

Artforum

Rugoff, Ralph: *Deviations On A Theme: Paul Mccarthy*

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## DEVIATIONS ON A THEME: PAUL MCCARTHY

**AS THEY EXCAVATE** pop culture's repressed fantasies, Paul McCarthy's demented mock-instructional videos, AudioAnimatronics-type sculptures, Hollywood-style sets, and mutant figures look like distorted family entertainments more than the objects of art history. At once eerie and comic, his bestiary teems with robotic goat-fuckers, giant furry skunks with human genitals, psychoactive human/vegetable hybrids, and mannequin legs afflicted with multiple personality disorder. Looking like mutants from a theme-park slum, they allegorize the traumas of consumer culture in the terms of sexuality, identity, and body-boundary confusion.

*Spaghetti Man*, 1993, a composite figure with a furry Bugs Bunny head, a humanoid body, and a 50-foot polyurethane penis, stands at a height of ten feet, dwarfing the adult viewer, whose perspective becomes that of a child. One feels vaguely threatened by this eyeless grotesquerie, as if menaced by a bad Oedipal hallucination. The gloss of the work's Imagineering-style manufacture is emotionally contaminated, ruptured by its incompatible fantasies.

On one level *Spaghetti Man* appears to parody male obsession with penis size. It has the ironic humor of the fairy tales in which wishes are granted with mischievous results: the desire for a big organ is answered with a monstrous excess. On closer inspection, however, its status is uncertain: the coiled noodle emerges from an orifice that approximates the location of a vagina, and it culminates not in a proper head but an abrupt cut—raising the question as to whether having a 50-foot penis would mitigate or amplify castration anxiety.

The unstable humor in this work, as well as its dumb pathos, characterize many contemporary esthetic exercises in desublimation, but while McCarthy wreaks havoc with childhood's idealized images, he's less concerned with transgressing taboos than with examining the perverse nature of authoritarian hierarchies. Instead of being about "killing the father," as in the avant-garde wish to shock authority, his work obsessively returns to the scene of paternal violence. The trauma of cultural conditioning in the consumerist family is McCarthy's great motif; his performances and videos from the '70s and '80s are rife with allusions to children's TV shows, with McCarthy often taking on the persona of a buffoonish male authority enacting a deranged educational program.

The figure of a perverse patriarchal instructor returns in such recent works as *Cultural Gothic*, 1992, an Animatronic-like tableau, rendered with Disneyland realism, in which an adult male coaches a young boy who is humping a horned goat. The figures' wholesome TV-family appearance makes the scene an unsettling take on middle-class propriety, as if it laid out an allegory of the developmental "norm," an initiation ceremony into a power structure based on domination and sexual mastery. You do it because you want Daddy's approval, and that's the way he did it.

*Garden*, 1991, offers another theme-park-like educational scene turned to the ends of a perverse sexual pedagogy: on a large bucolic set, an older male mannequin fucks a tree, a younger one a hole in the ground. Their robotic thrusting parodies a machinelike, indiscriminate sexuality; in screwing a sham version of Mother Nature, these lovers of the great outdoors also conjure a heavy death drive—fucking not only anything that moves, but even things that don't.

Images of men screwing inanimate objects crop up throughout McCarthy's work; for a segment of *Sailor's Meat*, a 1974 video, the artist wore makeup and wig while humping raw meat in a hotel room. The viewer of *Garden* likewise becomes a voyeur of a mindless compulsion to repeat. The two figures move as if in a trance, a state suggested by automatons and AudioAnimatronic figures in general (and echoed by McCarthy in his performances). By placing these zombielike rapists in a Hollywood Arcadia, McCarthy links our culture's obsession with virgin fantasy-spaces to a perverse and traumatizing male sexuality.

It's an idea brilliantly worked out in *Rear View*, 1990, a piece that pointedly recalls Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés . . .*, 1946-66. McCarthy's installation, which features a headless and limbless plaster body slopped across an institutional folding table, at first glance suggests an autopsy. But the curious viewer, drawn by a light inside the body, peers through the asshole and discovers a miniature Swiss village, a model of theme-park perfection. As with *Étant donnés . . .*

, the viewer is engaged in a hallucinatory voyeurism, but McCarthy has reversed Duchamp's terms: instead of peering through an architectural construction to see the body desired, we gaze through a bodily orifice at an architectural fantasy, a sanitized vision of order. With this wry twist, McCarthy underscores the anality of the simulacrum, and stresses its vampiric relationship to the life of the body, now fated to existence as a hollowed-out thing, an eviscerated theater.

