

Kaleidoscope

Gioni, Massimiliano: *The Human Tick*

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KALEIDOSCOPE

THE HUMAN TICK

Since the '70s, LA artist Paul McCarthy has made videos, performances, and installations in which the narratives are convoluted and delirious—much like this interview. In a new series of drawings, he scrapes the bottom of the barrel and to conjure up cheap psychology, mind-altering drugs, Trump, Hitler, and Hollywood populism, exposing the American pathology.

MASSIMILIANO GIONI Let's start with your show "A&E Sessions: Drawing and Painting" at Hauser & Wirth in New York. How did the show come about? Did you work on it during the lockdown, or before?

PAUL MCCARTHY The show comprises drawings and paintings that I did over the past few years during actions with Lilith Stangenberg. The large drawings were done in March last year, she came from Germany and we started working right away. Then the lockdown in LA began on 15 March. We were making the drawings in a small studio I have up near the house. In the beginning there were other people around videotaping and photographing us, but when the lockdown started, and everything shut down, the people who were helping and filming us all left. The two of us, Lilith and I, kept going, working on the drawings alone. We kept going for several more days.

MG Had Lilith come to LA especially to work on the drawings?

PM Her visit was part of a series of projects that have been going on for the past couple of years, and are connected to another series. It's a very long story.

MG I like long stories. Let's hear it.

PM Between 2007 and 2013, my son Damon and I had been making videotapes with these large installations. We did "Piccadilly," "Bunker," "Pirates of the Caribbean," and then "White Snow." Around 2014, I started to work seriously on a western. I'd wanted to make a western for a long time—15 years—going from flowers to death. I'd been writing a script and had different ideas. I wanted to make a covered wagon movie, but that's difficult, because you're involved in such a big production; how many wagons do you need? How many horses do you need? How many people do you need? And then there're the expenses, trying to get somebody to back it. And, of course, what I wanted to do and the way I wanted to make it, was an abstraction, would just be too much for any Hollywood producer to take on. It was all a pipe dream, a fantasy. But I started thinking that maybe I could make a movie using just one stagecoach, so I started working on that; wrote a script, auditioned actors and performers. It's titled "CSSC, Coach Stage Stage Coach." We shot for 39 days in the high desert near LA and on a set in our studio called the "Way

