

BOMB

Paul McCarthy by Benjamin Weissman



Paul McCarthy, *The Saloon*, 1995–96, mixed media, 139 x 191 x 110 inches. Installation view showing Dance Hall Girl and Cowboy (Gunfighter). All photos courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York.

I always wanted an older brother, so when Paul McCarthy and I became close friends 10 years ago I got the perfect bearded creature of my dreams, someone who was deeply curious about the world, art, movies, storytelling and sports, a closet jock who really knew how to rock climb, throw a forkball (a split-finger fastball) and ski.

Our friendship kicked into high gear while walking around the Getty Museum. I went there with my arm in a cast and was staring at a roomful of German photography when Paul suddenly appeared and wanted to know howl broke my arm. I told him skiing, gliding into a baby fir tree. He was surprised and excited. He said he was from Salt Lake and that his brother was in charge of all the snowplows in the state of Utah, and that he had a serious love for skiing. The next season we were on-slope together, ripping through snow like banshees.

Paul has a rusty, dissonant voice that cracks and lalts. He is a car freak, loves to drive fast, race complete strangers on the freeway. His hairy gnarled hands are creased and leathery like rhino hide. He's five foot nine and bowlegged, like a stand-up bass shrunken into a cello's body. He can grow a floor-length beard in less than a week.

Life on the McCarthy compound has a commune feel to it: front door usually unlocked, European visitors sleeping on spare beds and wandering down the halls sipping coffee, piles of photo documentation on the kitchen table. Since the landmark *Helter Skelter* exhibition at LA MoCA in '92, where he exhibited butt-naked mechanical men humping trees and earth on a recycled stage set from the TV show *Bonanza*, Paul's career has exploded. Prior to that he was known as a brilliant gut-and-schmutz performance artist who worked in relative obscurity for 20 years, adored by other artists, under-represented by galleries, uncollected by museums. Paul's particular Grand Guignol came out of a true personal crisis that dealt with the ghoulish properties of culture, consciousness and family. Psychosexual scenes were often played out in costume (Pinocchio, Alfred E. Newman, Santa Claus, Willem de Kooning); ketchup, mayonnaise and chocolate syrup were material substitutes for bodily fluids.

Paul has managed to remain a radical artist of true perversion, dedicated to fucking with viewer sensibility while at the same time achieving broad mainstream appeal. A rare accomplishment.

People close to Paul are forever begging him to slow down, to work less, to not tax the soul so hard, but he keeps up a mad factory pace, employing as many as 15 people at a time (old pals from Utah, boyhood friends of his son and a gang of art-school grads). He is obsessed with building things, particularly shacks, barns, boats, houses, rabbit people with unusual penises. When there is downtime, and there never is, he draws pictures. Paul is a heavyweight champion storyteller: late at night he talks and talks and talks until his entire family is sound asleep, all snoring beside him like cubs in a den.



Paul McCarthy, *Santa Chocolate Shop*, 1997, still from a color film.

Benjamin Weissman The pulsing id. That's what I think about when I think about your videos. Partly achieved through minimal dialogue. A generalized wound is articulated, or dug up: anxiety, sexual tension, humiliation, bodily fluids, consciousness. You get a lot of mileage out of wards via a spare, fragmented mumblelogue that's more like chanting than dialogue, drilling wards into the ground rather than at other characters, and there's something repetitious about this method, within a single work, then from piece to piece, year to year. Can Paul's Anxiety Channel accommodate a fuller script, or would that throw your characters into the acting deep end and deflate the luscious fucked-up universe you invent?

Paul McCarthy In high school I did a drawing of a man's face looking out of the picture plane straight at the viewer. Behind him in the landscape I drew a square hole in the ground. I have always been interested in digging. I remember finding a rock in a vacant lot when I was five years old. I tried to break the rock. I pounded it with another rock. At one point I stopped pounding it and picked up the rock to carry it home. After a short distance, a head appeared from the rock. I think I was dressed in white. All the houses around me were white. It was a very bright day.

I've talked to myself in performances since the '60s. But this auto audio babble got louder in the '70s. At times I would talk from the moment it started until the moment it ended. A muttering faceted language serving a number of purposes, directed at me and for myself. It's a multitude, a kind of runabout. A mother, father, brother, sister this and that. In *Santa Chocolate Shop* there were five performers including myself. In *Saloon* there were five performers. There was a script, but during the performance the scripts are improvised, repeated, and become language appropriation trying to be mediated into the other.

BW

When you say language serving a number of purposes—what purposes?

PM

A purpose, B purpose, C purpose and so on.

