

Blau International, Berlin, no. 6

Tittel, Cornelius: *Just The Two of Us*
Summer 2022



JUST THE TWO OF US

When American artist **PAUL McCARTHY** met German actress **LILITH STANGENBERG**, neither one could have foreseen the dramatic turn their encounter would take. Five years, two major movie productions (both as yet unseen), and countless drawing sessions later, the duo sits down with *Cornelius Tittel* to talk about their recent show in Bergen, Paul's return to live performance, and their responsibility to "use up" Hitler and Braun





CORNELIUS TITTEL: Paul and Lilith, the last time I saw you in person was in Bergen, Norway, for the show at Kode, *Dead End Hole*. It opened with a performance by the two of you. Paul, this was your first live performance in how many years?

— **PAUL McCARTHY:** I stopped doing performances in front of an actual audience in the early 1980s, but during the filming that we've done over the past 20 years, there would be people off to the side watching, both the crew and those who were invited to watch. I was still interested in people watching. Knowing that they were there would affect the performance. It's a hybrid theater situation.

What made you stop performing in front of live audiences?

— **PM:** In the early 1980s, I had just come back from Europe, where I'd done 13 performances in a row. They were pretty intense for me, so I didn't want to do public performances or actions anymore. Psychologically, I was fucked up.

Plus, the performance art world changed at that time. It became more cabaret-like, and alternative spaces started building stages in black rooms with theatrical lighting. I think of it as an aesthetic corporate takeover. The attitude of what performance art was changed, and a number of artists stopped doing live performances and went in another direction, like sculpture, music, writing, life, whatever. I was in Los Angeles, and there were always films being made on the street. While I was interested in the Hollywood spectacle, Hollywood Boulevard. The image of films being made in the city and people watching from the sidelines gave me this crazy idea of making a B-movie studio as a sculpture, as an appropriation of Hollywood. A studio making the abject.

Now, in Bergen, the live performance was a hybrid, between working with a film crew and for a live audience. It played out in the basement of the museum while the audience was on the upper floor, seeing everything broadcast live. Was that because you couldn't really perform in front of a real audience due to Covid?

— **PM:** No, it had nothing to do with Covid. We had this plan: we were going to hang ourselves. Lilith and I were going to enter the space where the drawings were installed, and then we would hang ourselves in the middle of the room, as a stunt. We had been working on this gag for the *A&E* movie.

There was a hyper-realist sculpture of the two of you hanging in the main room, surrounded by drawings. You wanted to do that live, with an audience?

— **PM:** Yeah, as a trick, but when we tried to rehearse it last summer, we couldn't quite get it right, so we gave up on doing it for Bergen. Lilith said we should do a performance somewhere outside or in the museum instead. When I contacted the museum and asked if there was a space we could use for a performance, they came back with, "We have this bunker, this bomb shelter from the 1950s or 1960s in the basement." It seemed interesting, especially as we were still filming *A&E*, and the drawings were from the *A&E* drawing sessions. Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun, their suicide in the bunker—there were connections. The problem was how the audience would view it, as we couldn't take them into this room. It's not that big. The idea of routing the performance upstairs as a projection, live, was interesting. I also thought it was interesting that the museum would be a giant empty building that had four or five floors of empty rooms, and we would be in the basement, and the projections for the audience would be two floors above us, and the drawings a floor above that.

Lilith, as one of the most celebrated theater and movie actresses in Germany, how did you end up doing this very extreme, very controversial performance, acting Eva Braun opposite Paul McCarthy's Adolf?

— **LILITH STANGENBERG:** I started my acting in theater, at Berlin's Volksbühne, and I think Paul had been talking with them for years. They wanted to invite him to do a show or something on stage. I was still part of the company, during Frank Castorf's last year, when it finally happened: Paul came to the Volksbühne to show an exhibition called *Rebel Dabble Babble*. They didn't just want a museum-like exhibition, however, they wanted something live. When the idea arose that he should redo some scenes from the video installation with German actors from the company, I saw Paul's footage and thought it was so magical and so perfect. I actually said: "I cannot redo it, because it's already too good. I don't know what I could add." But one video of a performance where Paul made some big paintings kind of dragged me in. I decided that I should just do what he wants me to do. Let's try it, whatever. We only worked for three days in Berlin, but what I experienced was very new to me—a level of freedom I had never achieved before. It was really about losing control, and that created a very interesting state. And in a strange way, I have to say, performing with Paul made me really, really happy.

