach test whose individual elements are not valued one more than another, but from which any might emerge to prove resonant or evocative beyond its neighbours. The operating principle here – as in Forced Entertainment's performances structured around textual catalogues such as *Quizoola!* or *Speak Bitterness* – is that given enough range to the tone and specific content in the instances of what's being catalogued (in Meyer Keller's case it is deaths) there are almost sure to be some that hit individual spectators in a personal way.

And this they do.

Sometimes the moments where laughter turns to sorrow come most readily with the visceral deaths that closely refer to or resemble torture or dismemberment, where the evisceration of a cherry-puppet enacts so graphically in miniature the abuse or destruction of human flesh. The bare wires pushed under the skin of cherry number eighteen bring to mind so easily bare wires held to genitalia that in the end – however much one might laugh at the real-life Hammer-Horror film sound effects produced by the sizzling fruit/victim - it is hard not to make the distressing connection.

At other times a turning moment is spurred by cooler, more complex conceptual deaths such as the execution or poisoning by lethal injection enacted on cherry number ten. Here, although we're well aware that that the poison Meyer Keller injects slowly into the cherry won't really affect it at all (a cherry has no life to take away) we might be aware, at the same time, that the poison in a lethal injection – the paralysing agent pancuronium bromide, also known as Pavulon, and the toxic agent potassium chloride - will stop a human heart from beating in minutes.

Either way, and in any case, as cherry-death follows cherry-death, such moments of sudden reversal in which hilarity turns a rapid corner to upset, are certain to come.

15.

Closing the system.

Cherry thirty-three is eaten. Popped into her mouth with a half-smile her eating of the cherry is flirtatiously almost-hidden; an event she seems to want us to miss; a hedonistic near-secret; a guilty pleasure.

Cherry thirty-four is sprayed gold. We are in the titles sequence of the James Bond movie *Goldfinger* (1964), directed by Guy Hamilton, Shirley Bassey's theme song summoned as inaudible memory. The actress Honour Blackman filmed naked but for gold paint in half-light against black velvet, is replaced by a single golden cherry on a white paper tablecloth, lit starkly with a mixture of daylight and fluorescents.

Meyer Keller puts down the can of spray paint and steps back to the props table where she selects the final item that she will need in the performance; a jar of Cherry Jam.

She returns to the killing-field. There, amongst the wreckage and corpses of the other thirty-four she prepares the death of the very last cherry – number thirty-five. She unscrews the lid of the jam. Takes the last of her crash-test dummies and pushes it deep into the preserve, deep down, well below the sweet sticky surface, until the cherry is completely enveloped. Job done, she licks her finger, and replaces the lid. With a joking nod to the production-line fate of thousands of cherries, the final cherry has been killed, returned to its own kind, put back into the organic, dissolved out of representation, out of the extraordinary and back into the everyday machinery of culture and consumption, back into itself.

Ashes to ashes.

Dust to dust.

The last thing she does is to take off the now-filthy apron, fold it, and place it on the table.

The performance is over.

Tim Etchells. Sheffield and New York. February 2006.