The New York Times
Miller, M.H.: *An Artist Exposing Fascism Through Provocation*
17 February 2021

The New York Times

ARTS & LETTERS

An Artist Exposing Fascism Through Provocation

Paul McCarthy has spent his career cultivating a visual language of depravity and scathing critique. After half a century, we still can't turn away.

By M.H. Miller
Feb. 17, 2021

AS AN ADMIRER of Paul McCarthy — an artist known for his multidisciplinary, frequently scatological works that combine performance, drawing, painting, video and sculpture, often simultaneously — I've seen him in a variety of exposed moments and compromised positions that are difficult to describe in terms that The New York Times's standards department would consider appropriate. I've seen McCarthy, nude except for a pair of black socks and a rubber baby mask, with his genitals tightly tucked between his legs (1998's "Sod and Sodie Sock Comp O.S.O."); I've seen him spread open his buttocks to reveal his anus (1973's "Glass Case"); I've seen his anus and genitals covered in ketchup and raw meat (1975's "Tubbing," among other works); I've seen him ejaculate onto a picture of Marilyn Monroe (1975's "Marilyn Monroe"); I've seen him in a sea captain's uniform, his pants around his ankles, as well as his underwear, sagging from a load of ketchup, mustard and mayonnaise, a concoction McCarthy drinks by running a long hose from the underwear directly into his mouth ("Death Ship," from 1983). It would be easy to argue that no other artist has so regularly degraded himself for public consumption.

McCarthy's work has always concerned our shared capacity for ugliness, but at 75, he's turned to explicitly grappling with fascism, a theme he's been touching on in some way or another for several decades. Distilled to its essentials, fascism is history doomed to repeat itself over and over, "a boot stamping on a human face — forever," as George Orwell so memorably put it in his novel "1984." This coincides with McCarthy's work, which often involves its author exploring unmentionable abominations so frequently that they become ordinary, a routine of debasement. Broadcasting his own embarrassment and suffering becomes an attempt to work through something inherently disgusting about human nature itself. A 2017-19 project, "NV, Night Vater," inspired by the 1974 drama "The Night Porter" — featuring an elaborate, disorienting, 100-foot-long, 40-foot-wide set that comprises a series of rooms, including a re-creation of the apartment from the film where an ex-Nazi and a former concentration camp prisoner engage in a sadomasochistic relationship — led to his most recent work, "A&E" (2019-present) in which McCarthy plays a version of Adolf Hitler. The title "A&E" is his shorthand for Adolf and Eva — as in Eva Braun, the Führer's mistress, played by the German actress Lilith Stangenberg — but, as is typical in his work, the performances contain multiple layers. Those letters also stand for Adam and Eve, and arts and entertainment. All of these strands inform the characters, who become bizarre amalgamations: Not quite serious portrayals of Hitler and Eva Braun — or, for that matter, Adam and Eve — they contain within them the archetypes of what we perceive as evil, and what we believe to be innocent. As part of the performance, McCarthy produced drawings in character, many of which are on view this month at his New York gallery Hauser & Wirth, his first solo show of new work there in four years. Stangenberg, who described herself as the project's "midwife," collaborated closely with McCarthy on these works, performing various actions while he drew and painted — including lying on top of the canvas, or underneath the artist — an attempt to produce works by, as McCarthy put it, "two humans occupying one mind." The drawings look like those a child might produce for a social worker to explain a traumatic experience.

"We were sort of mining an area that's problematic," McCarthy said to me during a series of Zoom interviews in the second half of last year. We both laughed at this understatement. What could possibly be more problematic than Hitler? The artist said that after Trump's election, he was fascinated by the number of people he would hear comparing Trump to Hitler, tossing around the term "fascism" seemingly without consideration for the history the word contains. He took issue with this, not because the comparison wasn't valid but because of how casually people made it. "To a degree, Nazi Germany is a case of hypnotism," he said. "Like, they believed it. And it was easy to go, 'They made Germany an evil population, because they're evil by nature.'" This, he said, was absurd. "We're all capable of it, right? Whatever was ignited in them can be ignited in us. And we see it. What are we watching right now?" He paused and added: "QAnon, dude!" (He was referring to the pro-Trump internet conspiracy theory that perpetuates centuries-old anti-Semitic ideas.) "What part of the population do you need to create fascism?" he continued. "You don't need the whole population. For me it was like, yeah, the subject's problematic, but it's the subject."

