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**Commodity and Abjection:
A Psycho-social Investigation of Pop Culture Imagery in the Artwork
of Paul McCarthy**

A Dissertation Presented

by

Robert Rand Shane

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Stony Brook University

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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McCarthy

by

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American artist Paul McCarthy (born 1945) is most well known for his live and video-taped performances in which he plays with mass-produced food products such as ketchup or chocolate syrup. In these scatological works McCarthy parodies characters from popular culture, such as Disney's Pinocchio, while simultaneously referencing family figures from his childhood. Attacks on popular culture and on personal family figures are two themes that appear separately in the work of a number of contemporary artists, but McCarthy's work is unique because of the connection he draws between the two. In his work he offers his own childhood experiences as proof of his implicit assertion that consumer culture is a totalizing and homogenizing force which pervades the intimacies of family life and identity. In this dissertation I present a selection of

McCarthy's performances and kinetic sculptures as case studies to argue that the rituals of his work are an attempt to expel those consumerist elements that on the one hand form his identity, and yet on the other feel completely alien to him.

I use both contemporary psychoanalytic and Marxist theories in this dissertation in order to analyze McCarthy's psychical response to consumer culture. McCarthy's work draws these two discourses together in a process that I call commodity abjection. I argue that his relationship to popular culture is analogous to the process of abjection as elaborated by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. Kristeva claimed that abjection is an interminable process whereby the subject attempts to establish a hermetic border against those materials which confuse its identity. In establishing one's subjectivity against abject materials, the subject must expel things that have become part of himself. Television and entertainment culture are the locus of McCarthy's childhood memories and cultural values, and to his consternation they form the core of his identity. I show that McCarthy's irreverent and puerile use of food products and imagery from popular culture is an attempt to abject those elements.

For Dr. Lucy Bowditch,
my teacher, mentor, and friend,
who opened up the world of contemporary art criticism to me.
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INTRODUCTION

Paul McCarthy (born 1945) is a Los Angeles based artist who has worked in painting, sculpture, and installation. He is most well known for his live and video-taped performances in which he plays with mass-produced food products such as ketchup or chocolate syrup. In these scatological works McCarthy often takes on the persona of a figure from popular culture, such as Disney's Pinocchio, Popeye, or Santa Claus; at the same time he makes reference to family figures from his childhood, most often his mother, father, and paternal grandfather. McCarthy's response to consumer culture is analogous to his response to his family: in both cases he identifies with and viciously parodies his subject matter. Attacks on popular culture and on personal family figures are two themes that appear separately in the work of a number of contemporary artists, but McCarthy's work is unique because of the connection he draws between the two. In his work he offers his own childhood experiences as proof of his implicit assertion that consumer culture is a totalizing and homogenizing force which pervades the intimacies of family life and one's own identity. In this dissertation I present a selection of McCarthy's performances and kinetic sculptures as case studies to argue that his work is a highly

ambivalent and deeply personal response to the hegemonic role American consumer culture plays in the formation of subjectivity, especially his own.

McCarthy within the Context of Contemporary Art

McCarthy's work is deeply connected with the imagery and attitudes of Los Angeles, Disneyland, and West Coast Pop art. He first studied art as an undergraduate student at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City in 1967, and completed his BFA at the Art Institute of San Francisco and his MFA in 1973 at the University of Southern California. The taboo shattering nature of his work is representative of a number of trends in contemporary art. In particular, his work resonates with the transgressions against pop culture found in the work of West coast art from the 1960s and 1970s such as the paintings of Peter Saul, the assemblages of Ed Kienholz, and the radical performances of Chris Burden.

McCarthy's artistic training began at a time of Abstract Expressionism, conceptual art, Minimalism, Pop art and experimental film. All of these movements had an effect on McCarthy's early years as an artist. In particular, Allan Kaprow played an important role in McCarthy's early career. McCarthy owned a copy of Kaprow's *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (1959/1961, published 1966). Kaprow's call for artists to blur the line between art and life was an influential idea that helped McCarthy move away from traditional painting to performance art. However, in the mid-1970s McCarthy began to explore the effects of media and consumer culture and began

experimenting with video. As a result his performances moved away from the spontaneity of Kaprow's Happenings.

Part of the unique character of McCarthy's work comes from the fact that its subject matter oscillates between 1960s Pop art and abject art¹ of the 1980s and 1990s. While McCarthy incorporates frequent images of consumer culture and entertainment icons, his visceral and scatological interaction with them sets him apart from the cool irony of New York Pop artists such as Andy Warhol or more recently Jeff Koons. However, McCarthy is also different from most artists who deal with the body and its fluids such as Kiki Smith or Andres Serrano. Most of these "abject artists," as they were called in the Whitney Museum's 1993 "Abject Art" exhibition, treat the body without reference to popular culture or anything else that would place them within a specific historical context. McCarthy's recurring pop imagery complicates a simple reading of the role of the body in his work.

Review of the Literature

While having had numerous solo and group shows on the West Coast and throughout Europe, McCarthy has only since the mid-1990s achieved recognition in New

¹ This term was introduced by the curators of the 1993 "Abject Art" exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York:

Although "abject art" is a play on "object art," the term does not connote an art movement so much as it describes a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food in order to confront issues of gender and sexuality. This work also includes abject subject matter---that which is often deemed inappropriate by a conservative dominant culture. (Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones, and Simon Taylor, "Introduction," *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* [exhibition catalogue]. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 7.)

York. Owing to his relatively recent arrival onto the mainstream art scene, most of the literature on McCarthy is composed of exhibition reviews and catalogue essays. The most notable academic scholarship on McCarthy rarely focuses on him in isolation. Among the various interpretations of his work, there are three dominant perspectives which play important roles in this dissertation: Thomas McEvelley has examined McCarthy's work in relationship to primitive ritual; Ralph Rugoff and Lisa Philips have argued that McCarthy is a cultural critic; and Donald Kuspit and Hal Foster have interpreted McCarthy through psychoanalytic theories of perversion and abjection, respectively. My reading of McCarthy is informed by all three of these models. Ultimately, I show how McCarthy's response to consumer culture is intertwined with the intra-psychical aspects of his work.

Art historian Thomas McEvelley has argued that the aggressive and erotic character of McCarthy's performances was not merely an attempt to *épater le bourgeois*, but was instead connected to archaic shamanistic ritual.² He categorized McCarthy along with other post-1945 artists such as Carolee Schneemann and the Viennese Actionists (though he acknowledged McCarthy's resistance to the comparison).³ The works of all of these artists included themes of self-mutilation, castration, female imitation (in the case of the Viennese Actionists and McCarthy), and sometimes were "clearly echoing various sacramental rites from the Dionysian to the Christian."⁴ McEvelley gave as an example

² Thomas McEvelley, "Art in the Dark," *ARTForum* 21/10 (Summer 1983): 65-66.

³ McEvelley, 62-71.

⁴ McEvelley, 66.

My Doctor (1978), a piece in which McCarthy wore a mask to appear like an older man and gave birth to a Barbie doll through a bloody (ketchup) slit in the mask's forehead, recalling the birth of Athena from Zeus' forehead.⁵ In another work, *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982), McCarthy simulated giving birth to a doll from between his thighs, which McEvelley read as an example of a female imitation ritual.

McEvelley's work is helpful insofar as it is a starting point to talk about the role of ritual in McCarthy's performances. It falls short, however, because it does not sufficiently address the role of pop culture imagery which distinguishes McCarthy's work from Schneemann's or the Viennese Actionists' in whose works any references to twentieth-century culture is conspicuously absent.

McCarthy himself disavowed many of the characterizations made by McEvelley, because he felt his work was more about the artifice of American popular culture and entertainment, whereas the Viennese Actionists were using literal blood in their ritual performances:

There are times when my work has been compared to the Viennese Actionist school, but I always thought there *was* this whole connection with Pop. The ketchup, the hamburger, and also the movie world. I was really fascinated with Hollywood and Hollywood Boulevard. I started using masks I'd bought on Hollywood Boulevard. [...] Vienna is not Los Angeles. My work came out of kids' television in Los Angeles. I didn't go through Catholicism and World War II as a teenager, I didn't live in a European environment. People make reference to Viennese art without really questioning the fact that there's a big difference between ketchup and blood. I never thought of my work as shamanistic. My work is more about being a clown than a shaman.⁶

⁵ McEvelley, 66.

⁶ Paul McCarthy, interview with Marc Selwyn, "Paul McCarthy: There's a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood," *Flash Art* 26/170 (May/June 1993): 63-64.

Despite the reaction of McCarthy, I do not completely dismiss McEvelley's work. On the contrary, it is not the case that McCarthy's performances have no connection to ritual; rather, the ritualistic element in his performances needs to be investigated in relation to the pop elements and McCarthy's biography. At another moment in the interview quoted above, McCarthy's response revealed that a more ambiguous overlapping of ritual, commercial culture, and American family life was operative in his work. It is precisely the overlapping of these elements that is the subject of this dissertation. McCarthy stated:

I was always aware that it could be perceived as both blood and ketchup. During the performances the smell of ketchup is strong. You think of blood and you think of ritual but you are also confronted with ketchup and grocery stores, commercials and cooking shows, Mom and Dad at the table. In almost all of the performances there is a table and a tablecloth, the sacrificial altar.⁷

Calling the table a "sacrificial altar" does seem to indicate that perhaps McCarthy was thinking in the terms that McEvelley was describing.⁸ The relationship of commodities to

⁷ McCarthy, 64.

⁸ Speaking of *Bossy Burger* (1991) McCarthy again referred to the site of his performance as an "altar": "There was this front counter for the fast food restaurant which becomes this sort of altar/table where I prepare the food" (McCarthy, 64). McCarthy repeated the same language of "altar" in another interview when he said: "The action of the altar is primal; it involves the body. The altar is a place where the sack is cut open--the human sack is cut open--the body sack or the animal sack, the sack meaning the skin. We search for what can't be gotten at in the interior of the body, cutting open the body to peer inside" (McCarthy, "Interview with Stiles," p. 14). Though his cutting open of the skin may have been a simulation, rather than on a real animal as had been the case in the performances of Viennese Actionists, the language of "primal", "altar", and "cutting the animal sack", do suggest a kinship with some aspect of the Viennese Actionists. In fact, McCarthy and fellow artist Mike Kelley participated with Hermann Nitsch during a 1978 Action in California. (See Duncan, Michael. "Report from Vienna--L.A.: The Dark Side," *Art in America* 81/3, (March 1993): 41-43).

bodily rituals will be an important aspect of my reading of his work as a way of symbolically exorcising the influence of consumer culture.

As opposed to McEvelley's comparison of primitive ritual to McCarthy's performances, a number of critics have argued that McCarthy's work is a form of cultural criticism against American consumerism. Ralph Rugoff and Lisa Philips are two critics who interpreted McCarthy's work as a response to the trauma of social conditioning in a culture dominated by consumerism and mass media.

Ralph Rugoff was curator of the LAX show in Vienna in 1993 which included McCarthy and a number of other transgressive West Coast artists from the 1980s and early 1990s. In an article for *Artforum*, he asserted that McCarthy's work is a critique of the cultural conditioning imposed by consumer capitalism. Rugoff claimed McCarthy's performances and sculptures "allegorize the traumas of consumer culture in the terms of sexuality, identity, and body-boundary confusion."⁹ Rugoff began to draw the connection between family life and consumerism that is operative in McCarthy's work. Rugoff wrote: "The trauma of cultural conditioning in the consumerist family is McCarthy's great motif; his performances and videos from the '70s and '90s 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."¹⁰ Rugoff argued that McCarthy's critique of social hierarchies of gender and control are embodied in his pop aesthetic, which is an aspect of the work that McEvelley's account failed to address. Echoing

⁹ Ralph Rugoff, "Deviations on a Theme," *Artforum*, 33/2, (October 1994): 81.

¹⁰ Rugoff, 83.

McCarthy's insistence on the artifice of the work, Rugoff wrote that it "has less to do with shamanic rites---or the work of Viennese Actionists---than with cheesy horror films, especially the kind of low-budget slasher movie where it's clear from the start that the blood is fake."¹¹ Such overt artifice is apparent from the iconic masks used by McCarthy which recall familiar characters, from Jimmy Carter to the Old Man in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974).¹²

In her introduction to the catalogue for the 2000 retrospective of McCarthy's work at the New Museum in New York, Lisa Phillips coined the term "pop expressionism." The term "pop expressionism" is helpful because it begins to signal the link between a psychological situation (manifest in the artwork through expression) and the material culture (as seen in the works' pop imagery) with which the psyche is at times in conflict.¹³ McCarthy expressively performs with his body and liquid mediums; but his work also contains elements of pop art in so far as his "food palette" includes hamburgers, hot dogs, condiments, chocolate all of which are, as Phillips wrote, "emblematic of American family life...."¹⁴ Ultimately, Phillips argued that McCarthy's

¹¹ Rugoff, 45.

¹² Rugoff, 46.

¹³ As Lane Relyea wrote concerning the term "pop expressionism": "The phrase fits McCarthy's oeuvre surprisingly well, but only because the two terms---pop and expressionism---go together so uncomfortably. Expressionism is supposed to be about empowered subjectivity, creation, the artist as producer; pop is about product, commodities, the artwork as sales pitch. The former relies on the poetics of the private, lone, individual, and how that individual achieves self-realization at the cost of social isolation and withdrawal. The latter turns instead to the public rhetoric of the marketplace, where social integration is won at the price of selling out, of self-alienation." (*Parkett*, p. 102)

¹⁴ Lisa Phillips, "Paul McCarthy's Theater of the Body," introduction to *Paul McCarthy*. (New York: New Museum, 2000), 5.

work is a critical endeavor, because it reveals the effects of social conditioning. Through his horrific and grotesque scenes, McCarthy uncovers both the instincts and the social traumas festering beneath the surface of contemporary American popular culture:

The ensuing carnality and carnage is reminiscent of the comic artificiality of many horror movies and alludes to a latent insanity which we all fear. By giving form to primal and hidden impulses, McCarthy's pop expressionism makes the comic and tragic effects of our social conditioning all too vivid.¹⁵

Philips, like Rugoff, thus implied that the shocking appearance of McCarthy's work is a way to awaken his audience to the deleterious and insidious social conditioning that capitalist consumer culture imposes on the psyche.

I use the work of Philips and Rugoff because they capture so eloquently the ways in which McCarthy's work reveals and critiques the mythology latent in theme-park and television culture. However, I point out that in the performances in which McCarthy uses pop culture icons, such as Disney's Pinocchio, Popeye or Santa Claus, he significantly performs with his *own* body and references his own personal history. Rugoff claimed that McCarthy's work represented a general trauma inflicted on all consumers, but did not discuss traumas particular to McCarthy's biography; Philips, despite her emphasis on expression and the visceral qualities of McCarthy's work, likewise claimed that: "In McCarthy's theater of the body, the human body is a social body---a metaphor for social conventions."¹⁶ While retaining the contributions of Philips and Rugoff regarding the pop element within McCarthy's work, I examine the work with regard to McCarthy's lived

¹⁵ Philips, 5.

¹⁶ Phillips, 3.

body and the intra-psychoic motivations driving him. McCarthy's work demands an integrated *psycho*-social method as I employ in this dissertation, because while he critiques consumer culture, he uses his own body as the primary site for that critique and makes direct references to members of his own family.

The psychoanalytic interpretations of McCarthy's work made by art historians and critics are varied, and all provide a remedy to the limited cultural analysis offered by Philips and Rugoff. Those made by Donald Kuspit, Tom Holbert, and Hal Foster have provided a foundation for the discussion of concepts operative in McCarthy's work, such as perversion and abjection. Building on their essential framework, I am the first to connect those concepts to specific people and events in McCarthy's biography.

In "Into the Anal Universe: the Para-Art of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy" Kuspit employed psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel's theories of perversion and creativity in his reading of McCarthy and frequent collaborator Mike Kelley: "Both artists are anal-sadistic. Further, they think it liberating and critical---socially critical, no less---to be anally defiant, when in emotional fact it is regressive and, at best, pseudo-critical."¹⁷ In the anal universe as described by Chasseguet-Smirgel the pervert reduces the adult world of differences to excrement. Kuspit did not read McCarthy and Kelley's work as a humorous parody of mass culture, but rather, asked what it meant for artists to incorporate and identify so consistently with excrement: "Shit is undifferentiated matter--pure homogeneity---the useless entropic end-product of the metabolic process. In other

¹⁷ Donald Kuspit, "In the Anal Universe; the Para-Art of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy," *New Art Examiner* 27/2 (October 1999): 26.

words, it is materialized death.”¹⁸ I too employ Chasseguet-Smirgel’s theories to describe the way McCarthy erodes differences between generations and gender in his work, and how in doing so he effectively reduces consumer culture, art, and members of his family to excrement.

Kuspit argued that McCarthy’s work is “para-art,” something that lies alongside and parasitizes true art (such as the shamanistic work of Joseph Beuys which was a vehicle for healing social ills rather than fetishizing them).¹⁹ Tom Holbert, writing on the McCarthy retrospective at the New Museum in 1999, used a Lacanian model, but arrived at a conclusion similar to Kuspit’s. He was troubled by the fact that he saw McCarthy as an artist who made no significant contribution to the problems of the culture he critiqued, but as an artist who fetishized the traumas thematized in his “deliberately anti-therapeutic work.”²⁰ Similar also to Philips and Rugoff, Holbert saw the problem of social conditioning in a media culture as the central theme in McCarthy’s work. Holbert argued that in McCarthy’s work from the 1960s to the present: “nothing stands outside mediated representations and social constructions.”²¹ Holbert described the trauma inflicted on subjectivity by society as the “impossibility of developing an authentic self”:

In many respects, McCarthy deals with a kind of diffusion of sociological and psychological insights that have attained the status of platitudes: the narration of suppressed social force that is unlocked in the virtual realities

¹⁸ Kuspit, 27.

¹⁹ Kuspit, 63.

²⁰ Tom Holbert, “Schooled for Scandal.” [pre-review of New Museum show] Trans from German by Mark Georgiev. *Artforum* 39/3, (November 2000):139.

²¹ Holbert, 136.

of theme parks and soap operas and the tales about the neurotic unit called ‘family’; the despairing knowledge of the impossibility of developing an authentic self in a media culture where nothing outranks efficient, embodied authenticity; and finally, the reality of the intimate fascism of the socially disciplinarian, confining environments of family, military, and workplace.²²

It is precisely this problem of developing an authentic self,²³ and how that problem in McCarthy’s work is blamed on the dominance of consumer culture, that I am investigating. However, Holbert’s argument was similar to Rugoff’s and Philips’s insofar as he read the body in McCarthy’s work as representative of a social body and did not extend his psychoanalytic interpretation into the specifics of McCarthy’s life and family as I do throughout in this dissertation.

