

ISSUE Magazine

McCormick, Carlo: *Paul McCarthy's Abject Object of Desire*  
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## PAUL MCCARTHY'S ABJECT OBJECT OF DESIRE

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*Client: Whitewall Magazine*



Portrait of Paul McCarthy

Paul McCarthy is really excited. We got to hang out with him for an afternoon while he was in New York putting together a chocolate factory, and now that he's back home in Los Angeles we want to know how he thinks it all went. "It was an utter failure, just as I intended," he jokes. "Of course, it worked fine—too well, really—but the model itself was flawed. It never had a chance of success." Giddy with failure, he couldn't feel more gratified. But that, we suppose, is the very rare artist he is—a man whose most disconcerting and disturbing creative gestures have against all aesthetic odds become cherished commodities, a provocateur along the fault line of materiality who has turned the chaotic and repugnant into a fine art while making stuff that no one should want but we, as a culture, quite desperately need. He is so benevolent, kindhearted, and sincere that we have to remind ourselves from time to time that underneath that gentle, paternal exterior and twinkling, mischievous smile is a dangerous man whose work is extraordinarily deviant by any reasonable measure.

In the relatively safe retrospect of 2008, it is hard to measure which was more shocking—his absolutely outré performance work of the late sixties and seventies, which, even in that most uncommercial moment of avant-garde process-based explorations of body and self, was so viscerally disquieting as to transgress the archest radicalisms of the day, or how in the early nineties he turned to object making (that is, the distillation of psychological atrocity in a form that approximated sculpture) with just enough uncanny humor that somehow the art world embraced ideas, sensations, and experiences that have always been so patently impolite one could never imagine them in a gallery, let alone a collector's home. To say that this once thoroughly underground cult figure has emerged from decades of artistic and financial struggle to thrive and prosper is a major understatement. And understatement is not exactly the vernacular McCarthy is known for. While it is certainly nice to see how the ambassadors of cultural value have for once gotten it spot-on, we must also acknowledge that his eventual ratification constitutes a bit more than mere persistence of vision. He has managed to universalize his visual demonology, and this, we must suspect, is because no matter how grotesque and perverse his personal iconography may be, it is more profoundly a caricature of our greater social pathology.

"As soon as I began using video, I was more interested in its properties as an object than merely a mode of documentation," McCarthy explains. This was extremely prescient, considering that he began transforming his performance art into videos as soon as he arrived in Los Angeles, with *Spinning*, in 1970. But he consciously makes a distinction between his work and that of his close circle of peers on the West Coast: "Bruce [Nauman] was very much concerned with process, and Chris [Burden] was not so interested in video as he was in the single iconic moment," he remembers, "but I was immediately intrigued by how the

videotape itself could be an art object, a form that when watched would not be a surrogate explanation for some previous event, but a narrative body itself.”

McCarthy is a master of grotesque fables, metaphors for our social dis-ease, and the vertiginous effects of his early experimental videos soon gave way to ever more disorienting and ornate stories. “Living in L.A., where all the films are made, I guess I was naturally curious about how those fictions could function,” he admits, “and a lot of my performance and video art, from Sailors Meat to Popeye, could come from old stills or scripts I might pick up in the stores around here then.”

With his form and content so contentious from the get-go, it takes this confession of his own process to understand how inherently postmodern his sense of narrative was — long before such a notion would gain currency in art world academia.

The phenomenal success that McCarthy’s art enjoys— his calendar of major public art commissions, museum exhibitions, and gallery installations keeps him as busy and in demand as any contemporary artist these days—is, he will freely and modestly admit, some measure of failure. “By the end of the eighties I was not happy with where my work was going, so I took some time for myself in the studio to rethink what it was I wanted to do as an artist,” he tells us, “but the obvious fact was that the level of interest and support for video- and performance-based work was clearly waning, especially in the United States. I could have kept on going, but as the spaces became much more about what could be sold in market terms, my way of working was less and less able to support my ideas.” It would be easy to take this bit of honesty as testament to some degree of selling out, but only if one ignores how extreme his visual language remains or the way in which his objects disrupt public engagement in even more

subversive and horrifically psychosexual terms than those not-for-the-fainthearted performances of yore where all manner of foodstuffs acted as viscous ventriloquisms for the more vulgar cornucopia of blood, sperm, fecal matter, and glutinous consumption at the heart of American consumerist desire. And though seemingly untroubled by his place in the highbrow firmament—which is remarkable, considering how long he has exercised the lowbrow to confront the commodity fetish that now subsumes even his most difficult work—McCarthy’s ironic ideology of the irascible object remains a defiant critique of the perversities of late-capitalist consumerism.