Did you sense that this was just the beginning?

— **LS:** Well, at the end of those days in Berlin, we decided to do a new version of *The Night Porter*, because both of us were very interested in that film. But it didn't happen for three years, and we didn't have a lot of contact over that time. I didn't have a cellphone and I'd never write emails. I was very wild.

Paul, what is your first memory of Lilith?

— **PM:** *Rebel Dabble Babble* was an installation of a set with video projections, a piece that my son Damon and I had done in LA in 2015. In Berlin, Lilith and I redid a scene from the *Rebel* video that involved gravy and a bathtub. We did it upstairs, in a bathroom of the theater, not on stage, and similarly to the Bergen performance we routed the video down to projectors near the theater's lobby. Doing this action with Lilith, I immediately felt that she was somebody I wanted to work with. There was a similar sensibility and interest. It just made sense. The idea to remake *The Night Porter* happened in rehearsal. The bathroom had tiled walls, Lilith was on the tiled floor, and at one point I thought, "It's like a scene from *The Night Porter*!" So I jokingly said we should remake it. Lilith said something like: "That is one of my favorite movies. Should I sing the song?" Two years later, we were asked to make the film in Vienna, with the understanding that it would be funded through a Viennese government grant, but the funding never came through. So in 2018 we built a large set in our LA studio, and in 2019 we shot *Night Vater* over 30 days. I played the character of Max and Lilith played the character of Lucia. *Night Vater* has direct connections to *The Night Porter*, but at the same time I think it is more primal: it's an abstraction. And from *Night Vater* came *A&E*.

***A&E*, meaning, "Adolf and Eva"?**

— **PM:** Adolf and Eva. Or Adam and Eve. Or arts and entertainment [laughs].

I have seen still images of both these two big film projects. The ones from *Night Vater* are extremely beautiful—if one can say that about these very gruesome and often bloody pictures—but in a very Old Master kind of way. The colors and the misc-en-scène is breathtaking. Yet the world hasn't seen it, because it hasn't been edited, even though you shot it a few years ago. How is it possible that this masterpiece of yours, of the two of you, has not been shared with humankind, while you are already deep in filming the next one, *A&E*?

— **LS:** [Laughs]

— **PM:** For one thing, there's a lot of material. There is only so much time in the day, and I think Covid played a crazy part in it, and I'm also just trying to keep everything else going. Money and time became a problem. I like doing the actions, the performances, the drawings, and the scripts, which end up being lists. I'm interested in editing. The possibilities, variations, and combinations of *NV* and *A&E* seem almost endless. Damon and I are now editing *Night Vater*. We're working on it.

"In one way I think we're a functioning production company, and then, on the other hand, from the outside, we could easily be seen as dysfunctional" — PM

But you're obviously more interested in shooting, right?

— **PM:** Yes, and in performing. For the past year or two, I've been really involved in watching the videos and trying to figure out what to do. Then there are the still images, about 300,000 of them from *Night Vater* alone. I think I become obsessed with looking.

I don't think of *Night Vater* and *A&E* as feature films. You could edit them as features, but it's hard, because what do you cut out when there is so much? I think of them as episodes, a series for the future. *Night Vater* could be 20 episodes, each one an hour and a half. There's that much material.

With *A&E*, Covid put a stop to it for over a year. But we finally shot something this past summer. I think that parts of what we did are really, really good. The idea is to try and shoot something in June and July this year, or as soon as we can. Covid really screwed things up. When Lilith came last August, she first had to go to Mexico and stay for two weeks just to get into the US. Then, protecting everybody while we were shooting in the high desert, the organization of all that... In one way I think we're a functioning production company, and then, on the other hand, from the outside, we could easily be seen as dysfunctional.