Station.” The coach had six people in it. There’s a character named Ronald Raygun, and I played that part, though I looked more like JP Morgan. Then there’s Nancy Raygun, and a gunslinger/gambler, who calls himself Jesus Christ. It’s hard to say whether that’s his name or not, or whether he’s making it up. Across from him, there is a madam of some sort. I’ve always thought of her as being a rich aristocratic woman who’s experienced and collects art, maybe Russian. She refers to herself as Mary Magdalene. Then there are Adam and Eve, and they’re the innocent ones. Eve is a young actress living in Silver Lake, and Adam is a dentist. You can’t really tell what period of time it takes place in: is it in the West in the 1800s, or is it contemporary? It’s confusing. The script had four parts. We’d already shot the first three parts: “The Coach,” “Way Station,” and “The Attack.” In “The Coach,” the four libertines rape and abuse Adam and Eve over and over again and again. They go to a way station, where they rest for the night. During a party, Eve kills the proprietor’s wife in a bloody knife fight. The next morning, they get up and they leave in the stagecoach and venture out. That evening, they’re attacked by a group of men. All the characters in the coach are tortured and killed over a period of several days. In the fourth part, the men who’d killed the characters in the coach, were going to go to town and into a saloon, but by that point we’d been filming for 45-50 days with an entire crew. At times we had 60 people on the set. We were just burning all the money we had and going further in debt. And then Trump begins to run for office, so I change the characters right in the middle. Rather than shooting the scene in the saloon, I stopped the project and changed the story. So, Ronald Raygun becomes Donald Duck or Donald Trump. Mary Magdalene becomes Melania, and Eve becomes Ivanka or Bonkers. Melania is also referred to as Daisy Duck. And Nancy Raygun is now Nancy Reagan, and looks more like Nancy Reagan. Adam becomes Andy Warhol, but he’s referred to as Andy Warhole. Now the story starts all over again. We go back to the Stagecoach to shoot again and back to the Way Station and shoot again, and then instead of the Attack, we go to the Saloon. We had built the saloon set. The saloon set is a remake of the saloon in Fassbinder’s *Whity*, which is a film I like a lot, about American racism. The saloon set we built is a big two-story structure that we shot in for 29 days. At the end of all of this there were two pieces: “CSSC,” with the Rayguns, Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalene, and Adam and Eve, and the second piece, “DADDA, Donald And Daisy Duck Adventure,” with Donald Trump or Donald Duck, Daisy Duck, Bonkers, Andy Warhol, and Nancy Reagan. The two pieces are 150 terabytes of recorded material and 200,000 still images and a waystation set and the saloon set. “CSSC” and “DADDA” occupied a few years of our time. During that period, while shooting “CSSC,” I was invited to do a piece in Berlin at the Volksbühne theater, and decided to shoot a section of “CSSC” there. We worked on it for months. It was crazy to shoot the scenes on stage because of the depictions of violence. The attack is very extreme. The characters are killed over and over again. We wanted to make the scene very realistic and abstract at the same time. The plan was to make body life casts of all the actors. We molded their bodies to make realistic prosthetics and dummy body doubles in rubber, with joints and blood, all of that. The body casts had blood, crushable heads, and arms that could be cut off, but it turns out something was wrong with the silicon rubber. The rubber used for the molds and the castings, platinum silicon, is a very temperamental material, it’s hard to deal with. Sometimes you get a bad batch from the manufacturer, and we ended up with a bad batch, but there is no way of knowing it until you pour the part. And, of course, pouring a figure could be \$15,000, when there are 5 or 6 figures. It was a big disaster. At that point we were deep into this thing, and I realized I just couldn’t do the “CSSC” stage piece anymore, so I came up with this other idea of bringing the set of the Chateau Marmont bungalow that we built for the piece “Rebel Dabble Babble,” from 2011, to Berlin. We put the set on the stage of the Volksbühne and showed the videos on large projections. We turned the theater into an exhibition-theater and then reshot scenes from the “Rebel” piece with actors from the theater in different locations in the theater