BW

Back in the day a ton of interesting artists were doing performances. Now that energy seems to be directed toward video and film. Artists acting up for the camera. Where has performance gone? Why aren't people working with the live, high-risk moment? Why do the majority of artists insist on being mediated? Why the distance and safety, why behave on a big

installation screen, or a monitor on the floor or a pedestal? I know it's hard on a performer (physically draining) but that used to be the appeal, the rush, which is why all actors want to perform in plays, the venue of the real. It's odd to see a whole form almost disappear. There used to be performance magazines and regular venues at museums and galleries for performance. Not too long ago theater and performance were blurring; it was a fertile time.

PM

When I perform for the camera there are others standing on the sidelines in the void. It's very Hollywood to stand and watch a movie being made. I am planning a performance in a theater in Berlin this year at Christmastime. I don't know yet whether it will be on the stage or not. I think I would like to use the entire theater as a performance room, the theater as a set. Maybe I will extend the stage out into the audience, reduce the seating. I am interested in blurring our positions. I've always been interested in the audience being a prop.



Paul McCarthy, *Pot Head*, 2002, light blue silicon rubber, 33½ x 42 x 48 inches.

BW

You've been teaching art for over 25 years. Talk about the new finishing schools we've got going here in LA and the hunger for immediate commercial success in favor of the slow brew, the long haul. What's the difference between an art student today and the young 'uns of the '70s and '80s? How has thinking about art changed? How has UCLA changed as a school? And while we're at it, what do you think about curators' obsession with youth?

PM

Penis clam envy. The students are a congregation. It's a religious experience—the galleries, the museums, are religious temples. The galleries are all on the prowl. Who'll get picked? Artists declare themselves regularly as misunderstood. It's a pot of victims. As painters, they face a rectangular canvas each day, themselves, the canvas and the studio. It's an old problem, with a history and a tradition. There's an old feud boiling, painters versus conceptual artists. The doctrine of painting and beauty versus the doctrine of Michael Asher. It's all locked up in this age-old flickering. Then there's technology—the Unabomber, theory, fear of theory. The artists affect theory versus theory affects the artists. Who controls the castle? It's a laugh a minute.

BW

You were afflicted with a pretty strong case of dyslexia. Reading and writing has always been an arduous process for you. You mainly consume art books, not novels. This harks back to Question One, about the repetitious speak of your characters in videos. Your characters don't talk to each other and converse; they talk to themselves, they go on for a while, stop, and then another character utters something, but they talk to no one, just the human wall. Communication becomes animal. Characters hear each other's sounds and maybe react, maybe not. They're all in their own universe. What do you make of this style? Also, whenever you use text in your drawings, the words are misspelled and twisted up; it seems more about sound, a textured phonetic thing rather than words with a relatively fixed meaning. You take language that is already slippery and grease it up even further, shoot it out of the esophagus and let it fly into the air as if it were a material.

PM

Repression and animal communication—dyslexia is a boring subject. A more interesting subject is the fourth grade. One of my earliest memories of a drawing by a fellow artist was a pair of glasses rendered on the top of my desk at Woodstock Elementary School, fourth grade,

second floor, middle of the room. I don't know who did the drawing, a pencil drawing etched into the wood. I have no interest in conventional language, only when it is an appropriation to illustrate something else. Language is architecture as an institution for repression. I/we can't talk seriously. It's a grid of snakes. A tic-tac-toe grid. Verbal tic-tac-toe. Who has the janitor by his toe? Marvin Marick had a huge hose. During seventh grade in the boy's shower room, Gerald Cook clenched Marvin's hose, his penis, and pulled him through the locker room.

BW (Marvin's Penis)

Paul, why do you think about me? I'm touched.

PM

Because it was a tragedy, you, the penis, in Gerald Cook's hands was stretched. Gerald pulled you, Marvin, screaming through the shower and locker room and out onto the basketball court.

BW (Marvin's Penis)

Paul, after all these years, why are you still thinking of me?

PM

Sexual traumas. I remember it as sexual theater, theater and architecture: the shower room, the locker room and the gym. The lighting. How it was played out with the other boys in the room and the architectural space, a labyrinth of hallways and doors, moving into a large open space— institutional separation based on gender and function.

BW (Marvin's Penis) I am honored that you've elevated me to such a high cultural position. The penis is inherently tragic, isn't it?

PM

No more than any other Tom, Dick or Harry.

BW

I like how you think of sexual trauma as an architectural problem.

PM

I think of architecture as a frame and/or stage for trauma. As a frame and/or stage, architecture contextualizes and effects trauma.

BW

Isn't conventional language just a medium?

PM

Yes, a medium—for science, for theory, for advertising soup.



Paul McCarthy, *Spaghetti Man*, 1993, fiberglass, urethane rubber cloth and fake fur, 100 inches high.