Lastly, while psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has not written on Paul McCarthy, her psychoanalytic theories of abjection have played an important role in interpretations of his work. Kristeva’s *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) became a theoretical tool in art criticism for understanding a number of artists who dealt with the body and its fluids from Andres Serrano to Kiki Smith. In early 1993 the Whitney Museum of American Art even held an exhibition titled “Abject Art,” which did not include McCarthy (he still had not been widely recognized in New York) but did include

²² Holbert, 136.

²³ Holbert’s notion of an authentic self is analogous to Winnicott’s notion of the true self. A true self can make a clear distinction between the “me” and the “not-me” The ability to distinguish this develops if the child is raised in an environment in which he or she feels safe exploring the real world. In such a safe environment the child can feel free to act spontaneously. If the environment is hostile, however, the child will become compliant and not develop his or her inner capacity for creativity. See: Michael St. Claire, *Object Relations and Self Psychology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 67-68. Some of Winnicott’s other ideas will be introduced later in this introduction and used throughout the dissertation.

his friend and frequent collaborator Mike Kelley.²⁴ Kristeva's theory of abjection highlighted the ambiguous status of borders, particularly in relation to the human body and the fluids which pass in and out of it. As such, McCarthy's art of bodily performances, which incorporates foods and liquid condiments, has lent itself well to her work.

Kristeva's theory of abjection posited that subjectivity is always in process: a sense of self is formed by expelling that which is alien to one's self. The process becomes ambivalent and often traumatic, because in order to expel something from the self it must have already been a part of the self.²⁵ This can be an intrapsychical process, but Kristeva claimed its precedent is in the body.²⁶ Excrement, for example, belongs to the body, but is also expelled from the body. Once it is expelled it is disavowed, and the self can be

²⁴ "Although 'abject art' is a play on 'object art,' the term does not connote an art movement so much as it describes a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food in order to confront issues of gender and sexuality. This work also includes abject subject matter---that which is often deemed inappropriate by a conservative dominant culture. Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones, and Simon Taylor, "Introduction," *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* [exhibition catalogue]. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993, p.7.

²⁵ ..."I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.... Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects." Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1980], Trans. Leon Roudiez, (New York: Columbia, 1982), 3.

²⁶ Abjection is similar to the mechanism of psychical expulsion operative in Klein's notion of projective identification, or in W.R. Bion's work on psychotic personalities: "[in the paranoid-schizoid] phase the psychotic splits his objects... In the patient's phantasy the expelled particles of ego lead an independent and uncontrolled existence... In consequence the patient feels himself to be surrounded by bizarre objects..." W.R. Bion, "Differentiation of the psychotic from the non-psychotic personalities," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 37, (1957): 268. The difference between Kristeva and Bion is two-fold. First Kristeva insisted that psychical abjection has its precedent in the processes of the body. For that reason it is useful in an analysis of the McCarthy's performances in which he uses his body as a medium. Second, abjection is not necessarily pathological, whereas Bion's notion of beta elements was related to his analysis of psychotic patients.

defined in opposition to it. On Kristeva's analysis, subjectivity is formed by creating a border between the self and the things that are expelled (and thereby non-self). The sense of revulsion or abjection that arises when encountering abject materials (such as excrement or bodily fluids) happens because those things serve as a reminder of just how unstable and permeable that border actually is.²⁷

Though it treated McCarthy's work only briefly, the most scholarly exploration of abjection in contemporary art, including its relation to consumer culture, was taken up by Hal Foster.²⁸ Foster recalled for his readers the idea of abjection à la psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva that "the abject is what I must get rid of *in order to be an I*.... It is a fantasmic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it."²⁹ Abjection, Foster wrote, "touches on the fragility of our boundaries.... Both spatially and temporally then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, 'where meaning collapses'..."³⁰ I discuss the notion that the subject must always expel that which is both intimate and alien to himself with regard to McCarthy's position vis-à-vis consumer

²⁷ Theories of abjection are therefore concerned with the instability between binary oppositions particularly questions of inside/outside, but also animate/inanimate, life/death, and even political categories such as native/immigrant.

²⁸ Michael Cohen must be credited as the first critic to place McCarthy's work within the framework of abjection theory in an article for *Flashart*. Cohen wrote: "Several critics have tried to make the case that Paul McCarthy's performative actions constitute shamanistic ritual. But shamanism indicates sublimation, exclusion. And while it may bear a superficial resemblance to, McCarthy's work does not enforce closure on the abject. His liberatory power is in misdescription, in askew formal translations of the abyss, using abject language (food for sperm) in which it cannot be contained. If Paul McCarthy is a shaman, his is ritual ambiguity, the celebration of half-right gestures and half-way desires." Michael Cohen, "Leap into the Void: Abjection and Survival in the Work of Paul McCarthy," *Flash Art* 26, no. 170 (May/June 1993): 62.

²⁹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), 153.

³⁰ Foster, 153.

culture: the consumer icons he desecrates are also ones with which he identifies, the cultural symbols with which he grew up.

Commodity Abjection

I draw upon the framework of contemporary psychoanalytic and Marxist theories in this dissertation in order to show how McCarthy's work is a psychological response to consumer culture. Psychoanalytic theory is appropriate to an analysis of McCarthy's work because of the ubiquity in his oeuvre of both scatological imagery and his overt references to the three figures of the Oedipal triangle, both of which psychoanalytic theory addresses. His work also lends itself to a Marxist reading because of the prevalence of consumer products and pop imagery. As shown in the review of the literature above, criticism to date on McCarthy has been informed by both psychoanalytic and Marxist perspectives making it obligatory to address them in any scholarly study of the artwork. Though critics have in general addressed either one or the other of these elements, I argue that his work draws these two discourses together in a process that I call commodity abjection.

I argue that McCarthy's relationship to popular culture is analogous to the process of abjection. As explained in the literature review above, Kristeva claimed that abjection is an interminable process whereby the subject attempts to establish a hermetic border against those materials which confuse its identity. Kristeva argued that food and excrement are abject materials because of the ambiguous status they have vis-à-vis the body: food is exterior to the body, but then becomes interior, and excrement's

relationship to the body is converse. To the consternation of the subject, food and excrement demonstrate how permeable the body is and how easily the boundary between self and world can be broken. In establishing one's subjectivity against abject materials, the subject must expel things that have become part of himself.³¹ I argue that abjection plays a role in McCarthy's work, not simply because of the obvious and literal use of food and allusions to excrement, rather, food and feces are symbolic of his personal attachment and revulsion to consumer culture. Television and entertainment culture are the locus of his childhood memories and cultural values, and thus to McCarthy's horror they form the core of his identity.

Consumer society exists a priori to the subject, and McCarthy demonstrates this by emphasizing the fact that at birth one has entered into a family of adults who have already been conditioned by it. As the case with pop imagery, McCarthy identifies with, yet expels parental figures, as seen when he takes on the character of a butcher, his father's profession, or pretends to give birth to a baby boy, as his mother did when she gave birth to him.³² The process of expelling what has been psychically internalized is complicated, and McCarthy uses a variety of psychical defenses ranging from anal-sadism, from which I draw upon the theories of perversion given by psychoanalyst, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel,³³ to re-scripting childhood traumas in such a way as to put

³¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

³² McCarthy, Interview by Jeremy Sigler, facsimile of original manuscript. *Parkett*, no. 73, (2005): 120-134.

³³ Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984).

himself in the role of the aggressor rather than the victim, a strategy I will demonstrate using the work of psychoanalyst Robert Stoller.³⁴

By juxtaposing and then demonstrating the intertwined relationship of childhood trauma and family life on the one hand with the prevalence of consumer imagery on the other, I show that McCarthy's work is not a detached, cerebral indictment of capitalism, found in the work of contemporary American artists such as Barbara Kruger. Though the body in McCarthy's work may be a social body, as Philips and Rugoff claimed, that social body is his own body, born of his parents' bodies. McCarthy's work consists of lengthy rituals, visceral and scatological, more akin to a self-exorcism than an intellectual critique.

In order to talk about how these personal experiences relate to McCarthy's use of pop culture images, I employ Marxist analyses of consumer society. Two philosophers in particular, Theodor Adorno and Frederic Jameson, have theories that address the issues that arise from McCarthy's work. Adorno, writing with Max Horkheimer, showed a dialectical relationship between primitive ritual and capitalist culture in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. With their text I am able to bring together the discourses of ritual and consumerism which have until now been mutually exclusive in the literature on McCarthy,³⁵ and show that in fact McCarthy presents them as two sides of the same coin. Frederic Jameson, who considered his own work a late twentieth-century update of Adorno's, brought up several issues pertinent to McCarthy's work. Jameson observed

³⁴ Robert Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and *Perversion: the Erotic Form of Hatred*. (London: Karnac Books, 1975).

³⁵ See, for example, the debate between McEvelley and Rugoff cited above.

what he called the waning of affect in the postmodern era, a problem he linked to the rise of consumer culture. This is helpful for talking about the status of affect in McCarthy's work which often mimics expressionist work in its viscerality, but usually lacks any real emotion. McCarthy described the "numbness" of his repetitive actions in his performances as a "sort of solution" to the traumas of a consumer society.³⁶ Ultimately I bridge Jameson's Marxist analysis back to a psychoanalytic reading of McCarthy by way of psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, who provided a clinical language for talking about schizoid culture in his work on creativity and art.³⁷ Jameson's and Winnicott's work make it possible to analyze the affect of McCarthy's work and to account for the ways in which his psychical distresses are culturally induced.

In Chapter 1 I analyze two of McCarthy's early food performances, *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* (1975) and *Tubbing* (1975), which were performed in tandem on the same evening. These pieces marked a dramatic shift from his earlier Kaprow-inspired work. In these performances he addressed seriously for the first time the consumerist themes that came to dominate his oeuvre. He began to use pop imagery by dressing himself up and posing like a pin-up girl. Though McCarthy performed live, his audience watched him via television monitor in an adjacent room. The medium of video highlights McCarthy's ambivalent relationship to media culture. On the one hand his perversion was a way to subvert the sanitized sexuality of television sitcoms, but within the context of

³⁶ McCarthy, Interview by Kristine Stiles, in Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, Ralph Rugoff, and Kristine Stiles, *Paul McCarthy*, (London: Phaidon, 1996), 21

³⁷ D.W. Winnicott. *Playing and Reality* [1971], (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 66-70.

1960s and 1970s abstraction, minimalism, and Kaprow-style performance art the very use of television represented a new complicity and identification with the entertainment world. McCarthy effectively resigned himself to the idea that it was no longer possible for art to maintain a critical distance from mass culture.

Nowhere are themes of abjection and perversion more apparent than in McCarthy's birthing performances of late 1970s and early 1980s. These works, *Contemporary Cure All* (1978) and *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982), are the subject of Chapter 2. McCarthy's pieces rescript childhood traumas, recall Kristeva's notion of primary abjection,³⁸ and include a vast array of consumer products and toys. McCarthy always gives birth to mass-produced, plastic dolls, as if to say Americans are born as consumers and their subjectivity already commodified. His work echoed the sentiments of Adorno and Horkheimer who wrote:

...human beings are forced into real conformity. The blessing that the market does not ask about birth is paid for in the exchange society by the fact that the possibilities conferred by birth are molded to fit the production of goods that can be bought on the market. Each human being has been endowed with a self of his or her own, different from all the others, so that it could all the more surely be made the same.³⁹

³⁸ Birth, according to Kristeva, is primary abjection. It is the expulsion of the infant from the mother's womb. As philosopher Kelly Oliver elaborated: "on Kristeva's analysis, the child sees the mother's sex as threatening because it is the canal out of which it came...insofar as the infant was once on the other side of that canal, its autonomy is threatened." Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 55.

³⁹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments* [1944/47], Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8-9.

I also argue these works re-script childhood trauma, specifically the childhood humiliation McCarthy felt when learning about his breech birth. Thus in these works I show the intertwining of personal and social trauma.

McCarthy's kinetic sculptures from the 1980s and 1990s such as *Cultural Gothic* and *The Garden* are treated in Chapter 3. Created after his son Damon was born, these works dealt with two themes important with regard to McCarthy's childhood. The first was the coercive transmission of heterosexual identity from father to son, and the second was McCarthy's lament over the transformation of his rural childhood town into a homogenized suburban environment.⁴⁰ The figures in these kinetic works took on a mechanical, theme-park aesthetic showing that subjects become sexual automatons in a consumer culture.

Chapter 4 is an examination of McCarthy's *Pinocchio Pipenose Householdlemma* (1994). This scatological food performance was done with McCarthy dressed as Disney's Pinocchio. Two dummies used as props were dressed identical to him, and when the video of this work is exhibited publicly the audience is obliged to wear the costumes as well. This work was a continuation of McCarthy's interest in television culture seen in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* analyzed in Chapter 2, but in *Pinocchio Pipenose Householdlemma* both audience and performer were reified into theme-park automatons like the kinetic sculptures of Chapter 3.

⁴⁰ McCarthy, interview by Linda Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties: Sex, Food, Money/Fame, Ritual Death*, ed. Linda Montano (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2000), 97. The interview is undated, but was probably conducted shortly after *Death Ship* (1981).

Lastly, Chapter 5 is an analysis of McCarthy's video performance *Painter* (1995). He used the motif of a children's art instruction television show to simultaneously parody the abstract expressionist painter Willem de Kooning and his father who was a butcher. In this work subjectivity, family life, and expressionism in art were all shown to be infected by consumer culture. This was a significant work in McCarthy's career because it was funded by and then exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The works presented in these chapters demonstrate what I call commodity abjection. McCarthy's art is an amalgam of visceral performance, pop imagery and his own personal history. I argue that his work implicitly asserts that the space of subjectivity has been flattened by the hegemony of consumer culture. McCarthy has found that the realization of an authentic or true self is impossible after having been raised in a culture in which sexuality, art, and identity have been pre-determined for the subject by the entertainment industry. Since McCarthy was raised on consumer culture by parents who were likewise products of that culture, his work offers no possibility of escape. Using a psycho-social methodology informed by both psychoanalytic and Marxist theory, I contribute to the literature on McCarthy by demonstrating how his body has become the site where his biography and the discourses of consumer culture and abjection intertwine.

CHAPTER 1:
VIDEO AS CULTURAL SIGNIFIER AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE IN *SAILOR'S
MEAT / SAILOR'S DELIGHT AND TUBBING* (1975)

In this chapter I analyze *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* (1975) [fig. 1.1] and *Tubbing* [fig. 1.2] two of McCarthy's early food performances, in which he addressed seriously for the first time American consumer and television culture, and what art critic Ralph Rugoff called "the contagion of everyday life by media imagery."⁴¹ Though the pieces were performed live, McCarthy's audience was relegated to an adjacent room and watched him via television monitor. Video in this case was not used to merely to document the works, but became an integral part of their meaning as a signifier of television culture. I examine this use of video with regard to my thesis on commodity abjection, that is, McCarthy's Sisyphean expulsion of the consumer culture that comprises his own subjectivity. I begin by briefly describing a few of his early Kaprow-inspired performances in order to show what a radical break he had made both artistically and psychically when he began to make video works saturated with references to media and consumer culture. Second, I discuss McCarthy's dialectical use of video: these works critiqued television culture while simultaneously complying with it. Finally, I conclude

⁴¹ Ralph Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," *Paul McCarthy*, (London: Phaidon, 1996), 32.

this chapter by examining his appropriation of film stills and use of food products in these videos.

Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight was performed in the dingy and dimly lit bedroom of a Pasadena motel room. Through a nearby television monitor, McCarthy's audience saw him naked, wearing a silver wig and gaudy blue eye shadow. He put on women's black panties, and on a mattress proceeded to strike effeminate poses that mimicked pin-up girl poses appropriated from a low-budget erotic film titled *Europe in the Raw* (1963, dir. Russ Meyer). Then he began rubbing red paint, meat, and ketchup on his body. He molded the food and paint mixture into piles, placed them on the mattress, and then licked and humped them. Later he introduced a rubber crutch pad into the mix, first by holding it to his genitals like a phallus, and then dipping it in a jar of mayonnaise and sucking on it. He crawled on a table and urinated on a sausage that he had previously rubbed near his anus, and then licked it. At another point in the performance he bandaged the crutch pad-phallus to his leg. At the end of the performance he broke the bottles and jars the condiments had been in and then walked over the broken glass repeatedly.

From *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* McCarthy immediately transitioned into *Tubbing* [fig. 1.2]. Still wearing the same wig and make-up, he walked into the bathroom of the motel room. For a brief moment the audience, whose view until then had been restricted to the television monitors, saw McCarthy in the flesh as he walked between the

two rooms.⁴² In the bathtub he lathered himself with cream. He then shoved sausage and minced meat between his buttocks and into his mouth often causing him to gag. He ended the performance by washing himself slowly with the bath water.

McCarthy's Shift from "Actions" to Video

Video is now a mainstream medium in contemporary art, but it was just emerging at the time of *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing*. Likewise, the totalizing power of media and consumer culture has been a frequent theme in art since the 1980s (for example, in the work of Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger), so the radical nature of McCarthy's two performances with regard to the role of mass media in subject formation can only be fully appreciated by looking at them in an art historical context. McCarthy's shift to the medium of video and the subject matter of consumer culture was not only radical for the art world, but for him personally as well. In this section I describe his transition from his early "Actions" to his use of video in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing*. My aim is to show how McCarthy's awareness of the problem of media contagion created a dramatic upheaval of his world view and a personal crisis for him.

