



Paul McCarthy
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SMAK, GHENT, BELGIUM
Martin Herbert

FOUR DECADES IN, Paul McCarthy's art might easily be considered repetitious, overblown, big-budget, anxiously relentless. Is that his problem, or is it America's? The question is worth asking, if only because McCarthy, like Warhol before him, totes a get-out-of-critique-free card: His art is a mirror to his homeland's times, at best the convex type that allows a view around blind bends—though should it descend into costly gibbering spectacle, there are always enough analogues and portents in the parent culture to still render it defensible. Even so, there are inevitably qualitative variations within a project stretching over much of a lifetime, and these can best be evaluated by means of a large retrospective. The recent "Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966–2006"—on view this past winter at SMAK in Ghent, Belgium, after showing at Moderna Museet in Stockholm and ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark—ended up suggesting that there has lately been a throttling down of certain of McCarthy's former strengths.

Consider, for example, *Caribbean Pirates*, 2001–2005—as one could hardly fail to at SMAK (where the exhibition was organized by Philippe Van Cauteren), since it transformed the show's opening acreage into a blaring labyrinth of video projections, myriad sculptural tableaux—cum—

abandoned sets, a houseboat, and a partly deconstructed, chocolate/shit-colored frigate. The project is obviously inspired by Pirates of the Caribbean—the Disneyland attraction rather than the movie franchise. As subject matter (and regardless of the fact that the idea came from the artist's son Damon, who collaborated on the work), this was a gift to McCarthy: the mainstream transparently reflecting, in a manner that begged to be burlesqued, the myths of buccaneering that finds such apt resonances in the foreign-policy misadventures and corporate heists of Bush-era America. In *Pirate Party*, 2005, one of the works in the *Caribbean Pirates* ensemble, video projections bounce the viewer between raucous mutinies, clumsy ritual torture (McCarthy's increasingly trademark anesthetic-free amputations and fluid-slimed attempts at amateur reconstruction, glimmering obscurely through lysergic rotating camerawork and seasick double exposure), and cavorting prostitutes. *Houseboat Party*, 2005, another of the project's constituent videos, revolves around a modern-day sadistic relationship—with reverbs of Abu Ghraib in the specific humiliations—between two women in what is essentially a floating domestic sphere. Throughout *Caribbean Pirates*, McCarthy recasts illicit seafaring as a gory, sexualized, intermittently psychedelic, and splintered narrative, featuring a cast of figures in maritime costume, sporting prosthetics or oversize, Disney-style, false heads. Amid the guts, nudity, and auxiliary references to a continuum of performative American art—from ketchup as bloody Pollockian splatter to Matthew Barney via a powder-white hermaphrodite dribbled with Hershey's chocolate syrup—a picture is drawn of a thoroughly debased culture unable to escape from itself, its inhabitants trapped together on choppy waters.

Nevertheless, although the initial effect of *Caribbean Pirates* is to leave one initially exhilarated and unhappily titillated, in the end one is pinned, numbly, to the wall. Every inch of airspace is crammed with images and sounds: dancing colored light, screams and guttural

grunts, bodies, theatrical detailing, technical pizzazz, and inventories of proplike objects. The work, like many of McCarthy's recent projects, begins cranked up to ten, and there are no dynamics whatsoever: It stays right there, thrumming away like white noise. This could even be the point—to present the contagions of the present moment in such a way that they counterintuitively leave you cold.

"While being redolent with art historic influences and current political references," writes Moderna Museet curator Magnus af Petersens in the exhibition's catalogue, "more than anything [McCarthy's works] hit you right in the guts." They certainly used to. At SMAK, a roomful of early, performance-based projections were presented in a manner that felt throwaway and almost apologetic, with a long row of slide projectors forming a distracting spine down the room, and as much work crammed in as possible (again, one sensed a determination to overload the environment with stimuli). In contrast with McCarthy's recent projects, however, many of his older works are little short of incendiary—particularly three videos from 1975, whose now lo-fi texture and queasy saturation only add to their bad-dream quality. Here is McCarthy, in *Experimental Dancer*, as something legitimately alarming: an idiot self-celebrating prancing naked in a grotesque, grinning mask, tucking his cock between his legs or pulling it into distension, waving scissors around, ceremonially trimming his pubic hair, and pushing his anus toward the camera. Here he is in *Tubbing*, sporting a platinum-blond wig and stubble in the bath, fellating raw sausage and smearing it and himself with willfully crass transubstantiations of blood and ketchup, semen and lotion. And here, in *Karen Ketchup Dream*, the camera lingers searchingly, invasively, over a nude, dead-looking female body daubed with sauce. McCarthy, you sense, was working at this point with all mental gates open—and more than that, he had found a way of combining his return-of-the-repressed subject matter with the temporal logic of performance video, stretching out ritual