He was speaking to me from his house in Los Angeles, where he's lived since 1970. The only thing I could see behind him was a wooden cutout of Santa Claus — it was July — whom he resembles. That seemed to sum up something about McCarthy, whose ability to confront topics that so many others would shrink from is often presented with a kitschy sense of humor. One of my favorite works of his is 1992's "Cultural Gothic," an installation of fiberglass animatronic sculptures (inspired by rides at Disneyland, including Pirates of the Caribbean), featuring a father and son standing in a field with a goat. The father has his hands resting proudly on the shoulders of the son, who looks ecstatic. It appears like an earnest family portrait, a true expression of paternal love, and it is that, to some extent, except, well, the father happens to be encouraging his son to fornicate with the goat.

"A&E" is the latest in a series of multitiered, almost comically ambitious works that began with 2013's "WS, White Snow." A kind of X-rated retelling of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937), it was presented at the Park Avenue Armory in New York and included 47 hours of video, an enormous environment that really did look like the enchanted forest and a faithful re-creation of the house in which McCarthy grew up in Utah, the headquarters of sorts for the Nine Dwarfs ("We added a couple," he said), who in the artist's version of the fairy tale are drunken buffoons. Instead of working, they spend most of their time engaged in a bacchanalian party that leaves the house (and the forest, the floor of which is covered in empty liquor bottles and crushed plastic cups) in shambles. The piece also seems to allude to the idea, possibly apocryphal, that Disney's "Snow White," one of the most beloved children's films of all time, was also beloved by Hitler. McCarthy's Snow White, played by Elyse Poppers, "wanders through the forest, finds the house, goes in and becomes the subject," said McCarthy. "They have parties. And eventually she dies outside, from alcohol poisoning. Basically passes out in the front yard — or in this artificial forest." He added matter-of-factly, "And Walt Disney is molested and killed by the Dwarfs."

A viewer of a McCarthy piece always ends up asking why: Why is he doing this? Why can't I look away? For this reason, it's not surprising that his work took on an added resonance in the Trump era, where wrestling with these same questions became part of the daily theater of waking up yet again in an America that had become a violent parody of itself. The suggestion that human beings are capable of anything — all the good and evil one could possibly conceive, Hitler in Germany and Adam in the Garden all wrapped up in one indivisible package — is crucial to understanding McCarthy. He told me about the first time he encountered in his research some of the rare color footage from the Third Reich, of a military parade in Munich in 1937. It was so starkly different from the black-and-white images of death camps, though in its way no less disturbing. It struck him that the true face of fascism couldn't be understood through the goose-stepping Nazis alone: It was also the large crowd of onlookers, the smiling parents with their children, so happy, so willing to be entertained. And that, in the end, was what was so unsettling about the footage: He couldn't get over the fact that, to him, it looked just like the parades at Disneyland.

MCCARTHY GREW UP outside Salt Lake City, the eldest of three siblings in a Mormon family that wasn't active in the church until after he'd left home. His father came from a line of poor farmers. His mother was a homemaker but always wanted to be an artist. His parents were supportive of him, never questioned his artistic aspirations or told him to get a real job. His childhood home was in a subdivision that was built to house veterans, but the developer soon went bankrupt. "So it was like three streets in the middle of nowhere," he said. "You went out my front door, and it looked like something out of 'The Brady Bunch.' You went out the back door, and there was nothing for 50 miles." While other children dreamed of growing up to play football, the wilds of his backyard made McCarthy obsessed with mountaineering, and he dreamed of living in Switzerland. As a teenager, his parents took him to Anaheim, Calif., to see the recently opened Disneyland. The Matterhorn Bobsleds, the park's first roller coaster, modeled on the mountain in the Alps, cemented his obsession with Alpine culture.

McCarthy on the set of his work "NV, Night Vater" (2017-19), which led to his most recent project, "A&E." Joyce Kim

He attended Weber State College in Utah for about a year, where he received an unexpectedly avant-garde arts education, learning in particular about found objects and ready-mades, before transferring to the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. At Weber State, there was one student show in the hallway of the school's cultural center where he showed an old cash register; another student showed a car door. It was around this time that he met Karen Player, who would become his closest collaborator and, soon, his wife. ("We both had common interests: getting the hell out of Utah," he said.) Karen gave him a copy of Allan Kaprow's 1966 book "Assemblage, Environments and Happenings," which would become the standard text on the development of performance art. McCarthy was already familiar with the Gutai group, a loose collective that emerged in postwar Japan and approached painting as a kind of theatrical event — artists painted with their feet or ran through wooden frames covered in paper. He was, in these years, nominally a painter, but his paintings all had some performative aspect: He'd make what he called "black paintings" by setting canvases on fire. "The actions themselves were kind of utilitarian," he said, "in that the easiest way to turn something black was to burn it. You know, the easiest way to paint for me was with a big rag. Why did I need a brush?"

