

# **Projects 51 : Paul McCarthy : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 1-July 18, 1995**

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51

paul mccarthy

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art  
New York**

**June 1–July 18, 1995**

Paul McCarthy behaves like the quintessential “bad boy,” but his intentions belie that persona. Irreverent and transgressive, his work is not for the prudish or the faint of heart. His mischief, poor manners, smelly props, noxious litter, violent actions, and unpalatable concoctions of foods conjure an anarchist’s bacchanalia. His is a juvenile world that rages against taken-for-granted rules, ingrained patterns of behavior, and modern pieties. Relentlessly, McCarthy stalks the role models parading out in the media or hidden deep within the self.

As early as 1966–68, while a student at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, McCarthy subjected paintings to pyromaniacal vandalism and called the charred remnants “black paintings.” Action was an integral part of these works. He was as yet unfamiliar with Yves Klein’s fire and body paintings, but Klein’s photomontage of his “leap into the void” provided the necessary fuel, launching McCarthy and his action-oriented paintings into the arena of performance. By 1972, he was using his own body as a brush, and ketchup and other edibles as his paint. In his many activities, including painting, live and recorded performances, installation, sculpture, and photography, McCarthy thumbs his nose at decorum—not to shock but to question the validity of automatically transmitted values.

In his videos, which he has been making for the past twenty-five years, McCarthy follows no predetermined script. In a state of seemingly uncontrolled delirium, he proceeds on a visceral rampage. The actions—often clumsy repetitions of autistic gestures—are intensely physical. The odor is pungent and the behavior primeval. The vision that emerges, once the thunder has passed, the temper tantrum subsided, and the dust settled, is the ruin of certainties, fixed identities, and clear-cut boundaries. The process shatters stereotyped images: no voice can hide behind a mask of authority. Patriarchal figures are dragged from their fossilized virility and reinserted into a male-female continuum. In *My Doctor* (1978) and *Baby Boy* (1982), the male protagonist (McCarthy) gives birth to a ketchup-smear child. In *Family Tyranny* (1987), a despotic father with the motor skills of a

two-year-old child force-feeds a surrogate infant, while repeating in baby talk, “My father did this to me. You can do this to your son.” In *Bossy Burger* (1991), as ketchup gradually and nauseatingly inundates the set, a demented cook assumes the various roles of joker, instructor, and father figure. These role reversals rub the nose against the rancid but genuine smell of our common humanity.

To cast his characters, McCarthy raids popular culture. He then strips them of their innocuous personas and antiseptic origins to produce the unruly bunch of dysfunctional types and hybrid mutants that populate his videos and installations. The journeys of these cartoon protagonists might begin in Disneyland or in Hollywood’s TV sitcoms, but their final destinations lie closer to territories inhabited by Bosch and Rabelais—particularly the latter, a French humanist known for his scatological fables. To make his point, McCarthy unflinchingly portrays biological functions. Through excess he reaches for the raw essential—the base material of which the instincts guiding human relations and perceptions are made. His fascination with learned behavior encompasses birth, parental conditioning, sexual initiation, and, finally, an infantilizing media culture. Though he regresses into the universe of a teenager, his slapstick antics magnify the plights of the adult condition. McCarthy is a buffoon with a mission.

Humor is the salient trademark of Paul McCarthy’s work, and it is a logical ally to an enterprise devoted to uncompromised freedom. As defined by theorists of humor, laughter is a natural echo of freedom; it “liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor.”<sup>2</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that in most of the video performances McCarthy’s characters wear a mask (“A joke,” he says), evoking a claustrophobia that prohibits any escape from the self. The entrapment heightens the “experience of existence” McCarthy aims to express in his work,<sup>3</sup> yet he masks the gravity of his intentions with a jovial invitation to regression.<sup>4</sup> McCarthy may play the adolescent in perennial rebellion, but in fact he is an astutely informed observer of American culture. Bridging the artistic generations between Bruce Nauman and Mike Kelley, he may be distinguished from them in his particular brand of rough humor.

In the video installation he is creating for the Projects space, McCarthy returns to his age-old interest in painting. In the following interview he explains his conception of the piece.