Violated bodies are scattered like casualties throughout McCarthy's oeuvre: dwarfish, armless mascots and eviscerated robots lie stretched out as if victims at a crime scene. Poignantly freakish, these creatures appear as emblems of pain and loss, anxiety and horror. To the theme-park esthetic they add the perfume of sexual violence, calling to mind the Surrealist legacy of hybrid figures: Max Ernst's human/bird composites, Hans Bellmer's recombinaible *poupée*. As Hal Foster has pointed out, these monstrous hybrids spoke to a cultural anxiety over the mechanizing and commodifying of body and psyche alike.<sup>1</sup> McCarthy's work marks a different crisis—the confusion between media images and embodied experience. His cartoony anatomies are typically ruptured, penetrated, reformulated by an invasive Toontown logic.

*Tomato Head*, 1994, features three life-sized mannequin bodies, each crowned by a giant tomato. Plugged into their various orifices are a motley array of brightly colored stuff—including rubber vaginas and penises, fiberglass blocks, rubber-coated garden tools, and giant carrots. In its original installation in Los Angeles, extra accessories lay strewn across the gallery floor, a corpus of shared parts from which untold identities might be constructed.

On the surface, *Tomato Head* appears as a cartoon version of the post-Modern subject described by many contemporary theorists: a being that is center-less and divided, a compilation of partial identities, its disparate potentials freely competing. But the work doesn't wholeheartedly embrace the myth of decentered subjectivity; its fabricated-novelty-item appearance hints at the manic consumerism of which our theme-park utopias are a symptom. A Mr. Potato Head for adults, it presents post-Modern subjectivity as another product of radical capitalism—an analogue at the level of the individual to the theme park's seamless collage.

In the theme park such delirium serves an agenda of control. Its labyrinth of deracinated signs gives visitors an illusion of losing themselves, as if they could somehow escape manipulation, when in fact their experience is strictly orchestrated. Theme-mall and EuroDisney architect Jon Jerde has described his practice as “designing the experiences rather than the buildings; *designing all the things that happen to you.*”<sup>2</sup> And planners of developments such as MCA's Universal City Walk, a mall offering consumers a hygienic, crime-free microcosm of Los

Angeles, speak of enticing customers with an atmosphere that is “safely chaotic.”<sup>3</sup>

Much of McCarthy’s recent work probes these disciplinary uses of delirium. He is exploring a change in the manifestation of patriarchal authority: the Fatherland’s return as Disneyland, no longer transcendent order but stage-managed hallucination and airbrushed utopia. Even as his work evinces hallmarks of the uncanny, it raises questions about this area largely untouched elsewhere. What is the role of the uncanny in a culture of the simulated uncanny, the manufactured uncanny, the uncanny of consumer desire? In a theme-park world, how does one identify the return of the “real” repressed?

At the same time, McCarthy’s hybrid figures acknowledge the allure of absurd and violent transformation. The root of the word “hybrid” comes from the Greek *hubris*, which means violence, excess, outrageousness, and so carries with it the idea of a dangerous sensory excitement. The dark eroticism of trans-formative esthetics is evident in many of the Surrealists’ sexually charged hybrids, and it may well be that every monster can be considered an erotic figure, inasmuch as its composite body reflects a principle of joining and connecting. The face it shows the world is the face of an orgy, a commingling and union of diverse parts. Such is the face of a *Tomato Head*.

McCarthy has been telling us all along that our cultural Father is a pervert, that the Law is besmirched with lewd and irrational pleasures. His cartoon hybrids rearticulate this theme, but the chaotic rhythms of their mutation point to another kind of violence besides the violence of repression: that of seduction, fueled by the power of metamorphosis. If the lowly tomato can be irradiated and genetically reengineered, conflating the natural and the artificial in a way that renders both these terms meaningless, we too can be made traitors to our own interests and identities. McCarthy’s art shows us how we both devour and are eaten up by these strange fruits of our theme-park culture.

—Ralph Rugoff

NOTES

1. See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993.
2. Jon Jerde, quoted in “Universal Citywalk: An Architect’s Dream, A Conversation with Jon Jerde,” MCA Development press release. My italics.
3. MCA Development VP Tom Gilmore, quoted in *ibid.*