Video was an essential part of *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing*, and it set these performances apart from the work of other post-World War II performance artists in the United States such as Allan Kaprow, who had initially played a formative

⁴² Thomas McEvelley, "Paul McCarthy: Performance and Video Works: The Layering," *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966-2006* [exhibition catalogue], (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2006), 37.

role in McCarthy's artistic development.⁴³ In his influential *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (1959) Kaprow argued that Happenings were to be performed only once: "...to repeat a Happening at this time is to accede to a far more serious matter: compromise the whole concept of Change."⁴⁴ The spontaneity of the Happenings needed to be preserved because, as Kaprow argued, "the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, perhaps indistinct, as possible."⁴⁵ Therefore, Kaprow's performances were rarely documented in film or photography. Other West coast artists in the 1960s and 1970s documented their work on occasion, but the actual "art" was objectless, and therefore documentation could never be a substitute for the transient experience of the performance.⁴⁶ For example, Chris Burden explained in an interview that his work *Shoot* (1971) was about the psychological preparation for the experience of being shot with a

⁴³ Kaprow's influence on McCarthy's early work cannot be underestimated. He had a major West coast retrospective in 1967 at the Pasadena Art Museum, and McCarthy owned a copy of his *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (Magnus af Petersens, "Paul McCarthy's 40 Years of Hard Work," in *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966-2006*, p. 11 and McCarthy, "Interview with Marc Selwyn," *Flash Art* 26/170 (May/June 1993): 63). McCarthy and Kaprow were friends, and McCarthy gave a moving tribute to him after his death. (See: McCarthy "Final Scores," transcribed by Tim Griffin, *Art Forum*, summer 2006, 325). Many of McCarthy's early works were directly inspired by Kaprow's. For example, McCarthy's installation *Dream Room / Interior Room / Tire, Cotton, Water Room* (1971) in which he took large quantities of cotton, dipped them in buckets of water, and then draped them over tires filling an entire interior room, paid direct homage to Kaprow's installation *Yard* (1961) in which he filled the courtyard of Martha Jackson Gallery in New York with old tires.

⁴⁴ Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* [1959-1961], reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 721.

⁴⁵ Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*, 720.

⁴⁶ See McCarthy's discussion of the difference between Kaprow's work and his own with regard to the question of documentation in McCarthy, Interview with Grady Turner, *Flash Art* 34/217 (March April 2001): 91.

rifle in a gallery;⁴⁷ that is to say, the real subject matter of the piece was not something that could be recorded with photography or video. By contrast the end product of McCarthy's *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* even for those seeing it live, was a television program. The performance was video taped and could be repeated infinitely.

In contrast to *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing*, McCarthy's earliest performance work was actually much closer to Kaprow's model, because he did not use video or make references to mass culture. McCarthy began doing what he called "minimal actions"⁴⁸ in 1968. These were performances of simple instructions such as "Pile dirt on your desk" (1969), "Practice spinning with arms outstretched" (1970), and "Plaster your head and one arm into a wall" (1973) [fig. 1.3]⁴⁹ that explored intersections

⁴⁷ Burden said in an interview: "One thing that sort of bothers me is that a lot of people remember the *Shoot* piece and some of the violent pieces, and then ignore the reason for it all, the whole thing that ties it all together. They get carried away with 'There's the guy who had himself shot!' They don't go to the next step and wonder why I would want to do that or what my reasons are.

"I think a lot people misunderstood because they think I did those pieces for sensational reasons, or that I was trying to get attention. But those pieces were really private---often there were only two or three people there to see them, or maybe just the people who were helping me....

"It was more like a kind of mental experience for me---to see how I would deal with the mental aspect--like knowing that at 7:30 you're going to stand in a room and guy's going to shoot you. I'd set it up by telling a bunch of people, and that would make it happen. It was almost like setting up fate or something, in a real controlled way. The violence part really wasn't that important, it was just the crux to make all the mental stuff happen" (Chris Burden, "Interview by Jim Mosian," published as "Border Crossing: Interview with Chris Burden," *High Performance* 2/1 (March 1979): 4-11, reprinted in Selz and Stiles eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 772).

⁴⁸ McCarthy, "Interview with Selwyn," 63.

⁴⁹ They are similar to the instructional works of the Fluxus group, though Magnus af Petersens, curator of film and video at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, pointed out McCarthy's were not presented as written texts the way Fluxus's were. (Petersens, 12) Thomas McEvelley has also linked the simplicity of these actions to the regressive infantile behavior in his later work (McEvelley, 2006, p. 36).

McCarthy's first use of food began at this time in collaboration with camera man Mike Cram. The Instruction "Pour ketchup onto a sheet of glass. Place another sheet of glass over the first sheet of glass" became their sculpture *Ketchup Sandwich* (1970). Ketchup, also used in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight*, later became a standard medium in McCarthy's performances.

of the body and language.⁵⁰ These actions were not documented at first, but fellow artist Mike Cram began filming them for McCarthy in 1971. Though documentation violated the taboo among performance artists of the 1960s and early 1970s, video itself was not yet used as a signifier of popular and media culture as it was in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing*.

Soon after McCarthy started using video to document his performances he began to explore it as a medium representative of American media culture, as I will demonstrate below. This change was due to McCarthy's personal awakening to the hegemony of mass media and consumer culture in the early 1970s. He was responding to the growing simulacra of American life, or the rise of what American historian Daniel J. Boorstin labeled "pseudo-events" in 1962.⁵¹ The coverage of the American war in Vietnam in particular left him deeply disillusioned. McCarthy was a conscientious objector to the war, and when asked later in an interview about his refusal to register for Selective Service he said, "My early memories of Vietnam, from 1965 through 1969, were full of

⁵⁰ Petersens wrote, using J.L. Austin's term, that McCarthy developed language as "a performative tool." (Petersens, 12) Similarly, McEvelley called this period McCarthy's "structural" phase. "Structural" is a term McCarthy used, and was applied at a time in the early 1970s when French structuralism was emerging in the United States; McEvelley claimed McCarthy's actions are broken down to "irreducible structural patterns." (McEvelley, 2006, p. 36)

⁵¹ The problem of the simulacra is tied to post-WWII American culture. Boorstin's work analyzed many aspects of American culture including the news media, tourism, and the entertainment industry, and by doing so effectively described the situation of the simulacrum decades before Jean Baudrillard's work on the subject made it vogue. Boorstin wrote that pseudo-events were staged media concoctions, often planted (through press releases, for example). The real meaning behind these media events was always ambiguous. Pseudo-events were often self-fulfilling prophecies, as in the case of "The hotel's thirtieth-anniversary celebration, by saying the hotel is a distinguished institution, actually makes it one" (Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* [1961], New York: Vintage, 1992, 11-12). Similarly Boorstin famously defined a celebrity as "a person who is known for his well-knownness" (57). (This was the aspect of celebrity status that fascinated Warhol. Whether a celebrity was a Hollywood actress, like Marilyn Monroe or a political leader like Mao Zedong, Warhol's work showed how they all become vapid icons when filtered through mass media.)

confusion, images from television, magazine and newspapers; images of death. I made black paintings in 1967 sometimes with images.”⁵² When asked about the parody of mass culture in his work (explicitly seen in the later works discussed in Chapter 4), McCarthy traced its beginnings to the time period just prior to *Sailor’s Meat/Sailor’s Delight* and

Tubbing:

I mistrust a lot of what has been conjured up in this culture. At one point I mistrusted reality completely. It occurred in 1971-72, when suddenly the experience of being confronted with my existence was overwhelming. And that experience lasted for over a year. I was confronted with nothingness, why was there anything, why was there something, an object, an inanimate or animate object?⁵³

Mass media had become too strong an influence on McCarthy for him to continue working in the vein of performance artists like Kaprow. It had caused him to question the whole possibility of an authentic experience in the simulacral world of mass media and mass culture.

McCarthy made a series of one to three minute videos in 1974 that marked the pivotal transition from the “Actions” to *Sailor’s Meat/Sailor’s Delight* and *Tubbing*. I want to suggest that they were a response to his distrust of media images. In these works video became a signifier of the incursion of media and consumer culture on his subjectivity, and not merely a convenient way to document. In one of the works, *Split---*

⁵² McCarthy Interview with Stiles,” 25.

⁵³ McCarthy, “Interview with Stiles,” p. 20.
 McCarthy’s politics at the time were fairly left wing. He was drafted by the United States military in 1969 to serve in the American war in Vietnam, but refused. When his case was brought to court he was granted conscientious objector status and ordered to complete community service. As part of his service he made films in mental hospitals, and worked with Los Angeles gang members teaching them how to make videos. (See: Magnus af Petersens, “Paul McCarthy’s 40 years of hard work---an attempt at a summary.” Lars Nittve, Thomas McEvelley, and Magnus af Petersens. *Paul McCarthy Head Shop / Shop Head. Works 1966-2006* [exhibition catalogue], (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2006), 15.)

(1974) [fig. 1.4] McCarthy carried out the following direction before the lens: “While holding the camera, I attempt to point it directly at my face while I move my head from side to side in an attempt to not allow the camera to see my face.”⁵⁴ Ulrike Groos in his catalogue of McCarthy’s videos, described the artist in this piece as “a shy animal in distress trying to get out of the situation.”⁵⁵ Media technology in this piece was invasive, antagonistic, and an assault on the subjectivity of the artist reducing him to an animal.⁵⁶

To understand the role video played in *Sailor’s Meat/Sailor’s Delight* and *Tubbing*, it is important to remember that McCarthy began his career following the model of Kaprow’s Happenings, and that his early experiments with video revealed his ambivalence toward the medium. He embraced video and television precisely at a moment when he was disillusioned and confused about the effect they were having on him and society. Like the camera in *Split---* the effects of media were something from which he believed he could not escape.

⁵⁴ McCarthy, reprinted in *Paul McCarthy, Videos: 1970-1997*, Yilmaz Dziewior ed., (Cologne: Walther König, 2003), 62.

⁵⁵ Ulrike Groos, *Paul McCarthy, Videos: 1970-1997*, 62.

⁵⁶ A series of spitting pieces followed the same development of other works at this time. The motif evolved into McCarthy spitting at the camera. The title of *Spitting on the Camera Lens* (1974) revealed a consciousness of and antagonism toward the camera itself.

In *Up Down Penis Show* (1974) the camera was used to deceive the audience and thereby reenacted the deceitful aspects of mass-media that had caused McCarthy “to mistrust of a lot of what this culture has conjured.” The viewer could only see a close-up of thighs and part of a scrotum shifting slightly upward and downward while hearing the artist repetitively recite the words “up and down.” At the very end he let his penis drop revealing that he had been holding it with his hand the whole time, and presumably rubbing himself up and down during the two-minute performance. The deception is brought about by the cropping of the camera, suggesting the unreliability of a medium which was becoming all pervasive in culture.

Video as Cultural Signifier in Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight and Tubbing

The grotesque performances of *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* were critical of popular culture insofar as they subverted the sanitized world of television sitcoms.⁵⁷ However, McCarthy's very use of video and television monitors represented a shockingly new complicity and identification with the entertainment world at a time during the 1960s and 1970s when abstraction, Minimalism, and Kaprow-style performance art were the dominant models. Like Pop artists such as Andy Warhol, McCarthy effectively resigned himself to the idea that it was no longer possible for art to maintain a critical distance from mass culture. This was evident by the fact these two performances were ultimately transformed into television programs even for a live audience.

McCarthy's *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* blurred the line between experimental video and commercial video, a distinction made by philosopher Frederic Jameson in the 1980s.⁵⁸ Jameson argued that experimental video was not fictive in the way that cinema was because of the different experience of time it created. In fact, one of the difficult aspects of video art for many viewers was its duration: to spend twenty minutes in front of a painting was not as unbearable as spending twenty minutes before

⁵⁷ *Stomach of a Squirrel* (1973) was the first of McCarthy's truly messy performances and an act of endurance. For nearly an hour in a single room he tore his clothes, crawled on a floor littered with magazines, covered himself in name-brand margarine, ketchup, and mayonnaise jar, and held a handheld microphone. He made holes in a wall and stuck a banana in one of them, shouted several times into a mirror "Hey, go away!," sang nonsense Dada-esque songs.

⁵⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 68-70.

Jameson contrasted video to film, the latter of which he considered to be part of a modernist tradition and an extension of literature (which quite often reincorporates film techniques back into itself). He cited the quick assimilation of film into theory as an indication of film and literature's kinship.

an art film⁵⁹ The viewer's impatience was due to the role that commercial video had played conditioning television viewers to expect to be entertained by rapidly changing stimuli when looking at a television screen. In this respect, *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* fit Jameson's category of experimental video. They were long performances, forty-four and twenty-seven minutes, respectively, and performed in real time without any editing.

However, there are aspects of *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* that resonated with Jameson's category of commercial video. Jameson pointed out that the phenomenology of video was radically different than that of film. For example, experiencing images on a television monitor is different from watching a film in a blackened theater.⁶⁰ Commercial video provided rapidly changing stimuli in order to paradoxically encourage inaction on the part of its viewers.⁶¹ (In American television culture advertisers and programmers try to keep the public watching so they will see more commercials.) McCarthy's viewer in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* watched the performances, not as one experiences cinema or even theater, but rather, as one watches a television program at home; the live audience was therefore rendered into a mass of "couch potatoes."

⁵⁹ Jameson, 72.

Warhol's film experiments were an example of the kind of video that Jameson described. *Empire* (1964) consisted of eight hours of footage of the top of the Empire State Building with no cuts, edits, or camera movement.

⁶⁰ Jameson, 70.

⁶¹ Commercial video, however, does produce the "simulacrum of fictive time" that one experiences in film when, for example, events from different time periods are juxtaposed (Jameson, 75).

So despite the transgressive imagery of *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing*, McCarthy's use of video as a signifier of television culture undermined the performances' capacity to criticize that culture. It instead reinforced the audience's typically inert interaction with medium. As Jameson wrote: "The helpless spectators of video time are then...immobilized and mechanically integrated and neutralized...part of the technology of the medium."⁶² The collapse of critical distance that I am signaling in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* is a problem that Jameson suggested is inherent in the medium of video, commercial or otherwise, because of what he called its "situation of total flow":

For it seems plausible that in a situation of total flow, the contents of the screen streaming before us all day long without interruptions (or where the interruptions---called *commercials*---are less intermissions than they are fleeting opportunities to visit the bathroom or throw a sandwich together), what used to be called "critical distance" seems to have become obsolete. Turning the television set off has little in common either with the intermission of play or an opera or with the grand finale of a feature film, when the lights slowly come back on and memory begins its mysterious work. Indeed, if anything like critical distance is still possible in film, it is surely bound up with memory itself. But memory seems to play no role in television, commercial or otherwise (or, I am tempted to say, in postmodernism generally): nothing here haunts the mind or leaves its afterimages in the manner of the great moments of film.... A description of the structural exclusion of memory, then, and of critical distance, might well lead on into the impossible, namely, a theory of video itself---how the thing blocks its own theorization becoming a theory in its own right.⁶³

The "total flow" of video, an aspect common to both experimental and commercial video, washes over the viewer in a way different from cinema (whose temporal structure is

⁶² Jameson, 73-74.

⁶³ Jameson, 70-71.

closer to literature). The passive and complicit role of the audience in McCarthy's videos was thus built into the very structure and medium of the two performances.

A comparison of *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* to Mona Hatoum's *Pull* (1995) [fig. 1.5] will help to further illustrate my point regarding the collapse of critical distance in McCarthy's works.⁶⁴ In Hatoum's piece a television monitor embedded in a wall broadcast an upside down image of the artist's face. The viewer was invited to pull a braid of hair that hung below the television monitor within a niche in the wall. When the viewer pulled the hair he or she was shocked to see that Hatoum reacted in pain on the television screen. The image of the artist was not a recording, but a live telecast. Suddenly the viewer was made aware of the reality behind the television image. The structure of Hatoum's piece restored to the viewer his or her agency by creating an opportunity to break the situation of "total flow." Hatoum's viewer was no longer Jameson's "helpless spectator," but was instead an actor making an ethical decision to pull her hair or not. The people on both sides of the screen were re-humanized. By contrast, McCarthy's audience members for *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* watched his performances on television just as they would a TV show, commercials, or

⁶⁴ The effect television had on McCarthy's audience also becomes apparent when the works are contrasted to other performance art from the time, say for example, the Happenings of Kaprow or the performances of Schneemann and the Viennese Actionists. If those artists did not include their audiences in their works, they at least forced a reaction through the immediacy and presence of their live, visceral actions. Kaprow in particular had argued that audiences should be completely done away with ("*It follows that audiences should be eliminated entirely. All the elements --- people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, time --- can in this way be integrated*" (Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*, 722, Italics his)) by which he meant the audience should not be an entity which passively views art and performance, but should instead be a part of the work in order to further blur the line between art and life. In *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* McCarthy's audience members became passive spectators watching a television program as if at home.

the evening news. McCarthy not only reified himself as an object on display (like the actress in *Europe in the Raw* that he was imitating), but reified his audience.

In the previous section I argued that McCarthy's shift to video was largely due to his personal disillusionment over mass media and consumer culture. Other critics have connected McCarthy's work to mass media, the entertainment industry, and the simulacral nature of American culture.⁶⁵ This cultural context is relevant to the analysis of video in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing*, because as Jameson pointed out, video art's inception in the early 1960s and its proliferation in the 1970s coincided with the emergence of postmodernism as an historical period, whose formation he attributed to the rise of consumer culture.⁶⁶ He therefore suggested that video might be the quintessential postmodern medium.⁶⁷ His work also suggests that the collapse of critical

⁶⁵ Critic Ralph Rugoff asserted that McCarthy's work does not shock the viewer into life, rather everything is viewed through monitors: live and yet a recording a process, a "simultaneous reproduction," and he claimed that this is a common media experience particularly in Los Angeles "where neighborhoods remind one of the movies" (Rugoff 52). Critic Tom Holbert likewise argued that all of McCarthy's work "regardless of medium has...dealt with the problem that nothing stands outside of mediated representations" Tom Holbert, "Schooled for Scandal." [pre-review of New Museum show] Trans from German by Mark Georgiev. *Artforum* 39/3, (November 2000): 136).

⁶⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 73.

Jameson also noted that we use the word medium/media today to connote a mode of artistic production, a specific technology, and a social institution, whereas traditionally it connoted only the artistic mode of production (Jameson, 66-67.). This is an important point with regard to the visual arts. For Clement Greenberg art was supposed to deal with "the medium and its difficulties," (Greenberg, *Towards a Newer Laocöon* [1940] reprinted in *Art in Theory*, p. 566) and be a place of refuge from kitsch (See: Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch" [1939] in *Art in Theory*, pp. 539-549). In McCarthy's work media, in terms of art, and media, in terms of mass culture, are indistinguishable.

⁶⁷ Jameson wrote: "I have tried to suggest that video is unique---and in that sense historically privileged or symptomatic---because it is the only art or medium in which this ultimate seam between space and time is the very locus of the form, and also because its machinery uniquely dominates and depersonalizes subject and object alike, transforming the former into a quasi-material registering apparatus for the machine time for the latter and of the video image or 'total flow.' If we are willing to entertain the hypothesis that capitalism can be periodized by the quantum leaps or technological mutations by which it responds to its deepest systemic crises, then it may become a little clearer why and how video---so closely

distance that I claim happened in McCarthy's *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* was not only a problem inherent in his use of video, but belonged to a larger crisis regarding art's function in a consumer society. This correlation between video and consumer culture was also evident in the pop imagery and food products that McCarthy used in those performances as discussed below.