building. We recorded scenes in a bath, in staircases, in the restaurant, and in the director's office. The Volksbühne has all these great actors who are part of the company and I was working with Lilith Stangenberg and Bernhard Schutz. I connected with both of them immediately. In one of the scenes we were performing in a bathroom in the theater, in a bathtub filled with gravy. At the end of the performance Lilith was lying on the floor nude, and I said, "Oh, it's the Night Porter," as the bathroom tiles reminded me of a scene from the 1974 Liliana Cavani movie. Lilith said, "Oh, it's one of my favorite movies." That set something in motion for the future. Bernhard came to LA to be in "CSSC" in 2015. He played the ringleader of the group that attacked and killed all those in the coach; Ronald Raygun, Nancy Raygun, Mary Magdalene, Jesus Christ, Adam, and Eve. He was referred to as the white menace. But remaking Night Porter was an idea that was still in my mind. A year or so later, Henning Nass told a director of the theater and film festival in Vienna of our idea to do Night Porter and the director decided to take the project on and sponsor it. NV, Night Vater, was the title we gave to this remake. The festival came up with the money for it and the idea was to shoot it in Vienna and LA. We had already begun production on the set, when suddenly the festival in Vienna pulled the money and the director quit. But we decided to keep going and I rewrote the script to be about a German actress coming to America to audition for a part in a movie. Lucia flies to America and lands at the airport in LA. She's taken to Max's office and forced to sign a contract. So Night Vater is now no longer about Max, the ex-Nazi doctor, like in the original Night Porter. It's about Max, the producer, who lives in LA, and Lucia is now an actress from Berlin. We finished a large complicated set in LA of multiple rooms and hallways. It was about 100 feet long and over 50 feet wide. It included Max's apartment, its bathrooms, kitchens—two exact same kitchens and two exact same bathrooms—and the Marriott Hotel room that Lilith had stayed in when she first came to LA. There's also a huge room that we referred to as the Beverly Hills Hotel and was made from this Beverly Hills Hotel set we found that had originally been used in a Warren Beatty movie. After Lucia is picked up at the airport, driven to Max's office and forced to sign a contract, she goes to a party at the Beverly Hills Hotel. It turns out that Max is really not interested in making movies. He only wants to manipulate people, young people, and primarily women. He's a predator. I play Max, and I have a moustache and my hair is combed back. I look like a slimy version of Walt Disney or a cliché of a mafia boss. I was thinking about global politics and organized crime, and, of course, at that point Trump was raging. We shot NV, Night Vater for 30 days. We have hours and hours of video, something like 100 terabytes— that's still completely unedited—and 80,000 images. We planned on doing a suicide scene at the end of the film. One idea was that Max and Lucia would leave Max's apartment and go up into the Angeles National Forest in LA and commit suicide in nature. We thought that in a way Max and Lucia are forms of Adam and Eve. In the end we didn't do the suicide scene in nature, we did it in the set in Max's apartment. But these two different couple archetypes, in Max and Lucia, and Adam and Eve, led us to Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun. A&E became the project, the twin to NV. It seems that many of my pieces work that way, many of the pieces are in pairs. They start as something and then become something else, a kind of doubling. NV and A&E are a pairing and they're folded into each other. The plan then was to do A&E, Adolf and Eva as soon as possible. Before we began to shoot NV, I was drawing storyboards. At the end of NV and then again months later when Lilith comes back to LA, we did a series of life casts for A&E. We also did a drawing session for NV. We took down a wall of the NV set and put a table in, then drew for three or four days. While we drew, we were in character as Max and Lucia, but also ourselves. The personas are an amalgamation of the characters and ourselves. These drawing sessions were recorded but have never been edited, it simply has never happened. The two of us went in and out of the personas as I was drawing. It's a way of being distracted, detached. We shift moods and personas. I drew drawing as if I was the other and inflicted by what is happening on the platform with Lilith. My fantasy and emotion are a form of delirious gestures. The idea of drawing in persona dates back to my performances in the seventies. It's a way of drawing and fucking with your head.

That's all that is happening, you're fucking with your brain. It's about playing with your head and an entangling with the drawing and Lilith. It can go deep if you let it. Most of the drawings were done in the studio. We did them on a large table platform. We're on a stage or a sculpture's pedestal. It's a performance. I think during a drawing session, you're not in sync with the rest of the world. I talk during the drawings, mostly to myself. The drawings relate to a world in my head, it's "child's play," or "pretend." Lilith and I have done three different sessions; Night Vater inside, A&E outside and inside, and A&E inside. The last session was when Lilith came out to LA just before the COVID lockdown in March.

MG The fact that you call them sessions makes me think of psychoanalysis and, more broadly, of the subject of art and therapy, which your work often eludes to, mostly as parody. Many of your videos are strange educational films gone wrong, like "Family Tyranny," or "Heidi."

PM I have never thought about the sessions that way, but that's an interesting take.