This page, left: Paul and Damon McCarthy, *Caribbean Pirates*, 2001–2005, mixed media. Installation view, 2008. Right: Paul McCarthy, *Experimental Dancer*, 1975, documentary photograph of performance, University of Southern California Medical Center, Los Angeles. Opposite page, from left: Paul McCarthy, *Daddies Ketchup Inflatable*, 2001, vinyl coated nylon, fans, and rigging. Installation view, 2008. Paul McCarthy, *Michael Jackson White*, 1997–99, fiberglass, metal, wood, and paint, 10 x 96 x 55". View of "Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966–2006," 2008. From left: *Experimental Dancer*, 1975; *Black and White Tapes*, 1971–75; *Meat Cake #4*, 1974; *Sailor's Meat - Sailor's Delight*, 1975.





Paul McCarthy Artforum May 2008

actions over time. What is most disturbing about these works is their formalized aggression—how they force you into their often sluggish tempo; to wait, unwillingly captivated, while McCarthy ponders how to lower himself another notch.

Of the works in “Head Shop/Shop Head,” this proxy self-abasement and confrontational inertia is taken furthest in *Class Fool*, 1976, a grainy filmed performance in a classroom, which finishes with the (obviously exhausted) artist standing for an extended period in front of the scattered remains of an audience—apparently insecurely, but surely knowing exactly what he is doing. The approach peaks, however, with McCarthy’s 1991 masterpiece *Bossy Burger*, in which the pauses are pregnant with menace and the psychosis is exaggerated by being played against an unthreatening stereotype that gives the national context free rein. On video monitors dotted around the dirty shack in which the original performance was filmed (a set from the US sitcom *Family Affair*), McCarthy plays a chef-cum-kid’s entertainer in an Alfred E. Neuman mask, drawing smutty pictures with a menacing muffled laugh, whacking doors against his backside, and, often, doing nothing at all. (Again, if he’s stuck in his environment, we’re stuck in his conception of time.) It’s hard to overstate how many of American culture’s inadequacies McCarthy identifies and conflates in this work: its alimentary compulsion, Puritan repression of bodily urges, “bossy” cultural imperialism, infantilization via television and other institutional structures, and general ensnaring in a trap of its own construction. Most important, though, *Bossy Burger* still works. Aply, given the fast-food motif, you can feel it most in your anxiety-knotted guts.

Viewing McCarthy’s work chronologically, one senses a point later in the 1990s where the slowness fundamental

to its demonic effect is no longer counterbalanced by bursts of unpleasant activity. Some pieces descend into self-parodying rote shuffling—such as *Toyko Santa*, 1996, in which McCarthy plays a graceless action painter in a Father Christmas outfit and a rosy-cheeked mask of a caricatured oriental face. Something in his art was hardening around this time, evident too in the degraded remakes of Jeff Koons’s sculptures of Michael Jackson and Bubbles that McCarthy began in 1997. According to the exhibition guide, in these works McCarthy is “criticizing both the cult of the pop star and the star status of Koons”—but McCarthy was himself hardly a nobody in the art-world firmament at the time, so the outlaw stance feels like nothing but a pose. By 2004, when he was still making these objects, it had become close to risible.

If McCarthy’s later work is all sound and fury rather than tactical gut-punch, it can be recouped as reflecting an inner deadening symptomatic of the hyperstimulation at work in culture as a whole.

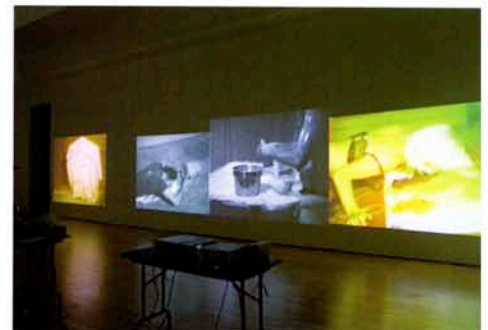
Indeed, from the turn of the millennium on, McCarthy seems primarily to do two things: first, to ramp up his environmental video installations to increasingly frenetic levels; and second, in his domestically scaled sculptures—the enormous public inflatables, which we’ll come to shortly, are a different story—to occupy the intersection of the scabrous and the willfully blunt. The video installation *Bunker Basement*, 2003, is a good example of the former approach. On large screens surrounding a reconstructed domestic interior in which parts of the work were filmed, performers in oversize masks play George W. Bush, the Queen Mother, and Osama bin Laden, all colliding in a relentless orgy of degradation, dismemberment, botched escapes, and—courtesy of the Bush doppelgänger—action painting. “Pig Island,” a series of sculptures made last year (and included in the retrospective at SMAK, notwithstanding the chronology in the show’s title) may be taken to illustrate the second approach. The high point, or deliberate nadir, among these sculptures is *Pig Island Train*, which consists of a row of