Pop Imagery and Food Products in Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight and Tubbing

The imagery of *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* was representative of the cultural problems that McCarthy introduced through his use of video. Pop culture imagery---in particular the reference to the film still from *Europe in the Raw*---and food products were employed in these pieces to show the incursion of consumer culture on McCarthy's identity. These works are the first examples in his oeuvre of what I call commodity abjection, that is, a process by which he tried to psychically expel through bodily ritual the consumer elements with which he identified.

One of the most significant instances of commodity abjection is in McCarthy's appropriation of film stills in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight*. McCarthy said that when he dressed as a woman he was imitating the poses of an actress from *Europe in the Raw* (a movie by California director Russ Meyer, maker of low-budget camp films full of gratuitous sex and violence such as *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965)):

I thought about Cindy Sherman while working on this show [2001 New Museum retrospective]. I was looking back on *Sailor's Meat*

related to the dominant computer and information technology of the late, or third, stage of capitalism---has a powerful claim for being the art form par excellence of late capitalism" (Jameson, 76).

(1975), which shows me in a kind of Marilyn Monroe pose based on a film still from *Europe in the Raw*. Like Sherman at about the same time, I was basing a piece on a film still of a female character. I bought film stills then, and I had stacks of them. I was into this figure, which had the erotic pose that I'm imitating.⁶⁸

McCarthy identified with the film still: he was “into the figure” and in his mind considered his own pose modeled after hers to be “erotic.” Note that he did not identify with a person, but with an image. This fact made McCarthy’s comparison between his work and the slightly later work of Cindy Sherman [fig 1.6] quite appropriate. Both artists eroded their own individuality by imitating Hollywood types. However, whereas Sherman’s images conformed to Hollywood’s motifs to the point that one could mistakenly think they were derived from specific films,⁶⁹ McCarthy polluted the glamorous image of Hollywood through an abject ritual of food and defilement (which is why McCarthy has been mistakenly associated with Carolee Schneemann and the Viennese Actionists).⁷⁰

⁶⁸ McCarthy, “Interview by Grady Turner,” *Flash Art* 34/217 (March/April 2001): 89-90.

Interestingly, Duchamp was one of the first artists to begin exploring Hollywood stereotypes. In 1921 Duchamp dressed in drag and was photographed by Man Ray as his alter ego Rose Sélavy (a pun meaning “Eros, that’s life”). In the work, Duchamp looks like Hollywood movie starlet, and Man Ray’s photograph looks like an actress’s 8x10 headshot. Duchamp signed the work “Lovingly, Rose Sélavy” as an actress would sign a portrait for an adoring fan.

⁶⁹ “Some people have told me they remember the movie that one of my images I derived from, but in fact I had no film in mind at all.” (Cindy Sherman from 1979, quoted in Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2005, 304.)

⁷⁰ McCarthy’s work has been compared to the work of Carolee Schneemann and the Viennese Actionists because of his use of food. McCarthy had disavowed such comparisons and the debate by critics Thomas McEvelley and Ralph Rugoff over this issue was outlined in the literature review within the introduction of this dissertation. Here I want to point out that McCarthy’s pop culture elements and use of video create an important distinction between his work and theirs. In addition to his reference to Hollywood kitsch, in *Sailor’s Meat/Sailor’s Delight* and *Tubbing* McCarthy made his commentary on consumer culture through the use of food *products*. The scatological and sexual imagery of McCarthy’s performances from this time had precedents in the work of Carolee Schneemann and the Vienna Actionists, but the self-conscious artifice and aforementioned pop imagery marked a major difference between his work and theirs.

McCarthy conducted this ritual of abjection to resist commercial culture, which he viewed as inhibiting authentic sexual expression, because before one even reaches adolescence one's sexuality has already been conditioned by thousands of hours of exposure to media and the entertainment industry. This view of consumer culture and its relation to sexuality is one that McCarthy arrived at intuitively, but can be explained analytically using the work of philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. They argued that the repetition of sexual images by the culture industry paradoxically brought about sexual repression, because individual sexual expression was forced to conform to a mass produced model of simulated sexuality. They wrote: "The mass production of sexuality automatically brings about its repression. Because of his ubiquity, the film star with whom one is supposed to fall in love is from the start, a copy of himself."⁷¹ The gender in this quotation from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* could easily be switched and applied to the figures McCarthy cited in the above interview: Marilyn Monroe and the *Europe in the Raw* actress.⁷²

Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (Paris, 1964) [fig. 1.9] was an orgiastic scene of men and women indulging in the sensuousness of each other's bodies with the aid of other flesh: fish, sausage, chicken, paint. Schneemann's work was at times repulsive, but it was also liberating and exhilarating: meat joy. Her sense of joy and ecstatic ritual was absent in McCarthy's performances. She and her performers were also dressed in Paleolithic costumes, not 1970s lingerie. In addition to using meat, the Viennese Actionists often slaughtered animals during their performances, and the performers engaged in archaic blood rites. Hermann Nitsch in his *Ist Action* (Vienna, 1962) was dressed in a simple white gown, tied-up in a cruciform shape, and then anointed with the blood and entrails of a lamb that had been slaughtered and disemboweled for the performance. Photographs of Otto Mühl's *Gymnastics Class in Food* (1965) show the performer surrounded by an audience smothered in food.

⁷¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments* [1944/47], Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 111-112.

⁷² *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* should not be mistaken for parody in which case the artist would imitate a figure to make fun of him or her. There was nothing satirical or comical about McCarthy's imitation, and his interview statements revealed no indication that he wanted to mock the image. On the

McCarthy's reaction to the automatic repression of sexuality in mass culture can be seen in his transition from unmediated body-based performances to his simulation of the film still in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight*. (This transition is analogous to his shift from unmediated performance to video and television that I described in the previous section.) *Drawing---Semen Drawing* (1975) and *Marilyn Monroe* (1975) [fig 1.7] were two works done just prior to *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight*. In the first, McCarthy's torso was hidden behind a screen. He masturbated to orgasm and then used his semen to draw. *Marilyn Monroe* was a performance in which he ejaculated on a framed picture of the famous actress. Masturbation as a metaphor for the isolated creative activity of the artist⁷³ in the former piece, gave way in the latter to a compulsory auto-erotic act⁷⁴ in

contrary, he stated his genuine interest in the film still and indicated that he had collected a number of them. (In Chapter 4 I return to the question of parody using Frederic Jameson's work on parody and pastiche.) Donald Kuspit's distinction between criticality (the mode of parody) and mimicry (a mode of identification) is useful here. He wrote of McCarthy's work in general: "Mimickry is not criticality, even when it is done playfully. It involves identification rather than analytic detachment" (Kuspit, "In the Anal Universe; the Para-Art of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy," *New Art Examiner* 27/2 (October 1999): 62).

⁷³ An idea operative in, for example, Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1898) in which the great French writer stood with a suggestive bulge protruding from beneath his bathrobe.

Masturbation was also an element of Vito Acconci's performance *Seedbed* (Sonnabend, New York City, 1972). Acconci under the floor boards of the gallery revealed the sexual fantasies he was having about the audience he could hear walking above him through a microphone and a speaker. Hawkins made a similar point in his comparison of Acconci's *Seedbed* and *Claim* (1971) to McCarthy's *Bossy Burger* (1991): both exchange the "repulsion of live performance" for "the haunted seduction of a delayed and distanced one." (Hawkins cited in Rugoff, 72)

Though I have emphasized the early influence of Kaprow in this chapter, Acconci was also an important influence throughout McCarthy's career. McCarthy's earliest performances were solitary with his body as a main focal point, parallel to Acconci (or Bruce Nauman with whom McCarthy had wanted to study as an undergraduate student (Petersens, p. 16).) Acconci also dealt with themes that would become particularly important as McCarthy's career progressed in the 1970s, namely how to preserve an authentic self in a consumer culture. In *Trademarks* (1970) Acconci bit his nude body where ever he could reach to reclaim it as his own. As such this performance was a piece of objectless art that could not be sold in a commercial gallery, and the irony of title's reference to corporate marketing shows its resistance to consumer culture. However, Rugoff pointed out that unlike Acconci, Piper or Chris Burden, McCarthy's performances are rarely public. Instead they are usually videotaped before a small audience. One or two people act as "surrogate public" or "movie extras" (Rugoff, 49). McCarthy and Mike Kelley later collaborated on a video filmed using clichéd tropes from soft-core pornography titled *Fresh Acconci* (1995) in which they hired actors and models to reenact Acconci's video performances.

which the artist tried to engage with an inanimate photograph of a person who, as Warhol's portraits of her [fig. 1.8] had already shown, had been reified into a media image. Monroe had died in 1962, so the photograph McCarthy used no longer had a referent in the real world, it was a pure image.

Marilyn Monroe was a significant work because McCarthy's individual sexuality was presented as being conditioned by a culture industry product. McCarthy was an adolescent when Monroe was at the height of her career, and the ubiquity of her image no doubt played a role in the development of his sexual identity as he was coming of age. The fact that Monroe's image played the very same role in millions of other heterosexual males' lives highlights the tension between subjectivity and its commodification in a consumer society. *Marilyn Monroe* was also the last time McCarthy used real semen in a performance. In *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* McCarthy internalized the mass produced image of sexuality: instead of masturbating to a photograph of a Hollywood starlet, he began to imitate one, thereby identifying with and becoming the object of desire. It is also

⁷⁴ The connection between art and affectless, machine-like masturbation was made in Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare, by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915, 1923): the chocolate grinder, French slang for masturbation, propels the bachelors symbolized by empty, lifeless clothes, around in a circle, while the object of their desire, the bride above, remains cut-off from them by the metal bar bifurcating the piece.

Psychologists have also made compelling arguments for the link between masturbation and boredom. (See the review of the literature in: Kamel Gana, "The relationship between boredom proneness and solitary sexual behaviors in adults," *Social Behavior and Personality*, 2001.) The situation of boredom, which in both Marxist and Freudian traditions Jameson points out "is taken not so much as an objective property of things and works but rather as a response to the blockage of energies (whether those be grasped in terms of desire or of praxis)" (Jameson, 71). Jameson connected that blockage of energy to the waning of affect in postmodern, consumer culture.

McCarthy's work made reference to the act of viewing pornography, though the actual image of Monroe was not pornographic. By doing so McCarthy was reducing art to the level of masturbation as had Duchamp. In their video collaboration *Fresh Acconci* (1995) McCarthy and Mike Kelley used pornography as an explicit motif by having porn actors reenact Vito Acconci's performances. McCarthy and Kelley used film techniques, lighting and effects from soft-core pornography.

significant that *Europe in the Raw* was not a film contemporary with *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight*, but was released when McCarthy was a teenager. This internalization of these simulacral images from adolescence was accompanied by his use of mayonnaise, a mass produced condiment, as a semen substitute. His most intimate and personal bodily fluid was exchanged for an overtly artificial surrogate, a physical analogue for the psychical standardization of his sexuality.

In addition to his appropriation of the *Europe in the Raw* film still, commodity abjection was operative in McCarthy's use of food products. As suggested above with the discussion of semen and mayonnaise, food products symbolize the commodification of the most intimate aspects of McCarthy's psyche and body. Ketchup and sausage figured prominently in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight*. I explain in depth in the next chapter, how these are symbols which McCarthy associated with his father, a grocery store butcher who according to McCarthy "put ketchup on everything."⁷⁵ Here I want to point out how the ketchup and sausage signified the commodification of the body as McCarthy's use of his actual bodily fluids began to wane.

With *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* McCarthy's work was becoming a fully mediated experience. Along with the waning of spontaneity, McCarthy began moving away from the use of real bodily fluids and excrement to food product surrogates. For a moment in the first half of the 1970s a few of his video performances used actual bodily fluids, such as *Pissing, Microphone* (1972) in which he knelt before a

⁷⁵ McCarthy McCarthy, "original manuscript of 'A Dialogue with Language Itself' Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy," *Parkett* 73 (2005): 120-134.

tin can and urinated into it while recording the sound with a microphone.⁷⁶ *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* incorporated a brief instance of urination, and real blood, as McCarthy walked on broken glass, but by far his use of food products dominated the piece. Ketchup and mayonnaise could signify blood and semen, but also overtly revealed their own artifice. As McCarthy said, the use of these products indicated a cultural turn for him: "I've been more interested in the simulation of the real. A mayonnaise jar as an orifice brings into the equation something that the human body cannot---it's about consumption, the act of buying, and fetish."⁷⁷

Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight and *Tubbing* were pivotal works in McCarthy's artistic development. His use of video and television, Hollywood appropriation, and food products all showed that he was moving away from his earlier Kaprow style performance art toward work that dealt with consumer culture. Unlike the Pop artists' use of those subjects, McCarthy's work had a dark affective dimension. McCarthy was coming to an awareness that vital components of his identity had been irrevocably molded by the television culture with which he grew up and the Hollywood images of sexuality to which he was exposed during adolescence. This realization caused a crisis for McCarthy and he tried to expel those elements by defiling them through performance. However, he was not able to completely exorcise them: his use of video and television complied with their

⁷⁶ This piece echoed Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and anticipated Warhol's *Oxidation Paintings* (1978) both of which effectively stated that "art is piss." Furthermore, urination was a theme explored by a number of male performance artists in the late 1960s and 1970s. To give two examples: in 1968 and 1969, Viennese Actionist Otto Mühl did performances on stage in which he urinated into the mouth of fellow artist Günter Brus's mouth, and Michael Snow's "*Rameau's Nephew*" by Diderot (*Thanx to Dennis Young*) by Wilma Schoen (1972-74) included a "Pissing Duet" sequence in which a nude man and woman urinated into tin buckets with microphones nearby.

⁷⁷ McCarthy, "Paul McCarthy talks about *Piccadilly Circus*, 2003," *Art Forum*: 123.

usual status in culture, and while he may have defiled images of Marilyn Monroe or *Europe in the Raw* he also showed that he identified with them. Commodity culture left him in a state of abjection, trying to reject the very things that comprised his subjectivity in order to save it. The body was the ground for this battle: walking barefoot on the broken glass of a mass-produced mayonnaise jar constituted a postmodern passion; but the immediacy and vitality of that act were made distant and his body reified when the audience experienced the performance through a television.

McCarthy's emergent interest in the incursion of consumer culture into the realm of subjectivity in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* became dominant in his work throughout the rest of his career. This theme will therefore recur in the works discussed in the remaining chapters of this dissertation. In the next chapter I analyze two performances in which birth was the motif, *Contemporary Cure All* and *Baby Boy, Baby Magic*, and show how family history was also important to these issues of subjectivity and consumer culture.

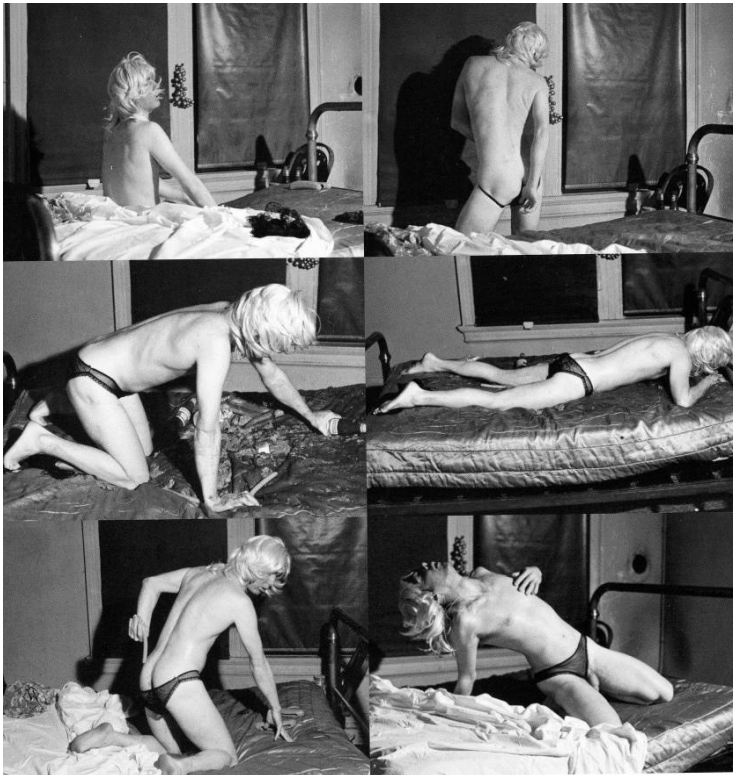


Fig. 1.1 *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight*, 1975, performance/video tape, Pasadena, CA
 Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 1.2 *Tubbing*, 1975, performance/video tape, Pasadena, CA.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 1.3 “Plaster your head and one arm into a wall,” 1973, performance, Pasadena, CA. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 1.4 *Split---*, 1974, video, s/w | b/w, 2:42 min. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

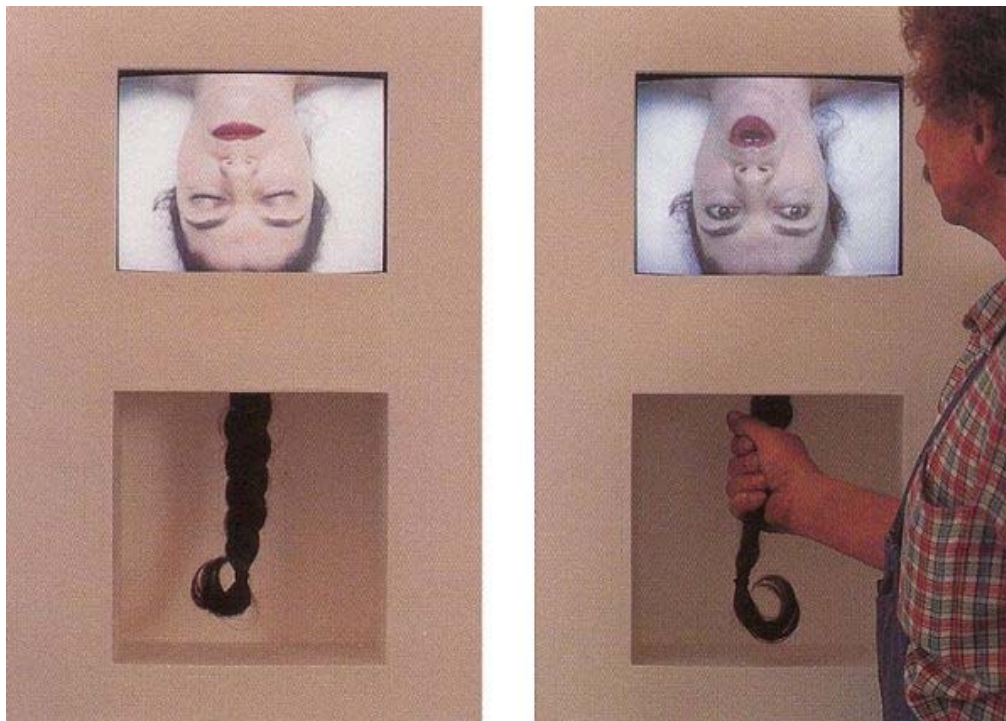


Fig. 1.5 Mona Hatoum, *Pull*, 1995, Künstlerwerkstatt, Munich, 2-hour live work with video. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 1.6 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still (#11)*, 1978, black and white photograph, 8 x 10 inches (20.3 x 25.4 cm). Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures.