MG I recently interviewed Peter Saul and he said that when he returned to California around 1964, after living for a few years in Europe, he was shocked by the fact that everybody suddenly seemed interested in psychology and psychoanalysis. And this fascination was colliding with a new type of celebrity culture in which politicians were being transformed into actors, and actors were becoming politicians. In a sense your work seems to have identified a very similar American pathology, hasn't it? PM Yes—California, mind-altering drugs, Gestalt therapy, Esalen, Eastern philosophy, and cheap psychology. I've often thought there was this interesting disconnect between minimalism in New York, and so-called minimalism in Southern California. In New York you had Donald Judd, Robert Morris, the reductive form, the concrete environment of buildings, and all those cubes around you. And in California you had Finish Fetish, Light and Space, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, and John McCracken, who were all interested in illusion, reflections, mirrors, light, the sky, and nature. In New York, what you see is what there is. In LA, it's about the illusion and asking yourself "What is real?" For me the '60s and the '70s in California were Wilhelm Reich, Adorno, Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, RD Laing, Angela Davis, the Black Panthers, the Diggers, the beatniks, the hippies, demonstrations, drugs, the sky, the ocean, "Go West young man," and being in San Francisco. The conversation around art for me was about collaboration, process, art as life, eliminating the object, poor materials, using what you could find on the street, and happenings. There was little interest to no interest in galleries and making art to sell. At the Art Institute, the idea of photographing a performance was a no-no, but I'd always been interested in cameras. When we moved to LA in 1970, I became interested in videotape, personas, and less interested in collaboration. I've never been interested in my art as therapy. I don't use art to cure myself. I have always been suspicious of the so-called real. I've been interested in art and the language it makes.

MG Hollywood and the studios are gigantic fiction machines. You mentioned Fassbinder and Warhol. Paraphrasing the title of a book by Douglas Crimp, what's your kind of movie? Is it a Hollywood epic or is it "Flaming Creatures?" Do you make movies like Fassbinder, Warhol, or Jack Smith did, or more like a proper Hollywood production?

PM It's closer to Warhol and even Jack Smith. It's a genre of obviously pretending and parody. It's another way of looking at perfection from its inverse. It tries to move towards Fassbinder. And maybe I used Hollywood populism, the spectacle. I heard George Lucas say at an art museum dinner, "If it isn't populist art, it's not art." I am not interested in satisfying the populous. I think at its core, I try to make work that is about the human tick.

