

The Brooklyn Rail

Grau, Donatien: *Paul McCarthy: A&E*

October 2022

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Paul McCarthy: A&E

By Donatien Grau



Performance stills from *A&E / Adolf and Eva / Adam and Eve / Hamburg Day 3*, 2022, at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, Germany. Directed by Damon McCarthy. © Paul McCarthy. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photos: Alex Stevens.

Nearly thirty-seven years after his last public performances, Paul McCarthy has returned to making art in front of a live audience. The series of performances titled *A&E* was the first half of a European program that brought McCarthy and Lilith Stangenberg first to the SchauSpielHaus in Hamburg for five nights in a row and then to the Volkstheater in Vienna for four nights. In Vienna, the performance was *NV/Night Vater*, a reinterpretation of Liliana Cavani's *Night Porter* (1974). The scripts for both pieces were written by McCarthy and act as a skeleton structure for McCarthy and Stangenberg. Stangenberg has been a prominent figure of the German theater world and is a frequent collaborator with McCarthy since they first worked together on *Rebel Dabble Babble Berlin* (Volksbühne theater in 2015). These two series of performances were preceded by films bearing the same title and activating the same threads. The films led to series of drawings made by McCarthy with Stangenberg where they both appeared in character, Stangenberg acting as an active influence on the drawings. The Hamburg and Vienna performances therefore participate in a large body of collaborative works.

The letters A and E open multiple words: A is for Adolf—and indeed, McCarthy performs a buffoon Adolf Hitler type of character, with a mustache and a costume—but he is also Adam, the first man; and even Art. While E is Eva, for Eva Braun; Eve, the first woman; and Entertainment. Everything viewers saw performed on stage was conditioned by these layered identities. An Eva Braun type of character certainly interacted with an Adolf Hitler type of character; but it was also a constant inquiry in the relations between male and female; and eventually it was an allegorical set of meaning in which Art and Entertainment kept challenging one another. Each of those identities—according to the fluid pattern inherent to McCarthy's work—shifts all the time: Eva Braun may be interacting with Adam, Art interacting with Eve.

Mythologies, symbols, politics consistently move in one direction then another. There is no stable identity in McCarthy's oeuvre. Adolf is not even a theatrical version of Hitler, nor is Eva an interpretation of Braun: Adolf keeps referring to himself as an American, and Eva is referred to as a German actress, alluding to the lives of McCarthy and Stangenberg. Adolf also refers to himself as the "Daddy" and Eva refers to herself as the "daughter." To add a further layer of meaning, the character and the appearance of Eva Braun in *A&E* resemble a cliché of Marilyn Monroe. Americanness and Germanness shift back and forth.



Performance stills from *A&E / Adolf and Eva / Adam and Eve / Hamburg Day 3*, 2022, at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, Germany. Directed by Damon McCarthy. © Paul McCarthy. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photos: Alex Stevens.

A&E is the point where several traditions meet: existentialist theater, as in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, which has exerted a huge influence on McCarthy's. The issues of freedom, metaphysical disarray that are central to Sartre are fully enacted in *A&E*. The reference to Beckett is even more direct: *Waiting for Godot* is a constant presence in this work. Adolf and Eva are Vladimir and Estragon: they are lost, godless. They are bored—and their boredom is metaphysical. Their boredom enables them to go into the wildest actions. People familiar with McCarthy's work will encounter many of the tropes recurrent in his art. Scenes of violence, sex and scatology reoccur. In certain moments, the level of unreality is evident. In others, it is more ambiguous, creating a sense of malaise in viewers.

However, the performance is not presented frontally to viewers, but rather staged in a complex display feature. The actions are blocked to direct viewing by a camera-telescoping crane set on tracks moving back and forth in front of the set of rooms—which itself sits on a rotating turntable. McCarthy's camera crew, directed by Damon McCarthy, a collaborator of the artist since 2005, takes photographs and video of the action, making it even more difficult to fathom exactly what is happening on stage. The video recordings are edited instantly by Damon and released on two large screens mounted above the stage. Thus we see what is happening on stage as a live-action and as a two-channel projection rather than a traditional theatrical performance. This is crucial to McCarthy's method, in which nothing is ever given and everything has to be questioned. The intensity of the performance does not obliterate thought. On the contrary, it is designed to favor it. The multiple camera views bring a form of intimacy into the action of McCarthy and Stagenberg and thus puts the audience in the position of directly viewing the action taking place in the rooms.



Performance stills from *A&E / Adolf and Eva / Adam and Eve / Hamburg Day 3, 2022*, at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, Germany. Directed by Damon McCarthy. © Paul McCarthy. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photos: Alex Stevens.

The languages embedded in *A&E* belong to different worlds: performance, through a re-engagement with the legacy of Allan Kaprow and with McCarthy's own oeuvre; philosophy, as everything here is metaphysical; the visual arts, from film to sculpture. In almost every pose McCarthy and Stangenberg can be seen as figures from a classical sculpture—or paintings from the past to the point of recreating a performative version of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. The dialogue with art history is in fact a dialogue with normativity—with the creation of a canon and the meaning of this canon today. Going into the theater room feels like entering a metaphysical space—it is risky, but allows us to pierce the “veneer of normality” (as McCarthy calls it).

Living through these performances is a humbling, human experience. After attending two of them, each different, one is struck by *A&E*'s total reinvention of catharsis. Ancient Athens was a culture of extreme violence, powerful language of the body, and domination of men over women—who could hardly leave the house without a man or without wearing a veil. As a reaction, theater did the very opposite: it showed no violence on the stage; emphasized spoken language; and made women into the heroines we now revere—the Antigones of tradition. The norms of Western culture have built themselves on the exclusion of violence—however present it is, it has a status of exception, not rule: (still) within the domination of language, and in particular writing; with emphasis on a peaceful relation between genders. McCarthy and Stangenberg dig into the underbelly of our conventions, and show us physical violence, language broken into stammers, and two human beings at war, and in love. They recreate a ritual, reinventing what catharsis once was—towards our times. What they do has the density of the masterpiece, while being sabotaged all the way. It is, simply put, life.