Fereshteh Daftari  
Department of Painting and Sculpture



*Painting a White Line on the Floor with My Face*. 1989 (1973). Gelatin-silver print. 14 x 11". Photo: Karen McCarthy

1. See A. Penjon, “Le Rire et la liberté,” *Revue philosophique*, no. 36 (August 1893): 113–40.
2. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Laughter and Freedom,” in “Rabelais: His World,” *Marxism and Art*, ed. Maynard Solomon (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 300.
3. Paul McCarthy, interview with Linda Burnham, in “Paul McCarthy: The Evolution of a Performance Artist,” *High Performance* 8, no. 1, (1985): 42.
4. This is another facet of humor as elaborated by Ernst Kris. See his “Laughter as an Expressive Process: Contributions to the Psycho-Analysis of Expressive Behaviour,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 21 (July 1940): 318.

**Fereshteh Daftari:** You began your artistic career as a painter while attending the University of Utah from 1966 to 1968. Can you describe the black paintings you made then?

**Paul McCarthy:** I started making the black paintings in 1966–67. They were fairly monochrome. Sometimes there was an image in them. They became blacker and blacker. At one point I began to paint with my hands, and I also lit them on fire to burn the surface. They had elements of performance in them. At that same time, I became aware of Allan Kaprow and the artists associated with happenings—not the Fluxus group, although I did learn about Yoko Ono and other artists who were involved in destructive actions.

**FD:** The paintings were charred and battered?

**PM:** Yes. They were beaten up. I would pound them with a hammer. They were painted flat on the ground—I was on top of them all the time. Many were done outside. I would pour gasoline on them and throw a match on them. They coincided with my discovery of Yves Klein.

**FD:** His *Leap into the Void* photomontage?

**PM:** I knew about the *Leap into the Void* but I didn't see a picture of it at that time. I had a friend who was talking about Klein.

**FD:** Do you think that helped you get away from painting and more into performance?

**PM:** Yes, but the paintings were already action-oriented.

**FD:** In 1968 you moved to San Francisco. What was behind your decision to go there?

**PM:** When I was doing performances and paintings in the mid-1960s I was really interested in experimental filmmakers like Stan Brackage, Stan Vanderbeek, and Andy Warhol. Their films corresponded to my interest in performance and happenings. I wasn't satisfied with art as just painting. I made a number of experimental films. My interest in film is largely why I went to San Francisco, because of the people involved in experimental film in the Bay Area. Bruce Nauman was supposed to be teaching at the Art Institute, but when I got there, he was gone. The school ended up being conservative. There was a lot of pressure to paint and not much interest in art as action. So I went back to Utah in 1969 and began to make films again. The following year I moved to Los Angeles to go to the University of Southern California, because I wanted to go to film school.

**FD:** Who were the most influential artists in the L.A. area that you came to know about?

**PM:** The most important one was Kaprow.

**FD:** You have talked about Marcel Duchamp as an influential figure.

**PM:** I made a connection between Duchamp's *Etant donnés...* and the camera lens, the act of looking through a small hole that defines your vision.<sup>1</sup> I was interested in the lens, the hole. It controls how much you can see. This element of control also has to do with parental conditioning and the media: what part of the world you are allowed to see and what part you are conditioned to see. I was also interested in Duchamp for other reasons—in his shop windows and use of mannequins, the sculptural figure and glass, the idea of reflections in the window, images from the outside being bounced back in.

**FD:** What about his gender reversals?

**PM:** Yes, but also the idea of sexuality or the erotic, the notion of the machine, the sexual act. There is a connection between *The Garden*, which I made in 1991, and *Etant donnés...* In the latter you have to look through a hole to see the figure in the room. You are only



*The Garden* (detail).  
1991–92. Installation: plants  
and motorized figures in arti-  
ficial garden.  
Photo: © Douglas M. Parker  
Studio

allowed to see certain portions of the figure. In *The Garden*, the trees and rocks are positioned so that you can't see the entire figure—the figure of a man—on the ground. In order to see the figure you have to bend down low. The viewer becomes a voyeur, a continuation of the piece. Looking through the trees is like looking through the lens of a camera: your perception is controlled. So the connection with *Etant donnés...* is in the controlled perception of the eroticized figure, and the voyeur peering into the world. *The Garden* is more of a cultural icon, in the sense of western culture not looking out, especially the culture of the mass media, the center of which is Hollywood. The world peers in through the media, but the media isn't really aware of the world.

**FD:** Did your work move from painting to performance, to video and film, and then to installation?

**PM:** No. In my work there was always a simultaneous interest in painting-as-action, in the camera, in performance, and installation. From 1969 until the early 1980s most of my involvement was centered on performance, film and video. And the performances were set up like installations. They were related to where they were taking place, to the context—installation and context as elements of performance. I was also using stuffed animals as props.