Lilith, you've been working so intensely on these projects and you've barely seen anything. Is that a problem for you?

— **LS:** I never went to an acting school, so right from the beginning, and at a pretty young age, I always felt the pressure of an opening night or a premiere, and of course there were always critics. So I never developed something just for myself. During *Night Vater* and these *A&E* shoots, though, I experienced the importance of





momentum and process. There's nothing more important than what I go through in a scene or during a shoot. It was a very, very, interesting experience for me, and I think it made me a better actress. But of course, I would really love to see the film, as what I underwent during the shoot was special. I'm used to an audience, and I like to deliver myself to people. On the other hand, it also made sense for me to just keep going and film *A&E*, because I was interested in that too.

After your lead role in the German film *Wild*, you were celebrated as the most radical actress in the country. Even so, do you ever think, "Maybe it's good that people haven't seen what I was doing in LA, because they couldn't handle it?"

—LS: I don't know. I think art also means taking responsibility, and I'm very interested in work that attempts to reveal things society tries to hide. I'm also a very moralistic person, and as a German I feel like it's my responsibility to play Eva Braun over and over and over again [*laughs*]. It's very important to confront yourself with those kinds of figures. I see them like toys. It's good to use them up, to wear them out, and not to conserve them and not touch them, because then they'll come back at a certain point.

It's like an exorcism?

—LS: Yeah. Of course those subjects are dark, and it's possible that for some people the images are shocking or too violent. But I see them as being complex and profound. Maybe it's not possible to show the work in a normal cinema, but, I don't know, for me there's definitely much more truth in seeing *Salò* by Pasolini than in any Steven Spielberg film dealing with concentration camps.

How did you—familiar as you are with German movie studios—experience what Paul describes as his "dysfunctional" production company?

—LS: I used to work in theaters that were funded by the government, and they had so many rules. Every night the curtain must go up. But the studio Paul has—I've never seen anything like it. When we shot *Night Vater*, we had a big set, and every day the whole set was lit, so we could decide what to shoot quite spontaneously. Normally you have limited time for each scene and you shoot an entire film in 20 days. There's always this economic pressure. It was very different, the experience I had with Paul. His studio is quite a utopian place. I really came to understand what Hollywood might be. I mean, Paul, you're so *not* Hollywood, but the mentality in the studio is like a *Traumfabrik*.

A dream factory.

—LS: Yeah, a subversive version of the dream factory.

After spending that much time with Paul in LA, did it feel weird to come back to Germany and do more mainstream jobs?

—LS: I think that I'm a pretty lucky actress, because I never did something just for the money. Every part I played, I wanted to play because I was interested in the part.

But this masterclass in transgression that you've been through with Paul, it must have informed the acting you're now doing, no?

—LS: I think my whole relationship to language changed. I knew the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille and Antonin Artaud from my work at the Volksbühne, and I think I understood them intellectually. But while working with Paul, especially in the drawing sessions, I experienced something that's beyond logic. It was as if I myself became poetry or language. Maybe it happens when words loosen their sense, when the emotion is more important than the meaning. I guess that's what Artaud *wanted* to do.

During the drawing sessions, I often felt that my body, with all the sounds it can produce, degenerated into something not human. Afterwards I felt that I was dealing with language very differently from the way I did before. Now, for example, when I have a monologue in a theater show, I am more interested in

"I'm a very moralistic person, and as a German I feel like it's my responsibility to play Eva Braun over and over and over again" — LS

what it's like to take words into your body, into your mind, and to then spit them out, or chew them, or softly destroy them, and deliver them.

Let's talk about the drawing sessions, which were also part of your show in Bergen—these large-scale drawings that you've been doing together. They are created "in character," like in a performance or film shoot. Paul, is this collaboration something new in your drawing practice?