BW

The first 30 years of your art practice was a private solitary act. Things are more complicated now. You're an industry. You employ lots of people. You've got a dozen projects going on at the same time. Deadlines and commitments up the wazoo. *It's getting kind of hectic*, as they say. You could ease the pace if you wanted to—it's your life and career—but you choose to keep it in high gear, pedal to the metal. Have things gotten out of hand, or is it all exactly where you want it?

PM

Sometimes I know why, how, this, that. Sometimes I don't. I collect telephones. Send me your phones. Some days I like my shoes. Some days I hate them. Not enough time to think about him or her. Pushing the wrong button signifies a squint. If you squint it muffles my voice—wipe yourself on the carpet, and yoga is good for you. Hold your knees and scoot forward.

BW

Your practice is kind of a family business. Karen and Damon (wife and son) are central to the enterprise, as well as Mara (daughter), who has recently pulled up a chair in the office. This is a unique setup. Ideal for you, but inconceivable for other artists with families. Talk about that one, Pop.

PM

Karen and I cook breakfast. Bake cakes. We eat out. We have lunch at 12.

BW

Joseph Beuys, our hero, once on the minds of so many people, now fading. You've been reading about him lately. What have you found out?

PM

Patina. It's all in the patina.

BW

Are you being coy?

PM

Absolutely not.

BW

What do you mean, it's all in the patina?

PM

He maintained a look, a surface look.

BW

A look that aged beautifully overtime?

PM

Beauty becomes cliché.

BW

Beuys as patina, Beuys as cliché.

PM

Boy as patina, boy as cliché. I was interested in Beuys in the '70s and early '80s. I haven't really looked at his work in the past few years, but I have thought about his career and his effect. Beuys was critical to European artists being looked at by the art world. This began in the '70s. The shift from the emphasis on New York to Europe began with Beuys. He was an art star, the first European art star since the prewar period. However, it is curious that he is totally dismissed now. It's convenient for the art world to have lapses in memory. It's good for business. His work has an effect on artists today. It's part of the trickle-down effect. You can see it in the installations of artists now. I am not interested in art being a cure-all.



Paul McCarthy, *Peter, Paul*, 2001–2002, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Luhring Augustine, New York.

BW

Talk about holes. They've appeared in your work consistently for 30 years. Holes drilled or dug up, holes to peer through, gawk at and poke, holes like empty eye sockets, portals to consciousness, the edge of a frame, a camera's lens. You made this metaphor about cultural control, what you can see and what you can't. Please explain further.

PM

Holes are access from one space to another—outside to inside—inside to outside—inside to inside. Round and square holes, body holes and architecture holes, mouth, ears, eye sockets, rectum, vagina, penis hole, front door, back door, windows. Holes are also openings to sleeves, deposit chambers and pockets. Donuts and rods, as sexual mechanisms, rub devices. Drilling holes, making a hole with a drill bit. It's about sex and confusion.

BW

Earlier you mentioned that your scripts are "improvised, repeated and become language appropriation trying to be mediated into the other." What do you mean by that? Along the same lines there was this gem, "repression and annual animal communication," when I asked about your use of spoken and written language. That seems like a bull's-eye. Please elaborate.

PM

Appropriation often comes first. The blah blah, the other, is often the objective. Communication and self-realization as hacky hack.

BW

It seems like your interest in making films and videos started when you stopped doing performances.

PM

No. My interest in film and video goes back to the '60s. For the most part film, video and performance were always connected. I have always been interested in the presence of the camera. But there were performances that were not recorded. The action was spontaneous and there was no time for equipment. After the late '80s I started to make videotapes that were directly related to a production set, a location, a television studio or a sound stage. It was about appropriating Hollywood. I wanted to make a film on Paramount's lot.



Paul McCarthy, *Grand Pop*, 1977, performance view.

BW

Do you find it strange that people have such strong reactions to fecal matter, blood and mucus? The slightest thing that pops out of us is a total horror. Aren't these standard human materials? Why the shock of what's inside us?

PM

Maybe it is a conditioned response: we're taught to be disgusted by our fluids. Maybe it's related to a fear of death. Body fluids are base material. Disneyland is so clean; hygiene is the religion of fascism. The body sack, the sack you don't enter, it's taboo to enter the sack. Fear of sex and the loss of control; visceral goo, waddle, waddle.

BW

How cool that you're a grandfather now. How does that affect your understanding of the world?

PM

I spend more time on or near the floor. I seem to be happy down there.

BW

Walt Disney the man, the freak with the harsh, right-wing politics, and Walt Disney the creator of all those remarkable characters and the cheerfully perverse world of Disneyland. Share your Disney thoughts?

PM

Disney has something to do with the future. It's a virtual space, not unlike the Acropolis. The Disney characters, the environment, the aesthetic are so refined, the relationships so perfect. It's the invention of a world. A Shangri-La that is directly connected to a political agenda, a type of prison that you are seduced into visiting.