Fig. 1.7 *Marilyn Monroe*, 1975, performance/photographic series, Los Angeles, CA Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

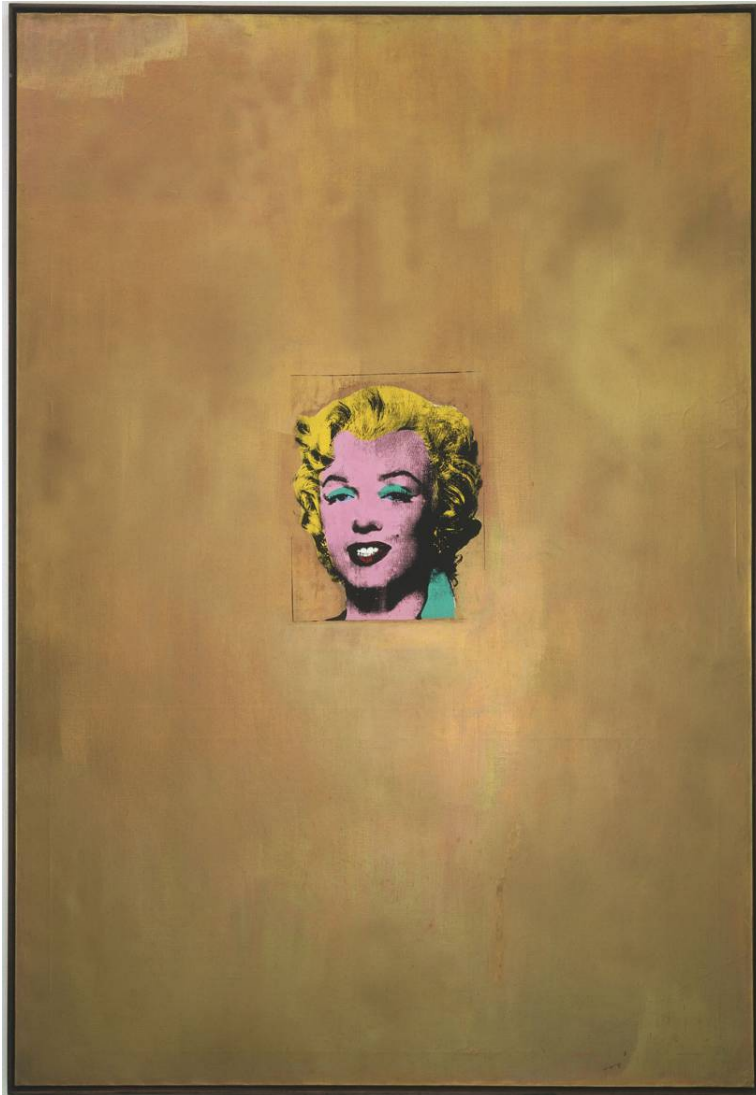


Fig. 1.8 Andy Warhol (1928-1987) © Copyright. *Gold Marilyn*, 1962. Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 6' 11 1/4" x 57". Gift of Philip Johnson. (316.1962). © 2000 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, NY. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, U.S.A. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY



Fig. 1.9 Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy* (1964) Performance: raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, plastic, rope, paper scrap. (Photo - Al Giese). Courtesy the artist.

CHAPTER 2

BIRTH AND COMMODITY CULTURE IN *CONTEMPORARY CURE ALL* (1979) and
BABY BOY, BABY MAGIC (1982)

In this chapter I analyze *Contemporary Cure All* (1979) and *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982) two works in which McCarthy intertwined the themes of childbirth and consumer culture. I argue that these performances support my thesis that McCarthy's work is a process of abjecting the commodity culture that he identifies with on an intrapsychic level. I show how McCarthy acted out specific childhood traumas involving his father and mother in these two performances. As I argue throughout this dissertation, the image of his own family life cannot be divorced from the images he presents of consumer culture. McCarthy's work represents a world in which his family life and subjectivity have been irreversibly infected by the hegemony of consumerism.

Parody of the World of the Father: Contemporary Cure All (1979)

In this section I demonstrate the ways in which *Contemporary Cure All* (1979) was a perverse psychical defense against early childhood trauma, specifically McCarthy's

fears of his father. The attack on his father carried out in this work doubled as an attack on consumer culture.

Contemporary Cure All [fig. 2.1] was performed for the video camera at the medical school of the University of Southern California and was exhibited the same year at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Exhibitions. One performer wore an old man mask, and lay passively on a hospital bed naked with his legs splayed. He was surrounded by a co-ed team of hack surgeons who all wore pantyhose over their heads like bank robbers. They were either dressed in flannel shirts and white aprons, or stripped down to their white underpants. The medical procedure involved the doctors holding black and white dildos against their patient's genitals, then affixing to him with adhesive bandaging tape a prosthetic vulva made by bending one of the dildos. Ketchup was strewn everywhere making the scene look like a bloody disaster. The old man finally gave birth through his prosthetic vagina to two Barbie dolls. He was then fashioned with another dildo. McCarthy (who played one of the doctors) at one point chopped one of the dildos with an ax. Later he removed the old man mask from the patient and chopped it up along with the Barbie dolls. I will demonstrate how McCarthy parodied the world of his father by examining two symbols---ketchup and the motif of the butcher---that represented McCarthy's father in this work.

Ketchup as Symbol of Erotic Violence and Pop Commodity

In *Contemporary Cure All* ketchup was an over-determined⁷⁸ symbol that represented McCarthy's father, sexual violence, and commodity culture. Ketchup is a medium which McCarthy has associated with his father. McCarthy said in an interview that his father used to "put ketchup on everything."⁷⁹ Psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel defined perversion as an anal-sadistic universe where the differences between gender and generations are eroded.⁸⁰ She claimed that the anal-sadistic world created by the male pervert is a parody of the mature world of the father.⁸¹ The collapse of the double-difference between genders and generations was evident in the *Contemporary Cure All*. The patient was a grotesque male-female hybrid, with detachable genitals, and he wore an old man's mask despite being young enough to bear children. Chasseguet-Smirgel connected the pervert's parody to infantile phantasies of omnipotence: the

⁷⁸ Over-determination was a concept Freud used to describe the formation of dream symbols. Dream symbols, he argued, "...constituted 'nodal points' upon which a great number of the dream thoughts converged, and...they had several meanings in connection with the interpretation of the dream. The explanation of this fundamental fact can also be put another way: each of the elements of the dream's content turns out to have been 'overdetermined'---to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over." (Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* Trans. Strachey, (New York: Avon, 1965), pp. 317-318)

⁷⁹ McCarthy McCarthy, "original manuscript of 'A Dialogue with Language Itself' Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy," pp. 120-134.

⁸⁰ Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 2.

Donald Kuspit was the first art critic to use Chasseguet-Smirgel's theories of perversion to analyze McCarthy's work. Here I build on Kuspit's framework by introducing the aspects of McCarthy's personal biography relevant to a psychoanalytic interpretation of his artwork. For Kuspit's analysis see: Donald Kuspit, "In the Anal Universe; the Para-Art of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy," *New Art Examiner* 27/2, (October 1999): 24-27 and 62-63; Kuspit, "From the Sublime to the Ridiculous," *Art New England* 22/4 (June/July 2001): 8-9; and Kuspit, "The Triumph of Shit," *artnet.com* (September 2008) <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit9-11-08.asp>. See also my summary of his argument in the review of the literature in the introduction to this dissertation.

⁸¹ Chasseguet-Smirgel, 11.

pervert rejects the father's world, usurps his throne, and thereby rejects reality in order to remain in his own immature anal-sadistic universe. The ketchup used in *Contemporary Cure All* and throughout his career is a parody of the father's mature sexuality: the bottle is frequently used as a phallus and the ketchup, by extension, is a metaphor for the semen it discharges. The pervert, according to Chasseguet-Smirgel, views his destruction as creative,⁸² as did McCarthy, which is evidenced by the fact that he presented *Contemporary Cure All* to the world as a work of art.

McCarthy's profuse use of ketchup in *Contemporary Cure All* was also a violent symbol evocative of blood. Psychoanalyst Robert Stoller offered a contribution to the psychoanalytic discourse on perversion that is relevant to *Contemporary Cure All* (and for other works in McCarthy's oeuvre for that matter). He observed that perversion is "an erotic form of hatred" in which the pervert can only achieve sexual arousal through a wish to harm the object of his desire.⁸³ To fully demonstrate the simultaneously erotic and violent meaning of ketchup in *Contemporary Cure All* I must briefly examine two earlier works: his undergraduate paintings and an early ketchup performance done with fellow artist and spouse Karen McCarthy.

The perverse crossing of violence and eroticism emerged at a very early point in McCarthy's career. In an interview he was asked when he had started using sexual imagery in his work, and his response included a rather violent description of his undergraduate paintings:

⁸² Chasseguet-Smirgel, 4-5.

⁸³ Robert Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 4.

The paintings I did in 1966 had sexual imagery. They were triptychs with a machine beast or a tree beast in the center, surrounded on both sides by nude females...I also started painting with my hands....The paintings were laid flat on the ground. The act of painting itself was sexual, was a sensual act. The last one was almost black, no figures. This was in 1968. I always lit the paintings on fire. I poured gasoline on them and threw a match. I let them burn until they became charred.⁸⁴

He described the act of painting these nude women as “sexual” and “sensual,” but the act only climaxed when he violently destroyed them. Erotic pleasure was derived only through an act of hostility of the sort that Stoller observed in perversion.

One of McCarthy’s earliest ketchup pieces was *Karen Ketchup Dream* (1975) [fig. 2.2] a performance in which he poured and spread ketchup on his wife Karen McCarthy’s nude body. This work further demonstrates the link McCarthy unconsciously draws between hostility and sexuality. He said this work was inspired by a dream: “I had a dream and in the dream I had spread ketchup on Karen. So I turned it into a real piece. [...] There was kind of an erotic thing to it. It was this mix of something that was meant to feel good, but there really was this stink.”⁸⁵ His father had poured ketchup on everything, marking the food he was to eat as his own, and McCarthy translated this act into the sexual realm, calling it an “erotic thing” as he marked his motionless wife as an object for him to consume. The ketchup bottle and the liquid inside it were parodies of the father’s mature penis and semen, and were used by McCarthy to imitate genital sexuality. The act of covering his wife in ketchup might have been erotic for him, but visually it looked as if

⁸⁴ McCarthy, “Interview with Linda Montano,” in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, ed. Montano, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 97.

⁸⁵ McCarthy, “original manuscript of ‘A Dialogue with Language Itself’ Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy,” pp. 120-134.

she was covered in blood. This point has never been missed by McCarthy. In another interview speaking of his performances in general, he said: "...even though they [the audience] cling to the conscious interpretation that ketchup is ketchup. I suspect that they're disturbed when ketchup is blood."⁸⁶ This renders the interpretation of *Karen Ketchup Dream* frightfully violent. Latent in the work were themes of sexual domination and violence: Karen McCarthy was passive, rarely moving, while Paul McCarthy's active ejaculatory ketchup application intertwined his erotic phantasies with violent imagery.

The ketchup in *Karen Ketchup Dream* was used as a symbol of his father's sexuality, and continued to play both an erotic and hostile role in *Contemporary Cure All*. The ketchup had the appearance of blood, so the aggressive element was easily to recognize. The erotic ketchup was also spread all over the open legs of the old man who on one level was actually female, since he had a vulva and gave birth to twins.

Emergent in the ketchup laden violence of *Contemporary Cure All* was the motif of the butcher. This was a powerful motif for McCarthy (it reappeared explicitly in *Painter* (1995) discussed in Chapter 5), that, like the ketchup, was used to parody his father. In an interview in which McCarthy revealed that his father was a butcher, he also suggested that his earliest memories of him coming home blood-stained from work were traumatic. McCarthy said:

PM: My father was hard working; he worked seven days a week from seven in the morning until seven at night. When he wasn't working at his job he was working at home. He expected me to work around the house.

JS: What was his occupation?

⁸⁶ McCarthy, "Interview with Marc Selwyn," *Flash Art* 26/170 (May/June 1993): 63.

PM: Well, I think that's where it gets interesting. (laughs) My father was a butcher. He worked in a grocery store. One of my earliest memories of my father is an image of him in a bloody apron.⁸⁷

I want to argue here, following the work of psychoanalyst Robert Stoller, that McCarthy in *Contemporary Cure All* was attempting to “rescript” that trauma, so that he no longer felt threatened as he had as a child. Stoller, in his study on perversion and creativity, argued that the pervert is one who endlessly rescripts or reenacts a trauma, and does so in order to reverse the roles so that he becomes the aggressor rather than the victim.⁸⁸ In *Contemporary Cure All*, McCarthy reenacted the trauma of seeing his father in his bloody apron, but did so by taking on the role himself of the all powerful and potentially

⁸⁷ McCarthy, “original manuscript of ‘A Dialogue with Language Itself’ Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy,” 120-134. This quotation was taken from a facsimile of the interviewer’s original manuscript reproduced in the quarterly contemporary art journal *Parkett*. This manuscript later McCarthy crossed-out certain words and wrote in new phrases, the end result of which was published in the same issue as what he and the interviewer called a “collaborative ‘poem’” titled “A Dialogue with Language Itself.” He removed the nervous laugh after being asked what his father’s occupation was and sanitized the frightful image of the bloody apron:

...also about a father and his son. Ten years old, so I was reflecting on father. He worked seven days a week from seven morning until seven night. His job he was working. He expected to work.

Well, my father was a butcher. He worked in a grocery. One of my earliest memories of my father is of him in a white shirt. (from “A Dialogue with Language Itself,” *Parkett*, 119).

The changes made by McCarthy in the revised version bear witness to his sensitivity to the issues surrounding the role his father plays in his work. Not only was the laugh removed, which indicated that the question about his father’s profession and McCarthy’s revealing answer had struck an unconscious nerve, but he interestingly idealized what had in fact been a traumatic memory by changing the bloody apron into a white shirt. This is perhaps a way to mitigate the castration anxiety provoked by an image of a father with a butcher knife and bloody apron. It also worth noting that McCarthy was trying to disguise the direct influence his father plays in his work by not making him appear bloody and messy like McCarthy does in his performances. Chasseguet-Smirgel argued that the pervert is always in fear of his parody being revealed as less than adequate as compared to the father’s world of mature genital sexuality (Chasseguet-Smirgel, pp. 4-5). Finally, the revision is again an example of what Stoller called rescripting trauma, the same strategy employed in *Contemporary Cure All*. Whereas McCarthy was confused and frightened by his all powerful father in those earliest memories, in the final version of the interview McCarthy became omnipotent through his ability to manipulate the text at will, and in the end leave his reader confused. (Indeed the revised version contains so many ellipses and free associations that it borders on irrational.)

⁸⁸ Stoller, 20.

destructive father. The dolls birthed in the performance were given to McCarthy the doctor/butcher who proceeded to cut them up with his ax. McCarthy became the terrifying figure of the father with his power to castrate.

In the interview cited above McCarthy revealed that his father was a hard-working, grocery store butcher. In *Contemporary Cure All* McCarthy significantly played the only surgeon who had the power to destroy the dolls and held the phallic ax. McCarthy the butcher destroyed toys and made a mess of his food, a puerile imitation of his industrious father's vocation. As cited above, Chasseguet-Smirgel claimed that the anal-sadistic world created by the male pervert is a parody of the mature world of the father.⁸⁹ She connected the pervert's parody to infantile phantasies of omnipotence: the pervert needs to reject the father's world and usurp his throne, thereby rejects reality in order to remain in his own immature anal-sadistic universe.

While the ketchup in *Contemporary Cure All* was representative of sexual violence because McCarthy used it to evoke both blood and eroticism---associations that draw their potency from his own association between ketchup and his father---ketchup was also presented as a consumer product. The ketchup in all of McCarthy's performances has always been a recognizable brand, usually Heinz, Delmonte or Daddies (a British name brand). In the interview in which McCarthy indicated that ketchup was a symbol of his father he also acknowledged that it could be read as a commodity. He connected this commodity element in his work to Pop art: "There is a correlation to the Campbell soup can. It [ketchup] was something so central to the dinner table. But the fact

⁸⁹ Chasseguet-Smirgel, 11.

is my father put ketchup on everything.”⁹⁰ The problem posed by McCarthy is the infection of family life by American consumer culture, as McCarthy said:

...in 1973 I started using ketchup in performances. I was interested in the bottle as a phallic with an orifice. The smell. Ketchup as food as blood as paint. Ketchup as an American family icon, processed consumption. I grew up using ketchup on everything; it is an American ritual passed on from father to son. [...] In the performances I did in America, I bought Heinz Ketchup. Then in England in 1983, I did a series of performances and I bought a bottle of Daddies Ketchup. The label has a man’s face on it. Here was the commodity patriarch with a face and a body. [...] ...it’s a portrait of the quintessential 1950s Dad.⁹¹

McCarthy was born in 1945, so he was raised by a “1950s Dad.” The crisis for McCarthy is that ketchup represents not only his dad, but all dads. His family, like all others, was in his mind just another processed commodity.

In the above quotation McCarthy referred to ketchup with respect to Warhol’s soup can. Warhol too had thought that commodity culture was a homogenizing force in America. In an interview he said:

Someone said Brecht wanted everybody to think alike. I want everybody to think alike. But Brecht wanted to do it through Communism, in a way. Russia is doing it under government [referring to the Soviet Union of 1963]. It’s happening here all by itself without being under a strict government; so if it’s working without trying, why can’t it work without being Communist? Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we’re getting more and more that way.
I think everybody should be a machine.
I think everybody should like everybody.⁹²

⁹⁰ McCarthy, “original manuscript of ‘A Dialogue with Language Itself’ Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy,” pp. 120-134.