—PM: The large paintings and drawings that I did starting in the late 1960s were often done as an action, on the ground or on a table, and I would get on top. I'd often talk while I was painting or drawing. I realized that I didn't want to use a brush, because it

would take too long to paint the surfaces black. I used a rag instead. Then I realized that if I lit them on fire, they would turn black right away, so I'd paint out on the street and light the paintings on fire. At some point I would beat on them with a hammer or a rock...

I wasn't aware of Yves Klein or of Viennese actionism at that time, but I knew about Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. My own paintings I thought of as doors and windows, and I would call them doors and windows. I have always connected drawing and painting with action. In 2003, I was working on an installation and video performance with Damon titled *Caribbean Pirates*, referencing the Disneyland ride "Pirates of the Caribbean." At that time, Bush had entered Iraq, and *Caribbean Pirates* was about invasion. I made large drawings on a table, and while making them I talked constantly, speaking as a caricature, an exaggeration of a pirate. When I did *White Snow* with Elyse Poppers, I made drawings while being Walt Disney or "Walt Paul." Elyse was "White Snow." We made them in this artificial forest.

After Lilith and I did *Night Vater*, we made drawings. The first of these were small, done in the Marriott Hotel room we built into the large set called "The Maze," constructed in the LA studio. Later, we did five big drawings on a large table, when we were both in character, as Lucia and Max. Then, when *A&E* happened, we did three more sessions. One of them was outside, up in the lower Sierra Nevada mountains, in the high desert. These drawing sessions were more intense than any of the previous drawing series. I think the effect is much deeper and maybe more elusive, harder to grasp. There isn't a plan for the action or what a drawing will be. The closest thing to a plan is what is on the table and what Lilith chooses to wear.

And you undress.

—PM: The paper goes on the table and then it starts. Each one of the drawings seems to come out of the actions and out of the air. They are sometimes related to each other, but they're also unique—each one has its own structure, its own composition. While doing the drawing, I seem to go in and out of what's happening. My focus is interrupted. It's a type of distraction, I don't care about the outcome, like being drunk, delirium play. When I draw by myself, that type of sensation can sometimes happen, but it has *always* happened in these drawing sessions. It's hard to say how it works. I often stand up at the end and look at the drawing, and think, "OK, when did that happen?" Am I really in a trance?

I don't think so. My brain is split, and everything is happening in the middle of opposites.

You asked Lilith what she gained from working with Paul, but it's also, what did Paul gain from working with Lilith? What happens in these spaces for me? What happened in Bergen and what happened in Tehachapi? It's important to me. Is it in the lineage of what I've been doing? Does it have connections to the past and what's been happening in my work? Yes. Will these things get formed into something? Yes. I've always been interested in collaborations.

There's a brilliant photograph of the two of you standing inside a closet during one of these drawing sessions. You, Paul, have a baseball bat taped to your dick, and Lilith is wearing nothing more than ripped pantyhose in an American flag motif. Is this a planned photograph or something that just evolved?

—PM: A similar kind of closet was in both *The Night Porter* and *Night Vater*. Lilith went in and out of the cupboard during our action. After the drawing was done, or towards the end, we were having a discussion near the closet and Alex was taking photographs of us, so we stood there for him, briefly posing and then continuing. **So the photograph shows you having a break inside a cupboard, but Lilith is at your feet and you've got a baseball bat taped to your dick. If I may ask, what kind of discussion did you have in a situation like this?**

—PM: I think we were talking about Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. I kept thinking, "I'm like a Charlie Chaplin, pathetic, the Tramp". Right? Then there's this connection between Adolf Hitler and Charlie Chaplin. I remember just standing and posing as both of them. At some point during the past year, Lilith became interested in Eva Braun turning into Marilyn Monroe—Eva Braun as a German woman who had an interest in Hollywood and glamour. Adolf Hitler also had an interest in Hollywood and Walt Disney. His favorite film was *Snow White*. As an American, Paul adopts the image of Adolf Hitler as a buffoon in *A&E*. Then there's what was and is going on in America and the world at the moment. This also feeds into all of this thinking and doing. You can't block it, you can't stop it. It goes into the body.

It's very much what continued in Bergen.