**FD:** And masks, dolls, artificial body parts. How have they helped your expression?

**PM:** In a sense, they are used as a child might use them, to manipulate a world through toys, to create a fantasy. The props become the other performers, like in a child's play. A lot of the props are things I find on the street or in junk stores. There is an element of sculpture in them. During one period I became conscious that I was making an object during a performance—an environment would evolve. Afterwards, I would photograph the room. In the late 1970s or early '80s I became more aware of these environments as sculptural pieces, in the art-world sense.

**FD:** The next step was the use of robotic figures.

**PM:** Yes. I became more interested in robotic figures as a kind of replacement of me as a performer.

**FD:** What do you do with the props once a video performance is over?

**PM:** A lot of the props have been lost. A number of them ended up in suitcases, about six or seven suitcases of props. At one time I showed the suitcases, but they weren't open. You could see only the suitcases. I was interested in the props turning into something other than mere artifacts, in "showing" them in the condition of being stored. The suitcases containing the props were sold as sculptures. The person who bought them is not allowed to display the suitcases open, with the props exposed.

**FD:** *You have photographs documenting those props.*

**PM:** Yes, but for a long time the photographs were shown without reference to the objects as performance props. During the past four or five years, my performances have taken place in theatrical sets, actual sets from sitcoms or low-budget television programs. It has always been an interest of mine in terms of the reality of the action and the documentation or representation of that action on video or film—the comparison of those two kinds of experiences. In one piece I did in the early 1970s, the performers were in one room and the video monitors in another. The viewer had a choice between the live performance and its simultaneous broadcast on the monitors.

**FD:** *You create your own kind of fantasyland. How does this relate to the industries of fantasy in California—to Disneyland and Hollywood?*

**PM:** When I was first doing the performances, I was not directly concerned with the fantasy world of Disneyland. I was more concerned with B movies. Some of the poses were taken from B-movie stills, but I wasn't interested in entering the world of Hollywood. I was interested in mimicking Hollywood. The more overt interest in Disneyland and television happened in the early 1980s—not just Disneyland but in the whole artificial Shangri La of shopping malls—the commodity world. Ketchup and mustard and grocery items had always been part of my performances.

**FD:** *Let's talk about the issues that are important to you in your work. What are you critiquing?*

**PM:** I am interested in making pieces that are not centered on one critique of culture or art but which have multiple references. A piece like *Fresh Acconci* (1995), a video collaboration with Mike Kelley, is a reference to art now, to a resurgence of the 1970s and an interest in youth in the art world. There are also references to Hollywood B movies and the soft porn made in the Hollywood hills. There is a formula for making those movies. In *Fresh Acconci*, the New York art scene is sandwiched with Hollywood. Two kinds of aesthetics overlap. The tape itself crosses lines of what is politically correct, exploitation and softening or obscuring the meaning. *Heidi* (1992), another collaborative video I did with Kelley, is the same. It's not about the Austrian or German version of the story of Heidi based on the novel by Joanna Spyri. It's a combination of American horror film, the story of Heidi, and Disneyesque props mixed with attitudes of modernism. That kind of overlapping structure is what interests me. The references I make to the media and to Disneyland/Hollywood is another subject. It has to do with virtual-reality settings. It's a world that is quickly approaching, and I gravitate towards it. It's startling, how it's affecting humanity. I am not critiquing it, its destructiveness, in the sense that it is destroying nature. I am not making a judgment. You can't stop it. But it does put people in crisis.

**FD:** *You have also been interested in the notion of authority especially as exercised in parent-child relationships.*

**PM:** Yes, in the issue of conditioning and in how it defines

reality—the patriarch, the father, the family structure, notions of childhood experiences revolving around authority.

**FD:** *You have talked about a sense of loss of control in relation to your performances. Do you perform in a kind of semiconscious trance?*

**PM:** During the 1970s, when performance was related to shamanism, there were articles written that referred to my process as trance-oriented. However, I don't refer to my state of mind during performances as a trance. I perform in character/persona. There is a kind of withdrawal and altered concentration that occurs. It is a method of conditioning. Actions connected to emotions have a lingering effect—they stick in your unconscious.

**FD:** *Can you discuss the recent issues in your work?*

**PM:** I am interested in the structure of art and in things having multiple identities. Examples are the field of DNA research, as in the installation *Tomato Heads* (1994); computer imaging and the ability to quickly change something into something else; and the cartoon or buffoon character, a kind of virtual-reality character that almost comes to life.