⁹¹ McCarthy, “Interview with James Rondeau,” *Paul McCarthy at Tate Modern* [exhibition catalogue], (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 182.

⁹² Andy Warhol, “Interview with Gene Swenson” [1963], in in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 747.

The difference between Warhol and McCarthy is that Warhol ironically embraced the homogenization of identity under capitalism, whereas McCarthy has viewed it as a crisis, as was evidenced by the fact that ketchup, McCarthy's symbol of "everyone looking and acting alike," is strewn violently around in *Contemporary Cure All*.

The mask worn by the patient in *Contemporary Cure All* was used by McCarthy in previous performances, most notably *Grand Pop* (1977) [fig. 2.3]. A look at that earlier ketchup performance can help to illuminate the intertwining of consumerism and McCarthy's family life in *Contemporary Cure All*. The title, "Grand pop," can mean "grandfather," but the word "pop" is also suggestive of "Pop art" and "pop culture." In an interview McCarthy said that the mask reminded him of his grandfather (as is suggested by the title of the performance): "...I started doing males---old men, power figures, political leaders. I bought a mask in Hollywood, and later I realized that it looked like my grandfather."⁹³ He said the mask looked like his grandfather, which is to say conversely, that his grandfather looked like a cheap mass-produced commodity. McCarthy's father is also a cheap mass-produced commodity, that is, he is a 1950s dad, the kind reproduced on the Daddies ketchup bottles and distributed by the millions. The homogenization of identity in consumer society, and its resulting injury to the possibility of developing a true self, is inherited by sons from their fathers through a process of coercion. *Grand Pop* illustrated this idea through a parody of a business meeting. McCarthy wore the mask and played a senior, corporate executive who demonstrated new products for a younger,

⁹³ McCarthy, "Interview with Montano," 98.

junior executive by placing mass-produced toys, such as Barbie dolls, between his legs and smothering them with condiments squeezed out of phallic bottles.

While McCarthy's association of commodity culture with patriarchy is a point that has been noted by other critics, what has not been fully comprehended until now is how deeply personal this problem has been for McCarthy. He ended *Contemporary Cure All* with an act of futile resistance: chopping up the commodified image of his grandfather. He played his father killing his grandfather, and by doing so he identified with his father. The role that McCarthy played was of his mental image of his father, which is to say, the image of his father was part of McCarthy's own psyche (as opposed to an image of his father that other people could all concur to be accurate). The stakes were high for McCarthy, for his own son Damon was born in 1973. The terrifying fear for McCarthy expressed in the violence of *Contemporary Cure All* was that he was not any different than his Grand "Pop" and quintessential 1950s dad, that is, he was bestowing a legacy of consumerism to yet another generation.

A key component of Stoller's theory of rescripting that I have been using in this chapter is the pervert's compulsion to repeat, and indeed McCarthy has repeated this subject matter throughout his oeuvre. The pervert must constantly replay the script because he is unable to work-through the original trauma.⁹⁴ Chasseguet-Smirgel likewise

⁹⁴ For Freud repetition stood in opposition to the process of remembering and then working-through a trauma; more precisely, repetition is a way of remembering without bringing the traumatic event to consciousness. Freud wrote: "We may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through" [1914] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. XII, (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 150). The patient "cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering" (150). There are

argued that the pervert must repeat his actions to keep up the appearance that the anal-universe is as good as the mature world of the father which it parodies. It is therefore important to note that McCarthy has used butcher's meats such as ground beef and sausage in his performances throughout his career as in *Meat Cake* (1975) or *Sailor's Meat / Sailor's Delight*, the subject of Chapter 1. Likewise the butcher's knife was also employed in other performances, for example, *Painter* (1995) the subject Chapter 5.

Imagining Mother in Baby Boy, Baby Magic (1982)

McCarthy's performance *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982) [fig. 2.4] was, similarly to *Contemporary Cure All* (1979), a perverse psychological defense against early childhood trauma. This time McCarthy pretended to give birth to a baby boy, and thereby shifted the focus to his childhood experience with his mother rather than his memory of his father. Despite the subtle shift in gender, ultimately, the work illustrated the same

two important factors operative in the compulsion to repeat. The first is transference. Transference is a repetition of a forgotten pain on to the doctor and other aspects of the current situation. The second is resistance: the greater the resistance, the more extensively acting out (repetition) will replace remembering. The patient repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under conditions of resistance (151). Resistance may even cause a patient to think repression is better than working-through as symptoms surface.

Relevant to the puerile characteristics of McCarthy's work, Freud wrote: "Young and childish people in particular are inclined to make the necessity imposed by the treatment for paying attention to their illness a welcome excuse for luxuriating in their symptoms" (152-153). McCarthy seems to luxuriate in his symptoms, or what Kuspit called "fetishization of pathology" (Kuspit, "Into the Anal Universe, p.). McCarthy's repetition is acted out as childish behavior: drawing on walls, playing dress-up, playing with toys, or speaking about sexuality in childish terms such as "Daddy's big wee-wee."

Freud argued one cannot treat illness as an event of the past, though its sources may lie there, rather it as a present-day force: the patient feels something real and contemporary (Freud 151-152). The force of the affect of early childhood humiliation in McCarthy's performances are felt as present, as indicated below where I show that *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* was a way of rescripting as an adult a humiliation from childhood.

problem as *Contemporary Cure All* regarding commodity culture's pervasiveness in family life.

Baby Boy, Baby Magic was performed in Los Angeles before a live audience consisting of a select few that McCarthy had invited. McCarthy wore a giant featureless--save for two small black holes for eyes---white paper maché orb for a head, approximately the proportion to his body that an infant's head is to its body. He laid down on his back on a table, spread open his legs, and from under his hospital gown he pushed out a baby doll over his ketchup covered crotch. The baby's head was the last thing to come out and it got stuck under the gown (still appearing to be trapped briefly in the womb).

Rescripting Mother's Mockery

As discussed above with respect to *Contemporary Cure All*, according to psychoanalyst Robert Stoller the pervert rescripts a traumatic event, and dehumanizes others in order to make them feel the same humiliation he once suffered. McCarthy revealed in an interview that he once felt humiliated by his mother after asking her about his breech birth. He was asked why he used such powerful imagery in his performances, and if he had "traced it to anything", to which he replied:

You mean trauma? I was a breech birth. I came out ass first and bent over. It was a difficult delivery. Maybe I have physical memories of it. I have done a series of performances that involve the act of being bent over grabbing my toes. I asked my mother about being breech birth. She made light of it, made some joke. They'd put her to sleep anyway. Using sex in

my work has a lot to do with anxiety. For the most part it is directed at myself and objects.⁹⁵

The trauma of this event was unresolved. It resurfaced in his adult life and was the first association he made when thinking of trauma. To be clear, the trauma I am referring to is not the breech birth itself, but the conversation with his mother. When he asked his mother about his breech birth, she made a joke and laughed in his face. He felt humiliated and in the interview revealed that he continues to have anxiety over the issue.

Stoller explained that humor always involves hostility in varying degrees. Like the man who slips on a banana peel, someone needs to be the butt of a joke. One person's humor is another person's humiliation.⁹⁶ McCarthy had fallen victim to his mother's laugh. In *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982) he rescripted that humiliation. Preserving the structure of the trauma, he was hidden safely behind a mask while he made his audience witness his disturbing performance. He was then in the position to laugh, and was able to master, albeit briefly, the situation in which he was once so helpless.⁹⁷

McCarthy has done a number of works that incorporate the imagery of *Baby Boy, Baby Magic*. This is because simply rescripting trauma (through acting out in everyday life or while making art) does not cure its effects, and is not a substitution for sublimation or working-through. As Stoller argued, the rescripted act only provides a "quick fix" and consequently must be repeated over and over. McCarthy said in the interview quoted

⁹⁵ McCarthy, "Interview with Montano," 97.

⁹⁶ Stoller, 26.

⁹⁷ Stoller, 18, 26, 28-29.

above that he had done several performances in which he grabbed his feet. He also made several videos in which he revealed his buttocks to the viewer. *Ass End I* and *Ass End II* (1972) are one-minute performances in which he walked backwards bent over with his pants down until his buttocks entirely filled the television screen. In another early video performance called *Mooning* (1973) [fig. 2.5], McCarthy, stood with his back to the camera, dropped his pants, and shoved his bare bottom into the lens. McCarthy introduced himself to his audience in these video performances as he had been introduced into the world: naked, “ass first and bent over.” However, this time he felt no humiliation. He was not the one violated in his performances; rather, his intention was to violate the members of his potential audience, whose expectations for seeing art probably did not include being mooned.⁹⁸ In *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* McCarthy took on the role of his mother, rescripting the trauma so that he was the one who got to quietly sleep under anesthesia while the baby doll he used had to endure his humiliating entry into the world.

Infantile Perception of Mother in *Baby Boy, Baby Magic*

McCarthy’s imitation of his mother in *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982) was thoroughly puerile, as was his imitation of his father in *Contemporary Cure All*. As in

⁹⁸ McCarthy’s early videos were shown in various art venues in California such as the Long Beach Museum of Art, the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, and the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Exhibitions. McCarthy was included in the Long Beach Museum of Art’s annual “Southland Video Anthology” exhibitions in 1975, though his work *Sailor’s Meat* (1975) discussed in Chapter 1 was censored in the following year’s exhibition. After several other encounters with the authorities McCarthy began to limit the audience of his live performances to a few friends and showed his videos by special request only. (See: Linda Frye Burnham, “Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview,” in *Performance Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art* Carl Loeffler and Darlene Tong eds., San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1980, p. 418.) Fellow performance artist and critic Barbara Smith gave a narrative of her experience viewing McCarthy’s videos privately one afternoon as well as a description of several works in “Paul McCarthy,” *The Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal* no. 21 (Jan/Feb 1979): 45-50.

Contemporary Cure All, McCarthy again eroded the double differences between gender and generations in *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* as Chasseguet-Smirgel argued was operative in perversion. McCarthy played his mother, and blurred the line between generations by playing with toys and food as a child does. The collapse of generations was also embodied in the costume that portrayed the mother. Her giant bulbous head reproduced an infant's proportions on an adult scale. McCarthy thus played both mother and baby, even as he gave birth to a baby.

The depiction of mother with a bulbous, white head stripped her of her human status, and made her both monstrous and, as the title suggests, magical. However, the source of that magical power is unclear. It is uncertain whether it comes from the mother or the infant. After all McCarthy, his mother's son, is playing mother in the performance. "Baby magic" could refer to the mother's magical power to make babies, or to some sort of magic power that the baby possesses.

McCarthy's blurring of the boundary between his mother and himself as an infant in *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* is typical of the confusion experienced by infants in what psychoanalyst Hanna Segal, following the work of Melanie Klein, described as the paranoid-schizoid position. (Klein was one of the first psychoanalysts to study children, and Segal later applied her work to a study of art and creativity. Their theories lend themselves well to an analysis of McCarthy's performances because he consistently dealt with the very early childhood experiences of which they tried to give an account.) An infant cries when it feels hunger pains, and mother's good breast magically takes those pains away; but since mother comes whenever the infant cries, he may mistakenly

attribute the appearance of the good breast to his own omnipotence as if the nurturing breast is summoned by the power of his voice.⁹⁹ The boundary between infant and mother has not been formed in the mind of the infant, and it was eroded away in McCarthy's adult work *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic*.

McCarthy's paranoid-schizoid image of mother in *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* was regressive because it was instinctually modeled after an infant's early relationship with his mother. It appeared because McCarthy was reaching back into early childhood and his unconscious. The Surrealists earlier in the century also worked in this vein. Two surrealist works in particular help to illustrate infantile perception in the paranoid-schizoid position, and by their similarity to *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* show the primary and structural nature of the paranoid-schizoid experience. Joan Miró's painting *The Potato* (1928) features a larger-than-life white figure taking up most of the composition, the way the grand image of mother fills the mind of a child. Colorful toy-like objects circle above it. It seems to have a breast, though that brown shape is a part-object and not integrated into the figure's body. On the hand of the figure is a letter "M" which could stand for

⁹⁹ See Hanna Segal, *Dream, Phantasy, Art*. (London: Routledge, 1995).

The second position is the depressive position. In the depressive position the child begins to understand there is only one breast and it is attached to a mother who has an existence autonomous of the child's. The child begins to feel remorse for wishing such harmful things on the breast during the paranoid-schizoid position because it now realizes that breast belongs to the person who nurtures. In this position the infant renounces its phantasy of omnipotence and accepts a symbol in place of this loss. Symbolization is the key function of the mind for dealing with loss. Symbolization can take many forms: art, language, even objects such as a child's favorite blanket. Rather than splitting, the mode of mental life in the depressive position is integration (seeing all those former part-objects as a whole object, namely mother) and reparation, making up for the aggressive urges it once had. It is necessary for the child to internalize the new good object (mother) and renounce its paranoid-schizoid hostility in order to make the leap to creativity, that is, be able to symbolize. Segal, following Klein, refers to these modes as positions as opposed to stages because while they are in some respects developmental, one can fall back into the paranoid-schizoid positions at any time. McCarthy's work involves some degree of symbolization which Segal argued can only take place in the depressive position, as any work of art does; but its aggressive and disintegrated qualities show it to be closer to the paranoid-schizoid position.

mère or *madre*, but could also stand for “Miró” the artist. This identifying monogram, in fact, makes the identity of the figure all the more ambiguous since it could represent the artist or his mother. I would like to suggest that this is a paranoid-schizoid image in so far as we cannot distinguish between the artist and his mother just as in the psyche of an infant the distinction between the mother’s body and his own has not been formed.

Salvador Dalí’s *The Specter of Sex Appeal* (1934) also demonstrates these ideas. In the painting, set in a landscape similar to Dalí’s childhood terrain in the region of Andalucía, a young boy stares up in fascination at a larger-than-life and headless female figure composed of crutches and stuffed sacks. While the child in Dalí’s painting has separated from the mother figure, she is still not an integrated person; rather, she is a fragmented collection of part-objects in the child’s psyche. The featureless, all powerful, and mysterious mother of *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* was similar to the mother figures in these Surrealist paintings.

Nevertheless, McCarthy’s performance was more hostile than the two Surrealist paintings. Miró’s adult painting of a self-portrait/mother-figure shows that Miró has internalized the creative power of mother. Dalí’s child looking upward indicates an idealization of the mother, despite her fearsomeness. McCarthy’s mother character in *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* was highly aggressive. She became the threatening castrating father, once again covered in blood and wielding knives. This perception of the hostile mother is also a characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position. When mother does not

respond quickly enough to the infant's cries, he will---according to the theories of Klein and Segal---perceive her as a bad-breast projecting his own hostile feelings into her.¹⁰⁰

As McCarthy had done in the anal-sadistic universe of *Contemporary Cure All*, he idealized the mess of *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic*. In actuality, there is no magic in the work at all. A lifeless doll, visible to the audience, was pushed out from under McCarthy's costume, and in the end it remained the exact same lifeless, plastic consumer product. There was no miracle of birth, and none of the materials were transformed the way that

¹⁰⁰ See the above note on Hanna Segal regarding symbolization: Both Miró and Dalí through their idealization of mother and the meticulousness attention they pay to formal elements and techniques, abstract and naturalistic, respectively, demonstrate an ability to move beyond the paranoid-schizoid position and exhibit an ability to symbolize as is characteristic of the depressive position. McCarthy's work, by contrast, is more deeply mired in the paranoid-schizoid position. The aggressiveness, disintegration, and the relative simplicity of the symbolism---ketchup for blood, for example---show very little ability to symbolize.

Many of McCarthy's works exhibit a high degree of hostility toward his mother, particularly his inflatable beer bottle sculptures. Concerning his mother, McCarthy was quoted in the original manuscript of the *Parkett* interview saying that she was liberal, but then said right away how she was very strict about drinking and smoking:

My mother wanted to be an artist. She was liberal. One piece I'm making now has a relationship to my mother. It's a giant inflated bottle of rum. Being a Mormon, my mother always had thing about not smoking and not drinking, which had more to do with her younger bother who died of alcoholism. (McCarthy, "original manuscript of 'A Dialogue with Language Itself' Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy," pp. 120-134.)

McCarthy has made inflatable sculptures of beer bottles. They are goofy and make light of something that tormented his mother. Unlike so many of McCarthy's defilements of pop imagery, those beer bottle sculptures are closer to mainstream pop art or Claes Oldenburg in that they maintain the sanitized frivolity of the original product. Those pieces function not as an attack on alcohol, but an attack on his mother's serious concerns.

In the revised *Parkett* interview (explained above in the section on McCarthy's father being a butcher), McCarthy changed several things, most significantly made it appear that he used to drink with his uncle:

My mother wanted to be an artist. It's a giant inflated bottle of rum. My smoking and drinking with her younger brother who died of alcoholism. (p. 119)

This revised version represents a considerable amount of hostility toward the mother object. The death of his mother's brother from alcoholism was a painful issue for her, one that led her to be very strict about drinking in her family. In this published interview, McCarthy went out of his way to change the manuscript to make it sound as though he used to drink alongside his late uncle, showing that he identifies with him insofar as it can passive-aggressively inflict pain on his mother.

Miró and Dalí magically transformed paint into images of the unconscious. On the contrary, the literalism of McCarthy's performance made it an exhibition of artifice.

Commodity Abjection and the Doll in *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic*

Whether attacking his father or mother in these two performances, in the end, the old man and McCarthy gave birth to dolls. The baby boy doll was a particularly meaningful symbol in *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* because of its autobiographical resonance (in contrast to the Barbie dolls of *Contemporary Cure All*). The baby boy doll is a condensation of the discourses of abjection and commodity culture as they affect the formation of McCarthy's own subjectivity. Simply stated, abjection, as described by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, calls into question the identity of the subject by drawing attention to the fragility of the border between self and other. McCarthy's two performances sent the stability of subjectivity into free fall through his use of condiments, the motif of birth, and the representation of himself and his family members as consumer products that by their very nature have no unique self.

Contemporary Cure All and *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* were both works of abjection. McCarthy blurred the line between food and body, and used condiments such as ketchup, mayonnaise, and mustard to suggest abject fluids such as blood, semen, and urine. According to Kristeva's theories of abjection, foods and bodily fluids reveal that the body's borders are more permeable than the autonomous subject would care to believe. Food which is exterior to the self becomes fused with the body when eaten; and excrement and bodily fluids which are part of the body are expelled into the exterior

world. The sense of abjection that accompanies food loathing and the self's reaction to bodily fluids was compounded in McCarthy's performances because it was hard to distinguish food from the associations he made with bodily fluids.