—PM: I think it's what Lilith said, to use Hitler and Braun up, to eat them. I think that, in Bergen, I'm a pathetic leech. Towards the end of that performance, when I tape my face, I'm drunk from drinking and acting drunk. It's so strange how it went back to pieces I had done in the early 1970s, but also how we had degenerated as two people, how fucked up I became—a sad character, just pathetic. A deconstruction of a male



NV, Butter, 2019



psyche. Eva the daughter, Adolf the father, Eva the mother, Adolf the son. A string of versions of Oedipus. The layers get really complicated. Am I Adolf Hitler, or what am I? Are we archetypes of aspects of the human condition, male and female? Maybe it's about mining the area of what we are at this point. Or it's just us, the two of us.

The work is obviously a formed image of dumb aggression, the violence, but these characters are media characters as well. How do we now know what Hitler did to the world? Through the media. What and who was Marilyn Monroe? Something innocent and unbelievable. These two humans are two famous opposites within culture. But then, Lilith and I are really not trying to be Marilyn Monroe, Eva Braun, or Adolf Hitler. We're not making a period piece or describing who Hitler or Braun were. It's a broader subject. I think it's connected to existence, to the human, and in this case, to the male and the female.

—LS: Did I tell you this story of when Billy Wilder was shooting *Some Like It Hot*? Marilyn Monroe didn't want to rehearse the kissing scene with Tony Curtis, and Curtis got angry. Then, when they shot the scene, he said, "Oh wow, that was like kissing Adolf Hitler!" Everyone was in shock. They were scared that Monroe would hear about it and leave the film.

"Only a few people can embody cruelty in a way that I believe them. To me, Paul is as funny as Charlie Chaplin and still I believe that he could kill me" — LS

—PM: Wow.

—LS: Making buffoons out of Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun, for me, may be the only interesting way of making a film about them. I believe you have to fall very far and become very pathetic to play those characters.

—PM: When we shot *A&E* last August, we did a chapter titled "A&E, Picnic in the Garden of Eden" for the first three days. It's where the two characters, "Adolf/Adam" and "Eva/Eve," enter a grove of trees. They're drinking champagne as they arrive, and they end up stuck and drunk in the middle of the grove for several hours. As you see them come up the hill, dressed, it already starts forming. Then, after they enter the grove, the picnic begins, and later they're on all fours. In the end is the killing. They've gone to a more primal state.

Paul, are you even an actor, or is it something else that you're doing? Or maybe I'd better ask Lilith, as she is

one of the best actresses I've seen on screen. How would you describe Paul as an actor?

—LS: I don't really like to say it, because I don't really want to disturb myself with these kinds of simplifications, but working with Paul I experienced something I rarely find when working with an actor. Actors often want to *expose* themselves—is that the right word?

You mean they want to show off their brilliance as actors?

—LS: Yes, and often it doesn't really matter if it's you they're acting with or, I don't know, a cup of tea or a vase full of flowers. With Paul it's something special. He dedicates himself so much to the momentum and to the process, as if everything else—the result, the product—doesn't matter. That's very challenging in the beginning, because there is so much truth in it that you cannot plan or control things. It's difficult to describe. It's like digging deep into your intestines. Only a few people can embody cruelty in a way that I believe them, but with Paul in character it's totally believable. To me, he's sometimes as funny as Charlie Chaplin and still I believe that he could kill me.

How do you find the drawing sessions?

—LS: When we make those drawings, they're set on the floor or a table, and we're on top of them. I see them a little bit like stages or boxing rings. It's like being in an abstract window or an abstract field. When I am on a movie set, it's much easier for me to reveal certain emotions, easier than in reality. It's as if in the abstraction or imitation, I can get closer to life. This is also something I experienced while doing the drawings.

I also think that it's not just beings that have souls or spirits, but objects can have them too. Like in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, there's this house with the windows where the mother lives. The camera films the house, and I feel the house look back at me. It's a being. It has a soul. When I saw those drawings in Bergen, it was the first time I saw them in a museum like this, next to each other. I felt that they have spirits too. They're very powerful. They attract, as if they're dragging me in or dragging something out of me. I feel they communicate with the spectator's subconscious. They look back at me. I like them so much.