In 1968, he and Karen moved to San Francisco so McCarthy could finish his undergraduate degree at the San Francisco Art Institute. The following year he was drafted and refused induction, which forced the couple to return to Utah to wait and see if he'd be sent to jail. His case went all the way to the Supreme Court as part of a class-action suit, miring him in a legal backwater — he wouldn't be granted conscientious-objector status until 1973. During this limbo, McCarthy enrolled at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, where he was in the multimedia department, "somewhere between art, video and film," he said. In one of his student works, McCarthy, with the help of a friend, knocked a hole in a wall to the outside of a building and called it a movie, alienating other members of the film school. He never had any intention of living or, once he arrived, staying there (he and Karen wanted to return to the Bay Area, or even to Salt Lake), but it was the only school that offered him a stipend. "We were always going to leave L.A.," he said. "And pretty soon, you're there forever."

It was upon his arrival in Los Angeles that McCarthy began developing his language of depravity. The 1970s witnessed a malaise that led to a breakdown in the status quo, a time that recalls our current moment all too well: People were fed up with the pointless war abroad and struggling to survive; they had lost faith in the political leaders who seemed to have no interest in helping the people who had elected them. The era's nihilism was reflected in its art, which was angrier, more confrontational, less pleasant than anything that had come before. In 1971, in front of a small audience at a gallery in Santa Ana, Calif., an artist named Chris Burden staged a performance called "Shoot," in which he had a friend shoot him in his left arm with a .22 caliber rifle because he wanted to know what it

felt like. In 1975, for a piece called “Interior Scroll,” Carolee Schneemann stripped naked in a gallery in East Hampton, N.Y., stood on a table, rubbed her face and body in paint and pulled a long piece of parchment out of her vagina, from which she read aloud; the text discussed her marginalization as a woman in the art world.

But even in a time distinguished by its ferocity, the works McCarthy made in the ’70s remain harrowing. In a 1974 performance called “Shit Face Painting,” the images of which are still difficult to regard without cringing, he covered his body in excrement — his beard was caked with it — and rolled around on a white rubber tarp laid out on the floor. In both “Hot Dog” (1974) and “Tubbing,” McCarthy visibly gags as he tries to consume large amounts of raw meat. In 1974’s “Meat Cake I,” an oddly moving exploration of gender, the artist, dressed in a black negligee, paints his body with ketchup, mayonnaise, margarine and minced meat, and eventually stuffs everything — food, condiments, negligee — into his white underwear, revealing the man underneath it all, who looks almost like a newborn fetus, his body slick with various fluids, his underwear diaperlike.

Sculptures in McCarthy’s studio. The artist has long had a fascination with Disney. Joyce Kim

UNSURPRISINGLY, THERE WASN’T a lot of enthusiasm for what McCarthy was doing in these early years. The artists who knew him (for instance, Burden) viewed him with a kind of awed reverence, but his career was not going well. The irony of this period is that, as McCarthy was producing some of the most gruesome performance art on record, he was also a loving husband and father, constantly worried about money. Besides one drawing in the ’60s that netted him about $100, he’d never sold an artwork. His son, Damon, (who now manages McCarthy’s studio), was born in 1973, and by the time his daughter, Mara (a gallery owner in Los Angeles), arrived in 1979, McCarthy was mostly working construction jobs to support his family, taking periodic breaks to make art. In 1984, both he and Karen were unemployed, and he embarked on a kind of last-ditch effort to find success, going on a relentless tour of Europe while Karen stayed behind to take care of the kids. He did 13 solo performances over a roughly two-month period. The works centered around the 1930s cartoon characters of Popeye and Olive Oyl, which had become something of an obsession for McCarthy. He intended, after he returned from Europe, to make a film in which he played Popeye, Karen played Olive Oyl and their children would appear as themselves. Wearing a Popeye mask and, in some performances, a dress, he did terrible things to a stuffed rabbit and continued to violate the rules of culinary manners.

The European trip did not go well. He was robbed in Ireland and had to sell his car in order to get to performances in France and Belgium. When he finally made his way to an airport and returned to California, he was spent. "The reality at that point was: This is not working," he said. "The whole psychological stress of doing the performances and not having any money — I thought I was going crazy. So we just went, 'This is it. It's over.'" He was done performing. He was so done that he took all the leftover props from his performances — a record of dried-up ketchup, saw blades, knives, stuffed animals and rubber masks, all the objects from the previous wild decade of his life — and closed them inside of half a dozen or so trunks and suitcases. It was a more or less literal repression of his career as an artist up to that point. Years later, he stacked the cases, along with another sculpture, on a table that he used to make drawings and named the piece "Assortment, the Trunks, Human Object" (1972-84). Tellingly, it became the first major work he sold.