It's convoluted, going in circles, to the bottom of the barrel. When I was at the University of Utah, from 1966–1970, a number of the younger faculty were really interested in experimental films and happenings. And film became part of the curriculum in the art department. Stan Brakhage came to the school. We were fed a diet of Bruce Conner, Warhol, Yoko Ono, and European films from Godard to Bergman. When we moved to San Francisco, I saw all the Bergman, Fellini and Warhol films at the art-house theaters. I also become aware of Nauman and his videotapes. I started wanting to make videotapes in the late '60s. I wanted to go to film school in Los Angeles. So I move to LA, get into the multimedia department at USC and I immediately realize that I don't fit into the film school. They were not going to accept my ideas. They were not going to take me seriously and it's not going to work out. I knocked a hole in the wall of the studio they gave me, and said, "That's my first film." It was just a hole in the wall, like a window, and you could see the outside world, through the rectangular hole. You sit in a chair and just look through the hole and you watch the film, which is the outside world. But that type of attitude didn't really work in the USC film school world, and at that point I was getting more and more interested in videos. With video you immediately see what you're capturing, and it has audio, which is huge. Getting your hands on film equipment with sync audio was impossible. At USC at that time you didn't touch the equipment until you had a script, and video at the school was not an option. I think I have a mixture of embattled influences; experimental film, structural film, expanded film, performance film and video, European film directors of the '60s and '70s, and an endless amount of time in front of a screen of some sort watching whatever. I think what I might be doing is influenced heavily by body performance, dream narrative, persona, appropriation and pretending etc. Warhol films are interesting. Stan Brakhage's autopsy film, *The Act of Seeing with One Eye*, is interesting. And don't forget books, writers. They're one for the guck. When I started making video in 1970, I would start doing something as an unplanned, on-the-spot action. It often would turn into repetition and evolve from there. In 1971 I made *Ma Bell*. I adopted a persona in the form of an insane laugh and asked the person recording it not to show my face. I took two things away from that: an interest in a persona, and some form of a disguise. I think that *Ma Bell* also had a closer relationship to narrative. And there was a prop, a Los Angeles telephone book. I poured used motor oil and put synthetic cotton between the pages, tied the book with twine and threw it out of a seven-story window onto Broadway, in downtown LA. *Ma Bell* opened a door for a series of performances through the 70s. I used toys and stuffed animals as characters in the performances, as kids play with objects and carry out a fantasy. The stuffed rabbit is someone; the plastic cup is someone else. In the late '70s, I start thinking it could be interesting to perform with others, but was also less and less interested in live performance. I was interested in making pieces for the camera, and that's when I start thinking about making a "Popeye" film. I would simply find an existing script or use a comic book as a structure for the piece. Mike Kelley and I met sometime in the mid to late '80s, and we talked about doing something together. I was given a grant to make a video, so I called Mike and asked him if he would want to do a performance. He said yes and we did *Family Tyranny*, then I made *Cultural Soup*. The two videos are often seen together. That leads to *Bossy Burger*, and the videotapes with the sets. During that time I was trying to get closer to having other people in the pieces. *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Piccadilly* both have performers. In early 2000, I started thinking of the studio as a B-movie studio—the art studio as an appropriation of a film studio. I jokingly talked about it as a "film studio." I liked the term "B-movie Studio." But the videos that we made did not function in popular culture, in movie theaters. They were for the most part, multi-channel projections with sets. In the last few years though, we've been making more single-channel pieces, but the content is difficult, and the structure is abstracted, making it hard to finance or distribute, but I like pretending that we're a film studio. It's an absurd fucking gesture. For me it's a jab joke. I need to remember what's next. I have enough footage to make episodes and episodes, a series. We have 120 terabytes of material, maybe more. Do I even edit it? I don't even know how to plow through it. It's just too much and does it even matter?

I think of a lot of what I'm doing as a series for the future. That's what I call them. I have this giant backlog of stuff and, in a way it doesn't even matter if it becomes something or not. Do we just stream everything online, just dump-pump it out? We have mountains of material to just drop it in the pipeline. I asked, "What should we do?" and Lilith goes, "I don't know. For me it's just important that we keep going." We were filming this scene, for example, and the people in the scene started referring to themselves as "the wolverines." That's what they called themselves, and they even started to look like wolverines, and I thought, "Are they in character? They're becoming wolverines." They were becoming a projection of their fantasies. The film is telling them who they are. Watching the storming of the Capitol, I thought, "Do they think they're in a movie?" The Trump how, a manipulation and delusion. But the delusion is now their reality. Trump is a global theater director, the clown. How long will it take to understand it? We are watching his spectacle. He is constantly performing, like Andy Warhol. But the character makes the movie, and the movie becomes reality.

MG I don't want to talk about Trump.

PM Can I tell you a story?

MG OK.

PM I'm in a medium-sized grocery store, about 10,000 sq. feet. As you enter the front door—which is in the middle of the front of the store, over to the left—up against one wall is a long meat and cheese case, and above that is deep shelving. This open case runs nearly the length of the store. The rest of the store has low shelves running from the front, to the back. There are no cash registers. I'm on the opposite side of the store from the meat and cheese case, when I realize I don't have my ticket, my boarding pass, and that my agent has my it, and he's sitting in first class, which is on the shelving above the meat and cheese case, and everyone is now seated, waiting for the plane to take off. I go to the front of the store, then turn to my right, and go to the aisle for the meat and cheese. The stewardess is blocking the aisle, she says, "This is only for first class." I explain my situation. She then escorts me down the aisle, but I cannot find my agent and I know I saw him on the shelf earlier. I leave and go across the back of the plane. As I go up my aisle, I see my agent coming towards me with tickets. But then I remember that I am no longer connected. I am not in a store or on a plane.