**FD:** *What about the video-installation piece you are doing for The Museum of Modern Art?*

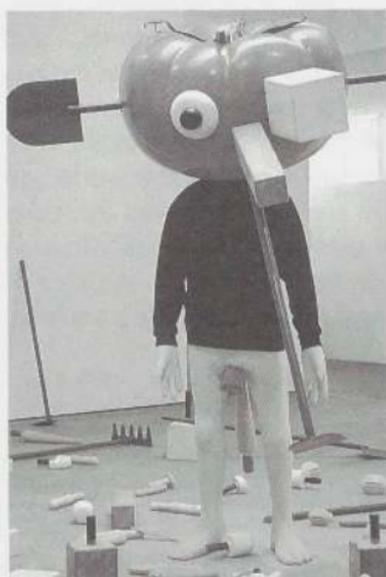
**PM:** I don't know what that piece will be. It's evolving now. But the character is cartoonish, deformed—its personality, its appendages, its face. Its nose and ears are too big. The props are out of scale. The environment is like a television stage set and part of it is a mock TV set. It has to do with painting being an icon of western art and about the representation of the artist by Hollywood.

**FD:** *You mean a romantic conception of the artist?*

**PM:** Romantic, yes, but also a conception of the artist as stupid, as a pervert or clown—Batman and Joker, Nick Nolte and Paul Newman as New York painters. When I was first asked what I was going to do for the show at MoMA, I said I was going to make a documentary of a painter. It came out as a spontaneous reaction. It seemed appropriate. There has always been a reference to painting in my work anyway. In the 1980s I did a series of drawings about painters.

**FD:** *It's more about the painter rather than painting?*

**PM:** I don't know yet. At this point it's a collection of thoughts and activities. It involves a number of references to painting, clichés about what art is and how the art world works—notions of collectors, money, and art. Clichéd ideas about art will be the context. I know what some of the images will be. People I've talked to about it refer to it as "the painter," but I don't think that is what it's all about.



*Tomato Heads* (detail), 1994. Installation: fiberglass, aluminum, urethane rubber, cloth, plexiglass, and mixed mediums.  
Photo: © Douglas M. Parker Studio

## biography

Born Salt Lake City, Utah, 1945

Lives in Altadena, California

## education

- 1966–68** University of Utah, Salt Lake City  
**1969** San Francisco Art Institute; B.F.A.  
**1973** University of Southern California; M.F.A.

## selected exhibitions, 1985–95

- 1995** 1995 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
Luhring Augustine, New York
- 1994** Air de Paris  
Rosamund Felsen, Los Angeles  
*Cocido y crudo*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid  
Studio Guenzani, Milan  
Galerie George-Phillippe Vallois, Paris
- 1993** *The Mere Interchange*, Aperto '93, Venice Biennale  
*Identity and Home*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna
- 1992** *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles  
*Post Human*, FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lausanne (traveling exhibition)
- 1991** *The Body 2*, The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago
- 1990** *New California Video: A Survey of Open Channels*, Long Beach Museum of Art
- 1989** *L.A. Freewaves*, American Film Institute Video Festival, Los Angeles
- 1988** *Open Channels Video*, Long Beach Museum of Art
- 1985** *B&W Drawings*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art

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- Burnham, Linda. "Paul McCarthy: The Evolution of a Performance Artist," *High Performance* 8, no. 1 (1985): 8–12, 44–45.
- Cohen, Michael. "Leap into the Void: Abjection and Survival in the Work of Paul McCarthy," *Flash Art* 26, no. 170 (May–June 1993): 60–62.
- McEvilly, Thomas. "Art in the Dark," *Artforum* 21, no. 10 (June 1983): 62–71.
- Rugoff, Ralph. "Deviations on a Theme: Paul McCarthy," *Artforum* 33, no. 2 (October 1994): 80–83, 118.
- Selwyn, Marc. "Paul McCarthy: There's a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood," *Flash Art* 26, no. 170 (May–June 1993): 63–64.

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1. *Etant donné*; 1. *la chute d'eau*/2. *le gaz d'éclairage* (1946–66). Duchamp's last major work, is a complex assemblage or tableau that can be viewed through two peepholes cut into a wooden door. At the center of the tableau is a lifesize female mannequin assembled by Duchamp. This work is permanently installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Cover: "Painter". 1995. Video installation (detail). Photo: Damon McCarthy  
Other photos courtesy Rosamund Felsen Gallery

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