That McCarthy ever became a household name does seem a kind of miracle. He had what you might call the first bit of luck in his career not long after he quit performing, when Burden, who had joined the faculty of U.C.L.A. in 1978, hired him. It wasn't a lot of money, but it eventually allowed him to quit his construction jobs. Serendipitously, the school also hired as a visiting lecturer Mike Kelley, another Los Angeles-based artist, who was about 10 years younger than McCarthy but nonetheless a kindred spirit who would become one of his closest confidants. The works McCarthy had made in the '70s seemed to predict the conservative backlash against the arts of the 1980s, with Ronald Reagan's administration initially planning to get rid of the National Endowment for the Arts altogether. Still, in 1987, McCarthy proposed to make an experimental video about child abuse, and received a grant to do so. He was given access to a television studio for a couple of days. The first day he spent alone. On the second, he called up Kelley. They knew of each other's work and had previously discussed doing a project together. "I asked him if he wanted to come by," McCarthy recalled, "and he said, 'What would it be?' And I said, 'You'll be the son and I'll be the father, and we'll just see what happens.'" The result was the eight-minute video "Family Tyranny," which resembles an extremely unfunny satire of the American family sitcom. Though the work maintained a similar element of danger from his earlier performances, he was no longer alone, and no longer facing a confounded audience. And while his early period had moments of being disgusting for disgusting's sake, "Family Tyranny" had a clear moral lesson. McCarthy relentlessly abuses (both emotionally and physically) Kelley, who is upsettingly convincing in the part of the helpless child. At one point, McCarthy, while funneling and shoving mayonnaise, milk and other foodstuffs into a foam ball wearing a hat, says, "My daddy did this to me; you can do this to your son, too." Later, he shouts at Kelley and chases him around the room. McCarthy described the piece as "a trajectory all the way to the present," and it set the tone for all that was to come. If his work before felt like a deadpan reflection of a broken society, he was now confronting it head-on, and his outrage was unambiguous.

A still of McCarthy and Mike Kelley's "Family Tyranny" (1987). © Paul McCarthy, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE from looking at his work, but McCarthy did have a brief career in the film industry. In the early 1970s, he got a job shooting public access documentaries for nonprofits, which he did for about five years before landing at a special-effects house that did work for Paramount Pictures. There he made some effects that wound up in "Star Trek: The Motion Picture" (1979), and Paramount later hired him as a still photographer. He described Hollywood as "like a military organization." Everyone had their designated roles in the chain of command. But he was fascinated by how the whole apparatus functioned at all. "At that point," he said, "I really became interested in forming a studio as a dysfunctional soundstage. That became an objective."

That is still his objective, though in practice it's created a complicated situation. Hollywood films tend to recoup their budgets through marketing and ticket sales, but McCarthy has no such option in the art world. He'd have to sell his sets to a collector or an institution, but they've become so elaborate that no one will assume the responsibility. He told me that the set for "White Snow" — all 17,500 square feet of it, including the scale model of the suburban home in which he grew up — was still sitting in his studio, intact and collecting dust.

"What do I do with it?" McCarthy asked. "Throw it away, I guess, but how do you even do that? It's been there for eight years. Sets are thrown away every day in Hollywood. It's a terrible waste." Over the years, a few of McCarthy's sets have made use of these discarded environments, which he bought for cheap or rented. He used casts he made of the trees from the TV show "Bonanza" for his 1991-92 installation "The Garden," which features an animatronic sculpture of a man with his pants around his ankles, humping one of the trunks. Of "White Snow," he continued, "It is an object that at this point doesn't need to exist unless somebody wants it. Will I ever make a piece like that again? No. I made it because this opportunity happened, and I'm still paying for it. What could I say? I don't even know. God. In some ways I wish I'd never made it."

That the artist's masterpiece was just sitting there, unwanted by anyone including its creator, was nothing less than McCarthyesque. I came to understand that his art, really, is about failure — the failure to communicate, the failure to learn from the past, the failure of being human — and that was why his work had endured and would continue to do so. Other people spend their lives trying to convince both themselves and those around them that they are lucky and fortunate, but McCarthy is most interested in horror, in the almost unspeakable embarrassments that everyone, from time to time, must face.

"My intention to make a dysfunctional studio — how could it be anything but that?" he said. "And it is that. I made a film studio, and now it's completely dysfunctional. Whatever generation succeeds me will have to try to pay back the debt. So it's dysfunctional, and it failed, as a thing to even make films, and it failed economically in a major way. It's not just a flippant, clever way to talk about what I'm doing in relation to the establishment. It's *literally* a dysfunctional studio. No one wants to show the pieces, and there's no money. And that's the definition of a failure." This caused him to laugh boisterously. "You could list all the points of what a failure is, and McCarthy Studios qualifies on every level," he continued. "So yeah. I made it." He looked right at me and concluded, "Success."