Furthermore, as Kristeva has described it, birth, the subject of these works, is primary abjection: the expulsion of the infant from the mother's womb is the origin of the subject, that is, it is the moment when a baby first becomes its own being separate from the mother.¹⁰¹ Subjectivity is always called into question by the specter of birth, because birth is a reminder that the subject came from other subjects. As philosopher and Kristeva scholar Kelly Oliver explained: "on Kristeva's analysis, the child sees the mother's sex as threatening because it is the canal out of which it came...insofar as the infant was once on the other side of that canal, its autonomy is threatened."¹⁰² Birth became a recurring theme in the abject art of the 1980s and 1990s, such as in the untitled sculpture of Kiki Smith that depicts a baby hanging by its umbilical cord from between its mother's legs.

The abjection of birth is further complicated in *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* because McCarthy gave birth to a mass-produced toy. Whereas Kiki Smith's handcrafted sculpture made no reference to any particular time period, McCarthy's image of birth was full of icons that located it within the context of post-1945 consumer culture. He constructed the head of the mother in that performance, but he did not sculpt the baby. Ultimately, in a performance that reenacted the trauma of his own breech birth, the mass-produced baby doll was the object that represented McCarthy himself.

¹⁰¹ See my "INTRODUCTION: *Review of the Literature and Commodity Abjection.*"

¹⁰² Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 55.

Kristeva's theory of abjection continues to play an important role here, but must be understood in tandem with a theory of consumer culture. Philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's analysis of the consumer society is helpful in this regard. Consumer culture in McCarthy's work is presented as a determining force in the formation of identity analogous to the situation described by Adorno and Horkheimer: "...in the exchange society [...] the possibilities conferred by birth are molded to fit the production of goods that can be bought on the market."¹⁰³ McCarthy the baby in *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* and McCarthy the real life father, are just more "commodity patriarchs," that is, they are just another couple of mass-produced subjects conditioned by consumer culture, just like his grandfather the rubber mask, and his father on the ketchup bottle icon.

At its core, McCarthy conceived of his family as a consumerist family whose identity was comprised by mass-produced goods. In the performances analyzed in this chapter, he tried to expel those consumerist elements. Commodity in McCarthy's works was present at birth, and from his point of view he therefore could not escape the coercive power of consumer culture any more than he could psychically escape the formative role his parents played in his development. The parody of consumer culture was analogous to his parody of his family. In each case McCarthy was a puerile

¹⁰³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1940-1950] Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, 8-9. McCarthy was not directly referencing Adorno and Horkheimer. I am arguing that they all share a similar pessimism over consumer society. McCarthy arrived at his conclusions through an intuitive and instinctual process which I believe can be elaborated using Adorno and Horkheimer's intellectual analysis.

adolescent acting out, mocking his parents and his culture, but still condemned to identify with them all.

Hanna Segal, the psychoanalyst to whose work I referred above when discussing Klein's paranoid-schizoid position and *Baby Boy, Baby Magic*, wrote that generally the artist moves beyond the paranoid-schizoid position to create a new object and a new world after repairing the damage of his hostile phantasies.¹⁰⁴ She likened that new object to a baby: "It is a restoring in one's inner world of a parental couple creating a new baby. ...[the artist's] creation is felt to be baby resulting from meaningful internal intercourse."¹⁰⁵ However, McCarthy in *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* created nothing new. The materials remained the same by the end of the performance; they had simply been made messy. Rather than create a new world, McCarthy re-presented products from consumer society such as dolls and ketchup.

In the introduction to this dissertation I cited art historian Thomas McEvelley who argued that McCarthy was enacting primitive magic rituals of female imitation in his birthing performances such as *Baby Boy, Baby Magic*.¹⁰⁶ The title "baby magic" sets up the expectation of shamanistic ritual. However, that ritual needs to be interpreted in light of the consumerist elements in the work. Though the following quotation by art historian

¹⁰⁴ After the child becomes aware that the mother is a whole person, and not simply just a good or bad breast, the process of reparation can begin. Symbolization in the depressive position, including the making of art objects, is a way of showing regret for earlier hostile wishes by creating a whole mother. See note above regarding symbolization.

¹⁰⁵ Segal, 95.

¹⁰⁶ McEvelley, 66. See *Review of the Literature* in "Introduction" of this dissertation for my treatment of McEvelley.

Lane Relyea makes references to works from the 1990s, her discussion of condiments in relation to magic ritual is appropriate here:

All of these artists [Jean-Michel Basquiat, Cy Twombly and Christopher Wool] partake in a grim view of the publicly paraded private self, as does McCarthy, who always shoehorns his Dionysian outbursts in pop vernacular, enlisting as theater stages the discarded studio sets of canceled TV sitcoms, lubricating his rituals with neither bodily fluids, nor wine and wafers, but, rather, bargain-priced ketchup and mayonnaise, and who employs cultural icons like Santa Claus, Popeye, and Alfred E. Neuman as emcees. Every civilization gets the shaman it deserves.¹⁰⁷

The puerile nature of McCarthy's pseudo-shamanism is a result of the consumer culture that conditioned his subjectivity. This idea resonates with Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that the masses are kept immature by the culture industry ("The overripeness of society lives on in the immaturity of the ruled."¹⁰⁸), and yet immaturity is the strategy McCarthy used to combat the effects of consumer culture in *Contemporary Cure All* and *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic*. He thereby reinforced consumer culture's mechanism of infantilization that his work aimed to critique. At the end of *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* McCarthy was still a baby doll, and he played with it and with his food.

These two works signaled a crisis in art's capacity to be critical in a late capitalist society.¹⁰⁹ The psychological repetition in McCarthy's perversion is also a cultural repetition. The trauma in his work is his realization that he and his family are all products of their

¹⁰⁷ Lane Relyea, "A Few Words for *Dead H*," *Parkett* 73, (2005): 102-103.

¹⁰⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, 28.

¹⁰⁹ The term "late capitalism" was developed by the Belgian Marxist Ernest Mandel in *Late Capitalism* [1972] Trans. Joris De Bres, London: Atlantic Highlands Humanities Press, 1975. As opposed to earlier forms of competitive capitalism with the corresponding bourgeois subject, late capitalism began in the late twentieth century and is characterized by the hegemony of multinational corporations and consumer and advertising culture.

consumer society. Segal noted that most artists try to work through the ugly world, and reconstruct it into a thing of beauty.¹¹⁰ However, McCarthy's work is a repository for the most debased foods and images from consumer culture. If McCarthy disliked consumer culture to begin with, his art renders it even uglier in the end, desublimating it in order to reveal the latent ugliness under its glossy surface.

¹¹⁰ Segal, 90-91.



Fig. 2.1 *Contemporary Cure All*, 1979, performances/video tape, Los Angeles, CA; with Susan Amon, John Duncan and Ronald Benom. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 2.2 *Karen Ketchup Dream*, 1975, performance/video tape, Pasadena, CA. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

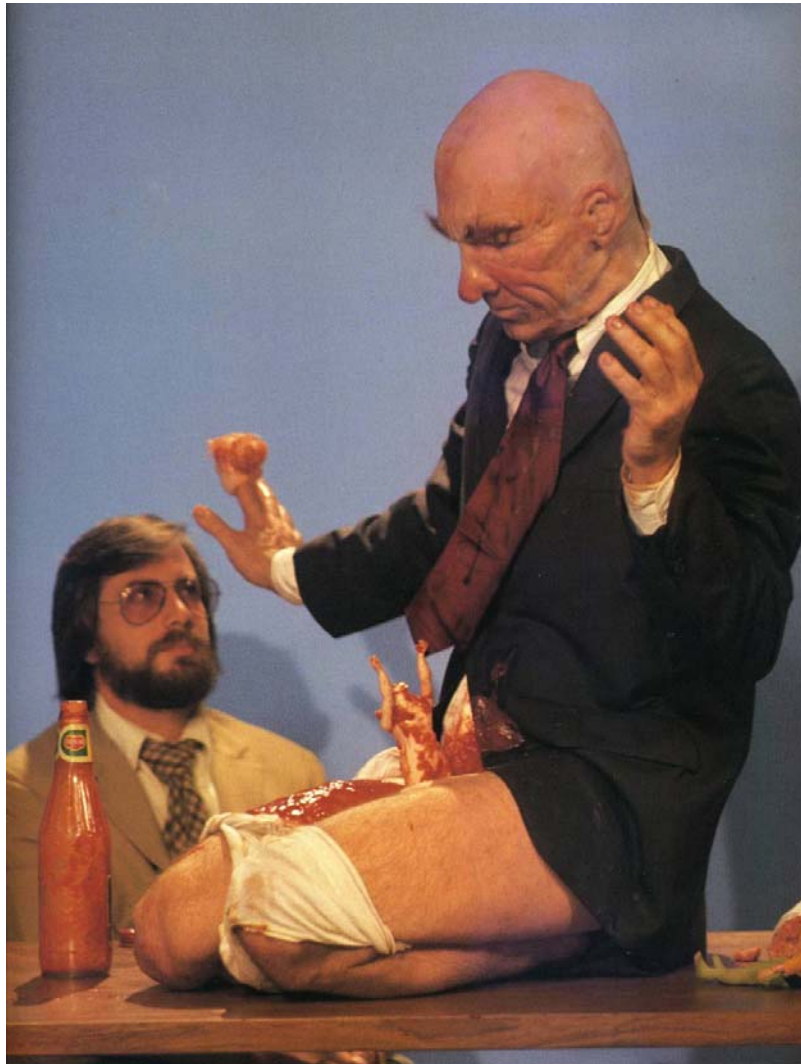


Fig. 2.3 *Grand Pop*, 1977, Performance, videotape, Los Angeles. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 2.4 *Baby Boy, Baby Magic*, 1982, performance, Al's Bar, Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 2.5 *Mooning*, 1973, performance/video tape, Los Angeles, CA.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

CHAPTER 3:
SEXUAL AUTOMATONS: *THE GARDEN* (1992) AND *CULTURAL GOTHIC* (1992)

After a flourishing of live performance activity from 1980 to 1983, including *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* (1982) analyzed in the previous chapter, McCarthy took a several years' hiatus from performing live, and focused instead on sculpture and installation works, and made occasional short videos. The works from this time expanded on his interest in social conditioning, and in particular began examining the ways in which attitudes toward sexuality are transmitted from father to son within a consumer society.¹¹¹

As McCarthy began work on kinetic sculpture, his mechanical figures increasingly took the place of him as the performer.¹¹² When asked in a 2007 interview if there had been a relationship between the kinetic sculptures of the 1980s and 1990s and his performance, he said there had been: "I was interested in working with a substitute to

¹¹¹ McCarthy also introduced new imagery based on American stereotypes of Europe, no doubt inspired by his recent experiences of performing abroad. McCarthy explained his reasons for leaving performance:

Performance was really wearing me down psychologically. I wanted to get a real distance from it and think about it in another way. There was no money. It seemed as if I should back away. I wasn't sure it was so healthy for me. Performing for an audience did affect my actions, but I was also interested in what happens when you put a frame, a camera window, in front of the performance and the viewer watches it through this window. You change the situation that way. You hide parts of what they could see and you control it. It reflects on culture's use of control. (McCarthy, "Interview with Stiles," *Paul McCarthy*, (London: Phaidon, 1996), 28)

¹¹² Dennis Oppenheim also working on the West coast explored a similar idea in *Theme for a Major Hit* (1974) originally exhibited at Ace Gallery in Los Angeles. In that piece several marionettes with faces sculpted to look like the artist hung from motors that animated them. Oppenheim called these works "surrogate sculptures."

myself in my performances. A mechanized figure, as a substitute. An immanent mechanical replacement for my body. So I became interested in that, and really interested in Disneyland.”¹¹³ In this chapter I analyze *The Garden* (1992) and *Cultural Gothic* (1992) with respect to the blurred line that McCarthy described in this quotation between humans and mechanical, theme-park objects.

McCarthy first began making mechanical sculptures in the early 1980s around the time his son Damon was turning ten.¹¹⁴ As a father with a son on the cusp of adolescence, the question of how sexual values were transmitted by parents and by entertainment culture became dominant in the work of this performance hiatus. *The Garden* was McCarthy’s lament over the transformation of his rural childhood town into a homogenized suburban environment, an event he connected to the repression of his sexuality.¹¹⁵ *Cultural Gothic* illustrated the coercive transmission of sexual identity from father to son. The figures in both these mechanical, kinetic works were sexual automatons from a consumer culture. (This theme appeared again after his return to performance, particularly in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household Dilemma* (1994) discussed in the next chapter.) Due to the fact that McCarthy said that these sculptures were surrogates for himself, they revealed his personal cynicism toward sexuality in postmodern society.

¹¹³ Paul McCarthy, “Interview with Alexander Tovborg,” in *Kopenhagen: Aktuel Information om Samtidskunst*. Feb 13, 2007 Accessed online 10/10/2007: http://www.kopenhagen.dk/interviews/interviews/interview_paul_mccarthy/

¹¹⁴ McCarthy, “original manuscript of ‘A Dialogue with Language Itself’ Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy,” *Parkett* 73 (2005): 120-134.

¹¹⁵ McCarthy, interview by Linda Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties: Sex, Food, Money/Fame, Ritual Death*, ed. Linda Montano (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2000), 97. The interview is undated, but was probably conducted shortly after *Death Ship* (1981).

Nature and Suburbia: The Garden (1992)

The Garden (1992)¹¹⁶ was a tableau depicting a forest [fig. 3.1]. The trees were recycled from a set of *Bonanza*, an American television western that aired from 1959 to 1973. The rocks, trees and grass of the work were obviously fictitious. The trees did not even have any tops, a fact that would not have been visible when seen through the television camera, but was obvious when the set was placed in a gallery. The ground was covered with astro-turf. *The Garden* was elevated so that it is removed from the viewer's immediate space, as if belonging to a slightly loftier realm, though that very elevation revealed its basic 2x4-construction and general artifice. While walking around the viewer would occasionally hear a mechanical noise and was surprised to find two mechanical figures dressed in middle-class clothing and wearing Hollywood masks. One older man with his pants around his knees mechanically humped a tree, a "tree-hugger" turned tree-copulator. The motor driving him was clearly visible on the other side of the tree [fig. 3.2]. Another younger man was lying face down on the ground with his pants off humping the astro-turf.

The work was a condensation of McCarthy's concerns about being able to discern the animate from the inanimate, the hegemony of Disney and consumer culture, and his

¹¹⁶ *The Garden* was a particularly important work for McCarthy's career because it was included in the internationally reviewed 1992 Helter Skelter exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the LAX show in Vienna shortly after.

personal response to his changing childhood home and his grandfather's frontiersman legacy. McCarthy addressed some of those themes directly when speaking about the work:

The Garden is a spoof on that idea [of man going back to nature in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s], but people saw it as fucking nature or destroying nature. There is the tension between two possibilities. There was also this idea of using mechanical figures, things we have seen at Disneyland or in store windows. [...] It puts the audience in the role of voyeur. They entertain themselves by walking around it and peeking in.¹¹⁷

This scene was disturbing to the viewer because of its voyeurism, and because it reduced human sexuality to a mechanical motion, in a "natural" setting of all places. It referenced both Hollywood and television, and American theme-park technology.¹¹⁸

The Garden embodied the disorientation that McCarthy felt in the new post-World War II American suburban landscape that was quickly displacing nature. This disorientation was felt by other artists, most notably Robert Smithson, as discussed below. For McCarthy, however, this lament over nature's receding visibility was intimately bound up with questions of identity and sexuality. The quotation below from an interview demonstrates the significance for McCarthy of the United States'

¹¹⁷ McCarthy, "Interview by Marc Selwyn," *Flash Art* 26/170 (May/June 1993): 64.

¹¹⁸ Ralph Rugoff wrote: "The Garden is...a cultural icon, in the sense of Western culture not looking out, especially the culture of the mass media. The world peers in through the media, but the media really isn't aware of the world." He went on to call it a "kitsch Eden" not depicting nature but a "them park-scaled reproduction." (Rugoff, 61). Rugoff compared the voyeurism in the *The Garden* to Duchamp's *Etannts Donn e*. The sexual machine motif also resonates with Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* in which the empty clothes of the bachelors are spun around by the chocolate grinder (a slang French reference to masturbation). The aesthetic is different, however, as McCarthy's imagery and content is clearly derived from popular culture.

Dan Cameron noted *The Garden* translates the ephemeral qualities of performance into a permanent piece that exists without the presence of the artist. (Dan Cameron, "The Mirror Stage," *Paul McCarthy* [exhibition catalogue] (New York: New Museum and Hatje Cantz, 2000), 61)

transformation from the mythical, rugged and untamed rural West of his grandfather's time to a consumer society. In an interview focused on the role of sex in McCarthy's work, Linda Montano asked him about what his early childhood experiences were like in regards to sex. McCarthy replied initially by stating that it was a repressed environment largely due to religious influences, but then curiously switched to a discussion of his socio-economic milieu. This indicated that the sexuality in his work was tied, consciously or not, to a certain social context, namely suburbia and its corresponding consumer culture:

I came from a pretty repressed sexual environment. It was religious and isolated. I didn't know what sex was. It was a taboo subject. I grew up not talking about it. It was a Mormon community. My grandfather was Irish Catholic. My parents weren't particularly religious, but the environment was. The whole community was Mormon. I went to a Mormon church. The church was very youth-oriented. It was a town outside Salt Lake City, a kind of rural farm environment. They were just beginning to build suburbs and tract houses, and now it's just like the San Fernando Valley---all tract houses.¹¹⁹

In this interview he mourned the passing of his rural and more natural home as it was replaced by tract houses, cheap suburbs, and ultimately the culture of television and Disneyland of post-war American society.

These new suburbs and their consumer culture had been a problem for other American artists concerned with nature. Robert Smithson, in "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1969) showed similar ambivalence as he tried to locate Passaic within history of architecture:

¹¹⁹ McCarthy, "Interview by Montano," 97.

But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the “big events” of history. Oh, maybe there are a few statues, a legend, and a couple of curios, but no past--just what passes for a future. A Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass.... Passaic seems full of ‘holes’ compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures. Such futures found in grade B Utopian films, and then imitated by the suburbanite.¹²⁰

Smithson’s comparison between suburban homes and movie sets resonated with the metaphors used in McCarthy’s *The Garden* in which the middle-class suburban figures played out their perverse sexuality on an appropriated television set. While Smithson’s and McCarthy’s assessments of the new suburban landscape resonated with one another, their responses were very different. Smithson’s reflections on suburbia compelled him to explore earthworks, massive projects out in nature that often very far from urban centers and difficult to reach, such as his famous *Spiral Jetty* (1970) [fig. 3.3] in the Great Salt Lake, Utah, not far from McCarthy’s hometown. Smithson’s earthworks offered an alternative to the commercial gallery system. McCarthy, however, resigned himself to the encroaching consumer culture and made works infected by its artifice. Nature in *The Garden* was reduced to its depiction in low budget television shows and confined to the space of the gallery.