eight Dubyas, looking dead-eyed and lost, rear-ending one another amid bottles of champagne, art magazines, and catalogues the artist collected from around SMAK as the exhibition was being installed.

Forty years of McCarthy, while underlining what a farsighted and conscientious producer he has been, is a lot to take in—more than one can easily digest. In this regard, the retrospective was a project precisely in keeping with the mode he seems to be cleaving to today: one of calculated, pointed excess. To take just one example, each of the twenty-plus projections in *Pirate Party* is one hour and thirty-two minutes long, so one must walk away from this work, as from other latter-day McCarthy projects, knowing that the thing is churning on, surplus slopping over its edges—and with an impression of glut associated, through the specific narratives in the videos, with notions of entrapment and feral unhappiness. To reiterate, however, this comes at the price of the viewer not feeling it: The argument is advanced almost entirely intellectually, because the installation is an impenetrable wall of furious activity. Here, again, is the difficulty with criticizing McCarthy—if his later work is all sound and fury rather than tactical gut-punch, it can be recouped as reflecting an inner deadening symptomatic of the hyperstimulation at work in culture as a whole.

It’s fair to say, however, that McCarthy has been in this place for a while, and hence, in his latest video works, is simply ringing baroque changes on a familiar tune. In his negotiations with video, he seems unable to outrun a past in which he, and we, genuinely *did* feel it—in *Rocky*, 1976, when he strapped on boxing gloves for us and turned them on himself, we really flinched—whereas now he makes special effects-laden pieces in which a character loses a limb and feels nothing, and we simply look on, glazed. Such works flirt riskily and perhaps laudably with assimilation into a culture addicted to simultaneous thrills and deep safety, but at the expense of a biting, overt criticality. What really makes them seem diminished, however, is McCarthy’s own contemporaneous work

continued on page 406





Paul McCarthy
Artforum
May 2008

HERBERT/MCCARTHY continued from page 373

elsewhere—namely, his inflatable public sculptures, which, rather than leaving us with a distracting sense of unchecked and meaningless gigantism, put us productively and unmistakably in the thick of a dilemma regarding how art can be both symptom and mirror of the culture in which it originates.

In Ghent, for example, one knew McCarthy was in town even from a distance, because he had changed the shape of the town's skyline with another icon of unmanageable excess—a sixty-foot-high inflatable of a bottle of Daddies ketchup, tethered to SMAK's roof. This loosely Oldenburg-ish piece is in some respects an advertisement for McCarthy himself, a bit of putatively ironic self-branding pointing up one of his key materials—for his multi-associative use of ketchup dates back, as one could see in this show, to the marvelous body-fixated post-Minimalism of *Ketchup Sandwich*, 1970, a glass box made up of stacked-and-slathered glass plates that turns Robert Morris's mirrored cubes into a leaking corpus. At the same time, *Daddies Ketchup Inflatable*, 2001, evokes McCarthy's signature concern with "daddies"—those institutional structures that control and restrain the populace. Even as it performs these two homologous functions, however, the bottle is also implicitly critical (particularly given its placement in a small European town) of imperial America wanting its products on every dinner table across the globe, and beyond that, it figures an inherent fragility beneath the monumentality, in the possibility of deflation. Whereas McCarthy's video installations might be credited with tracking his culture's drift into a taste for affectless violence and massive spectacle, he can't seem to both mirror it *and* make us care; instead, he leaves us with off-putting reminders that he is a successful cog in the contemporary art machine, which makes it tempting to scale up simply for the sake of it. In *Daddies Ketchup Inflatable*, by contrast, the various snares seem intended and controlled: There is every reason for inflatedness on the roof of SMAK. This Daddies bottle is a puffed-up, ostentatiously expensive, crass piece of showmanship, but the more one considers it, the more it seems to be performing a classic McCarthy move—punching itself in the face. □