**“HOW MANY PEOPLE DO YOU THINK  
THERE COULD BE WHO WOULD WANT TO  
PAY A HUNDRED DOLLARS FOR A  
CHOCOLATE STATUE OF SANTA CLAUS  
HOLDING A BUTT PLUG?”**

—MCCARTHY

Which brings us back to the chocolate Santa Claus he made this past Christmas in New York City. Why was this show, by most accounts a sensation in the art world and popular media alike, a failure? Or rather, what was the ideal of failure that McCarthy was seeking and that so elated him in the end? The product, quite unlike his monumental public sculptures and over-the-top installations, was delightfully simple. And by any comparison to the convoluted processes by which art is bought and sold in the privileged inner-sanctums of culture, manufacturing chocolate Santas for mass retail at a mere hundred dollars each is a veritably straightforward business model. How could it go wrong? And more important, why? First we must consider the obvious fact that, famous though he may be in the limited domain of the art world, McCarthy has no greater prominence than any contemporary artist, which in the realm of popular culture is a negligible step up from absolute obscurity. I doubt that bothers him in the least, but it is essential to keep in mind when you understand that, for all the evident modesty of means, this project was conceived on a scale more appropriate to a business model than the relative cottage industry of fine art.

Though more of an alternative space than the usual blue-chip galleries that show his work, *Maccarone Gallery* would not have any problem selling quite a number of limited- edition McCarthy multiples. But therein lies the rub. Far from being some select numbered issue, McCarthy’s “Peter Paul Chocolates” was a real working factory, up to health code, gourmet-quality control, and mass production standards, as one would expect of any commercially functioning factory. Let’s not forget the generational ambivalence toward mainstream acceptance that characterized the underground currents of sixties and seventies counterculture. By the same thinking that would make us question as aesthetically problematic the reproduction of McCarthy’s iconic *Santa holding a butt plug* (previously exhibited at last year’s Art Basel) into a delicious and affordable chocolate for the masses, we might as well consider who the intended market for such a product could possibly be. “They haven’t done the numbers yet,” Paul has said, “but how many people do you think there could be who would want to pay a hundred dollars for a chocolate statue of Santa Claus holding a butt plug? It’s not exactly archival in the

way most art objects are supposed to be either. The factory itself made one thousand a day, and there's no way that the audience for this could ever support such an investment or output. Maybe it lost a hundred thousand dollars in the end—I don't know. But what I wanted, for there to be so many made that the space would be swamped with them and turn into a chaotic mess, that did happen for sure." A valuable lesson in the economics of desire—in closing, just consider what it means for an artist who has used chocolate as the allegorical equivalent of human excrement for some four decades.

*Class Fool*, 1976 courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London/Zurich

*Contemporary Cure All*, 1979 courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London/Zurich

In collaboration with Damon McCarthy, *Caribbean Pirates*, 2001–2005 courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London/Zurich photo: Ann-Marie Rounkle

*Chocolate Blockhead Nosebar*, 2000 courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London/Zurich photo: Roman Mensing

*Santa with Butt Plug (Large)*, 2002–2004 courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London/Zurich

*Chocolate Santa with Butt Plug*, 2007 courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London/Zurich photo: Tom Powel

Studio views of Spinning Room, 1971–2008 courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London/Zurich photo: Tom Powel

*Angelina*, 2005–2008 photo: Ann-Marie Rounkle



Paul McCarthy's Los Angeles studio



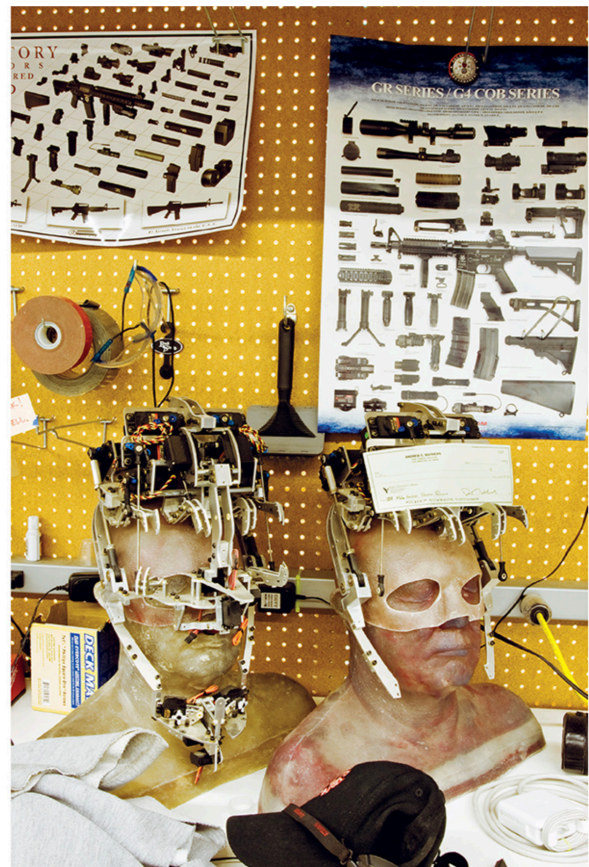
right: *Class Fool*, 1976; *Contemporary Cure All*, 1979; *Caribbean Pirates*, 2001–2005



*Chocolate Blockhead*, 2000; *Shit Inflatable*, 2007



Santa with Butt Plug (Large), 2002–2004; Chocolate Santa with Butt Plug, 2007



(Above) Eye balls and (right) two Captain Morgan animatronic head masks; (below) studio work station



left: Pig Island, Various studio views of Pig Island, right: Studio view of Alice, 2005–present



Studio view of untitled works in progress (Hummels)





Doorway to molding workshop



Paul in studio kitchen