For me the drawings also have a kind of religious power. They speak to subjects like fanaticism and insanity and death and madness. Another interesting thing—and I think this goes with how we do them and with what Paul described before—is that all of them are about relationships. Power relations

between men and women, fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, and the abuse of power in a patriarchal system. I think everyone knows these themes. Everyone has a mother or father, everyone has to deal with those kinds of conflicts. It's about our own conditioning. Also, I think they're very funny.

Because you mention power structures, I imagine that being holed up with Paul in a desert outside of LA, filming for days with a very small team, basically living there together, being in character most of the day—I imagine this must come with a toll, coming back to you at night, creeping into your dreams.

—LS: Of course, the subjects we're dealing with in *A&E* or *Night Vater* are very, very dark. They don't leave you unpunished, but I'm happy that I can deal with those questions in art. I don't have to do it in real life. I think good and evil, the tendency or possibility to be evil, is in every one of us. Maybe that's the human catastrophe. So it's of tremendous importance for me to confront myself with those cultural and civilizational taboos. Our film is a critique, an attempt to understand. For me, art is a door, an entrance to deal with those fields.

Paul, this thing you did in Bergen and of course these movie projects, they don't seem to smoothly match the current zeitgeist. A performance like that, I can't imagine that happening in New York City or Minneapolis. Do you see the window of opportunity to show this work becoming narrower and narrower? What is your answer to that?

—PM: It is simply what I do and want to do. I don't have any interest in stopping or not doing something because of some situation that's happening within the art world or society or whatever. I've felt that my position within the art world has always been a limited slice of the art world pie. At this point, this is who I am, and these are the people I'm connected to and want to work with. When there's time, when Lilith and I can get it together and want to do something, we can do it again. We're doing two theater pieces in August and September.

In Europe?

—PM: In Hamburg and Vienna, and the drawings from the *A&E* drawing sessions might also be shown in Austria this year. I do think that the art world has changed. Money becomes critical in how we will do the next project. Part of the problem is that, as the art world became more conservative, the work we were doing at the studio went in the opposite direction [*laughs*].

But while you are becoming more and more of an outcast in the contemporary art world, you still need these big resources, like a real movie studio.

—PM: These projects are low budget in relation to the Hollywood film world, or even to most of what's referred to as "low-budget" films. It's a combination of paying what you have, and also of simply going into debt. Those who hold the purse strings are gambling on a future, but I don't want to dwell on it. I want to think about what's been done and what to do next.

"As the art world became more conservative, the work we were doing at the studio went in the opposite direction" — PM

—LS: This new zeitgeist, I feel it's very dangerous for the arts. Bertolt Brecht once said something like, "You won't improve the audience's taste if you rid the film of its tastelessness, but you will make the film worse." I like tasteless films. Often, I find more truth in them. These days, with political correctness and cancel culture, I often feel it results in a dictatorship of good taste. Everything that's produced is checked and adjusted for its commercial quality. I observe, especially with young actors, that they're very strict about which words you can use and which not. When I grew up, I worked with an older generation of artists who fought hard for the freedom of opinion, and they always worked to defend that. So for me it's a strange thing when people start to cancel themselves. They don't even dare to try certain things because it could be *wrong*. For me, in art, everything should be allowed. Art can go in any direction and there shouldn't be a limit. It's a playground.

—PM: I think we're carrying on a discussion and an expression in these actions and performances. It can be misunderstood by the viewer, who might think that what we're doing should be condemned, blocked. They could misread the work and not realize what we're doing is *about* something; it's *not* that thing. They might not see it as language. I think both of us are aware that what we're doing is *our* definition of art, that it hits the subconscious and private zones in ourselves. That means we're going to mine parts of ourselves. It's a lot to do with trust, trusting each other in a very open situation. We understand that we're dealing with the subject of life. You take on these subjects, you enter that world. Like Lilith said, at the end of the day, I am still shooting, I am still in the action, or my brain is still there, and the subconscious processes it.