¹²⁰ Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” [1967], in *Robert Smithson: The Complete Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 72.

The Shift from Nature to Simulation

In the interview quoted above, McCarthy recalled his childhood lament as he watched his rural hometown transformed into a suburban landscape composed of tract houses. In his early performances he often tried to resist the commercial world of the gallery system in order to have an authentic, singular experience in nature. Those early works were very different from *The Garden* in which he gave up that struggle, resigned to the belief that consumer and media culture had rendered all nature obsolete. By examining this transition from nature to simulation, the personal significance of this conflict for McCarthy will be evident.

McCarthy's early pre-food performances showed an interest in nature and natural materials. While some of those early performances were simple deadpan, and ironic instructions, others were a search for revitalizing experience in nature. The performances of *Mountain Bowling* in Salt Lake City in 1969 [fig. 3.4] and 1970, and in Los Angeles in 1972 were examples of such pieces: "On three separate occasions a bowling ball was carried to the top of a mountain and bowled to the bottom."¹²¹ More than a mere ironic gesture, the work first involved finding three different mountains in remote areas away from humans, then the arduous, Sisyphian task of climbing up them through a natural landscape while carrying a heavy bowling ball, and then finally the liberating experience of letting the natural force of gravity take over. One of McCarthy's early "Actions" was to *Make a Window Where There is None* (1970). While this might appear typical of the destruction so common in McCarthy's later work, it was also a way of breaking out of a

¹²¹ Text from the New Museum 2000 exhibition catalogue, 12.

confined space---the gallery, the studio---and entering into nature. The photograph of this completed action had an almost divine glow, inviting the viewer within the gallery space to experience a world of light and air outside [fig. 3.5]. The violence implicit in the act of breaking through a wall, was sublimated into the sublime of the natural world. Nature for McCarthy in these early works was a place for rejuvenation, an alternative to suburban, consumer culture.¹²² His lived body and that of the viewer's were integrated into the natural world.

Even some of McCarthy's early installations also used natural materials. For *Cotton Door* (1971) [fig. 3.6] he stuffed cotton and wooden armatures in between two city doors. The work softened its surrounding industrial and urban materials; it made them more natural again. This was a very different piece from the later *The Garden* in which the natural world was presented as pure artifice.

McCarthy's turn to artifice in works like *The Garden* was not an arbitrary decision, but rather, as his early works show, it represented a dramatic shift in his world view with regards to nature, culture and the role that art can play in each.

¹²² There were numerous other early performances in which the artist was engaged with nature. A simple piece called *Falling*, involved McCarthy climbing to the top of a mountain and then running back down as fast as he could until he felt himself losing control. Finally, the "Action" *Throw Dirt in the Air* (1972) was a piece in which the artist was outdoors, immersed in earth, and launched dirt into the sky with a shovel. The artist and viewer experienced its boundlessness flight vicariously. The work recalled Van Gogh claim that it was good for city folk to smell in the air the odors of the country: dirt, potatoes, and manure. "...it would be wrong, I think, to give a peasant picture a certain conventional smoothness. If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam---all right, that's not unhealthy; if a stable smells of dung---all right, that belongs to a stable; if the field has an odor of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano or manure---that's healthy, especially for city people." (Vincent Van Gogh, letter to his brother Theo, Neunen, 30 April 1885, in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 31.)

Culture as Second Nature

Philosopher Frederic Jameson's theories on the role of nature in the postmodern era can provide a language for explaining the changes in consumer society that account for McCarthy's shift from nature to simulation. Jameson argued that the consumption-for-consumption's-sake aspect of postmodern culture advanced a simulacrum which eclipsed modern notions of nature and being. In the modern period when nature was being replaced by industrialization, there was still a natural realm to which one could return¹²³:

In modernism [...] some residual zones of "nature" or "being," of the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that "referent." Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which "culture" has become a veritable "second nature."¹²⁴

In the postmodern period simulation became so dominant that a pure concept of nature was impossible to conceive. In the image-driven advertising economy of late capitalism,

¹²³ Jameson's distinction between modernism and postmodernism based on their respective conceptions of nature and the relative dominance of simulation in each is relevant to a study of art. Modern art often resisted industrialization, or if it embraced it, at least still acknowledged that nature existed as something to defeat. For example, the artists of Die Brücke painted scenes of urban alienation and angst and, by contrast, scenes of the rejuvenating effects of nature as in Ernst Kirchner's *Street, Dresden* (1908) and *Ins Meer Schreitende*, respectively. The Italian Futurists celebrated the machine, replacing the organic with the geometric, metallic, and mechanical. The futurist poet Marinetti wrote that there was no need for sunlight now that modern man had invented electric light, and that smoke from factories was more beautiful than natural clouds. "We will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons...factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke..." (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism" [1909], in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 148). The fundamental premise shared by both of these artists perspectives on nature and technology, is that there did exist a notion of nature that could be opposed to an urban and industrial culture. This was a seemingly obvious premise, until the postmodern period, for which Jameson argued that commodity culture has created an impenetrable simulacrum which has eclipsed modern notions of "nature" or "being."

¹²⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Introduction," *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991/2003), p. ix.

people go to tropical islands, the mountains, or the Grand Canyon to see nature the way they have already seen it in photographs. Jameson continued by claiming that nature was replaced by the power of consumption in commodity culture:

So, in postmodern culture, “culture” has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.¹²⁵

Nature in *The Garden* became sheer commodity. The set was taken from a television show, which itself was a commodity, and into it McCarthy added figures with the mechanics of a theme-park. The viewer became a tourist in the gallery.

The ostensible ascendancy of the simulacra in American culture elicited a sort of claustrophobic response in McCarthy (and for other American artists such as Smithson) due to their perception of nature’s erosion in a society of image and commodity. Jameson tied the loss of nature to commodification and consumption. McCarthy’s early work, as I showed above, acted as a mode of resistance against the commercial world and of the gallery system so that he could have an authentic, singular experience in nature. In his later work he gave up that struggle, resigned to the belief that consumer and media culture had rendered all nature obsolete. The most important aspects of that consumer culture for McCarthy were television and theme-parks as he indicated in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, “I was interested in Disneyland.”

¹²⁵ Jameson, p. x.

It was strange that McCarthy had connected the passing of rural life to sexual repression. I believe the reason is two-fold. As I've suggested already, the passing of the rural meant the rise of suburbia and with it its bourgeois values. Secondly, the loss of an agrarian and western ideal was a significant break with his worldview as a child. McCarthy's grandfather was an Irish Catholic immigrant who upon arrival in the United States made his way to Utah in a covered wagon.¹²⁶ His grandfather embodied American myths of masculinity and potency as they were tied to westward expansion. *Bonanza*, from which the trees of *The Garden* were taken, was a show that McCarthy grew up on. In this television western he found simulations of the myths of his grandfather. *The Garden* was infected by television culture, and no longer procreative like his grandfather who forged his way across the American landscape. Instead the work was masturbatory; the figures were automatons, mechanically driven by television and the consumerist world. *The Garden* was like a perverse Barbizon school painting. Millet had left Paris for the Barbizon farming village, and made heroes out of farm workers in his paintings; but McCarthy had no untainted, idyllic world to which he could return. The imaginary world of his Grandfather the frontiersman was simply imaginary, as so proved by its quick assimilation into the world of Hollywood movies and television shows like *Bonanza*.

¹²⁶ Paul McCarthy, "Interview by Jeremy Sigler," facsimile of original manuscript, *Parkett*, no. 73 (2005): 120-134.

Nature and the Cyborg

Biologist and philosopher Donna Haraway's work on cyborgs and their relationship to the changing role of nature can be helpful in interpreting the role of the mechanical figures within McCarthy's *The Garden*. In her text *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Haraway argued that the cyborg---referring to both real cybernetic technology and images found in science fiction---signaled a contemporary erosion of the differences between human and machine and between imagination and reality:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of "Western" science and politics---the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as a resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other---the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.¹²⁷

Haraway's description of the "border war" between organism and machine is precisely the type of conflict that McCarthy's work addressed, and resonates with the blurring of boundaries characteristic of Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection employed in this dissertation. While human subjects want to draw a clear distinction between themselves and machines, the cyborg draws attention to the fragility of the border between organism and machine. The figures in McCarthy's *The Garden* likewise highlight the fragility of that border. It is a border war that McCarthy demonstrated to have been lost by

¹²⁷ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 150.

organisms, as both nature and humans could be simulated by a television set and mechanical theme-park figures.

While the answer to the question of whether the border war against the machine has indeed been lost by human subjects is ostensible, for McCarthy personally the answer is yes. As “surrogates for himself” the uniquely personal aspect of McCarthy’s work becomes evident. *The Garden*’s figures were not simply representative of postmodern society, but rather, were substitutes for his very self. His self and his sexuality were reduced to mechanical theme-park cyborgs.

The title and theme of *The Garden* resonated ironically with the mythical Garden of Eden. In McCarthy’s piece the paradise of origin was replaced with a simulation. On Donna Haraway’s reading, this new view of nature coincides with the emergence of the cyborg in postmodern culture:

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein’s monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and a cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Haraway, 151.

The viewer first encountering *The Garden* would generally be shocked by the perversity of the figures humping trees. Using Haraway's model the perversity of the figures and the simulation of nature can be read as symptoms of the same cultural shift. The movement away from an organic model of both nature and family is a result of the fact that the concepts of nature and culture are "reworked." No longer is nature appropriated by the arbiters of culture, rather, both nature and culture have entered into a world of simulation. A symptom of the new simulated world is that the cyborgs do not seek mates, but are rather moved by a mechanical compulsion, as is the case in the cyborg community that McCarthy orchestrated in *The Garden*.

Cultural Gothic (1992)

The underside of familial life and social conditioning became a dominant theme in McCarthy's work beginning in the 1980s. This grew out of his previous work on birth (such as the performances analyzed in Chapter 2). In an interview from the early 1990s McCarthy said:

The theme of children has been in my work for the last ten years, but now is less about the trauma of birth and more about the trauma of being conditioned by a parent.... I agree with what you said about the sexual act: it exists in film. We go into this black room to watch and we are transfixed. How much we watch determines what kind of people we are culturally. They are all things that to a degree are also repressed by culture, taboo acts, taboo fluids.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ McCarthy, "Interview by Marc Selwyn," 64.

Cultural Gothic (1992) [fig. 3.7] explored the role of parental coercion in children's sexual development. In this sculpture a white, middle-class suburban father in a striped button-up shirt and dark khakis, stood approvingly with his hands on his son's shoulders. He maintained a stern and solemn expression on his face. In front of the child was a stuffed goat. Periodically a hidden mechanism animated the boy like a character at theme-park or a 34th Street Macy's holiday window display. The boy's hips were thrust against the rear end of the goat, and though the child was fully clothed, the action clearly suggested copulation.

While talking about two video pieces made a few years prior to *Cultural Gothic*, McCarthy said the growth of his son accounted for the change in his subject matter from birth to childhood conditioning: "A [video] piece called *Family Tyranny* (1987) is also about a father and his son. Damon was ten years old then, so I was reflecting on being a father."¹³⁰ *Cultural Soup* (1987) [fig. 3.8] and the work he referenced *Family Tyranny* (1987) [fig. 3.9] were two very short performances staged and edited for video (seven and eight minutes, respectively). The former took place in what looked like a wooden shack.¹³¹ Two little dolls were presented by McCarthy as "nice little boys and nice little girls."¹³² A close-up of his fist showed him holding a doll on top of a table lined with astro-turf, while he menacingly covered one of the dolls with mayonnaise and sang, "The

¹³⁰ McCarthy, "original manuscript of 'A Dialogue with Language Itself' Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy," pp. 120-134.

¹³¹ Kristin Schmidt, *Paul McCarthy, Videos: 1970-1997*, Yilmaz Dziewior ed., Cologne: Walther König, 2003, 115.

¹³² Schmidt, 115.

son begets the son, the daddy begets the daddy. The son begets the daddy, the daddy begets the son.”¹³³ In *Family Tyranny* two grown men played father and son roles on a set composed of faux wood paneling, an astro-turf floor, a couch, and various icons of Americana, such as a baseball bat. The interactions were abusive: the father restrained his son while he crawled on all fours screaming. At one point the father threateningly said “Very bad boy...You can do this to your son too.”¹³⁴ These threats of punishment were placed within a certain social milieu suggested by the set which was saturated with clichéd aspects of American suburban life.

The same sense of generational coercion within the context of suburban consumer culture was operative in *Cultural Gothic*. In fact, critic Ralph Rugoff argued that the piece was disturbing not because of its bestiality per se, but rather, because it de-sublimated a coercive patriarchal system of child rearing that had become seemingly normal in American society: “McCarthy thus stages this verboten act not as a hillbilly crime against nature, but as a phase in the developmental ‘norm,’ an initiation ritual into a patriarchal system based on mastery, where men learn to dominate sexual partners as if they were inarticulate objects...[and]...make visible the libidinal and social dynamics veiled by civilized appearances.”¹³⁵ Rugoff also pointed out that class and race are revealed by the appearance of these figures, and that the title’s resonance with Grant

¹³³ Schmidt, 115.

¹³⁴ Schmidt, 117.

¹³⁵ Rugoff, 65-66.

Wood's *American Gothic* (1930) suggests this piece was about "traditional American family values."

Donna Haraway's work on cyborgs and nature can help to explain the role of the mechanical figures in *Cultural Gothic*, specifically by using the connection she drew between the origin of the cyborg and "patriarchal capitalism." She wrote: "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential"¹³⁶ McCarthy's work suggested that humans become automatons or cyborg under patriarchal capitalism, that the same culture that Haraway claimed produced cyborgs. "Family values" were transmitted from father to son in *Cultural Gothic* and done so within a specific cultural milieu, as Rugoff noted. The bourgeois clothes revealed these are late twentieth century figures from suburban culture. The cyborg in Haraway's account is a byproduct of the same culture and economic system that produced McCarthy's subjects.

Reification of Sexuality in Consumer Culture

The body was reified in both *The Garden* and *Cultural Gothic*. This was a realization of a deep fear for McCarthy of not being able to distinguish the human from the non-human: "In a lot of cases it's because my work is related to the body and

¹³⁶ Haraway, 151.

concerned with animate and inanimate objects. In my case it relates to a fear of the virtual, the fear of being unable to discern a real human from a mannequin.”¹³⁷

This was a fear that had haunted McCarthy for a long time. In 1971 he shot a series of photographs of Hollywood Boulevard storefronts displaying mannequins and wigs. He titled the work *Fear of Mannequins* [figs. 3.10, 3.11]. Atget in Paris [fig. 3.12], Barbara Morgan in New York [fig. 3.13], Manuel Alvarez Bravo in Mexico City, and many of the surrealists had photographed mannequins and storefronts in order to highlight the uncanny, but often playful collapse of the animate and the inanimate. Morgan’s photograph of a Macy’s display showed a humorous encounter in which a male mannequin appeared to be “looking” at a woman passing by. For McCarthy the same subject matter was terrifying as indicated by the word “fear” in his title. His mannequins had been cannibalized: they were bodies without limbs. Yet, they continued to make mysterious and sexy facial expressions to intrigue the living viewer. In real life they are meant to seduce shoppers to come into the store and purchase something. The viewer is meant to be seduced by an inanimate object. McCarthy’s fear was constituted by how easily humans can be tricked. It is easy to confuse the animate and the inanimate, and to be seduced by inorganic objects. Abject fear resulted when he could no longer distinguish the border that defined him as a living human from objects which were mere simulations of human form.

Though they were kinetic, the figures in *The Garden* and *Cultural Gothic* came very close to the domain of the inanimate. Despite their movement, their status was much

¹³⁷ McCarthy, “Interview by Grady Turner,” *Flash Art* 34/217 (March/April 2001): 89.

closer to that of the mannequins featured in McCarthy's 1971 photographs. To even call the figures animate would in some ways be a misnomer. The figures were not self-animating, rather they were inanimate objects propelled by inhuman motors separate from them. (They could be considered animate only in the way that the tire of a car could be considered animate.) The motion in *The Garden* and *Cultural Gothic* was paradoxically a reification of motion. It was absurd, not liberating, and it was mechanically repetitive, like a ritual that had lost its meaning. It was the kind of compulsive mechanical sexuality suggested earlier by Marcel Duchamp in *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915/1923) [fig. 3.14], an allegorical work in which a series of bachelors symbolized by men's trousers revolved in a circle driven by a chocolate grinder. The chocolate grinder was slang in French at the time for masturbation.¹³⁸ Humans in a theme-park culture became for McCarthy mere automatons compelled to an alienated sexuality that they pass on to their children.

The reified movement of *The Garden* and *Cultural Gothic* is compelling because of the place these works hold within McCarthy's oeuvre. As cited at the beginning of this chapter, McCarthy regarded these sculptures as surrogates for his own performative body while he took several years off from major performance work. That such overtly mechanical and artificial sculptures could act as a sufficient substitute for himself revealed McCarthy's cynical attitudes toward his identity and his body. Movement, the body, and sexuality, were all infected by the culture industry to the point that his only

¹³⁸ For the connections between masturbation, the chocolate grinder, and Duchamp's critique of painting see: Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* [1984], Trans. Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 173-178.

resistance possible was to make sculptures that were perverted, though they did not actually break from the form of theme-park aesthetics. McCarthy's earliest performances re-vitalized the body as he experienced nature. Therefore, his shift to the automatons of *The Garden* and *Cultural Gothic* represented an intra-psychical crisis. When McCarthy returned to full-time performance art shortly after these kinetic sculptures, this devitalized view of the body remained operative. In *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*, analyzed in the following chapter, McCarthy, two dummies (which were his props in the performance), and the audience members all wore identical Disney's *Pinocchio* masks and costumes. At times it was difficult to tell which figure was McCarthy and which one were the inanimate dummies.



Fig. 3.1 *The Garden*, 1992, wood, fiberglass, motors, latex rubber, foam rubber, wigs, clothing, artificial turf, rocks and trees, 30 x 20 x 22 feet. Collection of Jeffrey Deitch, New York, NY. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

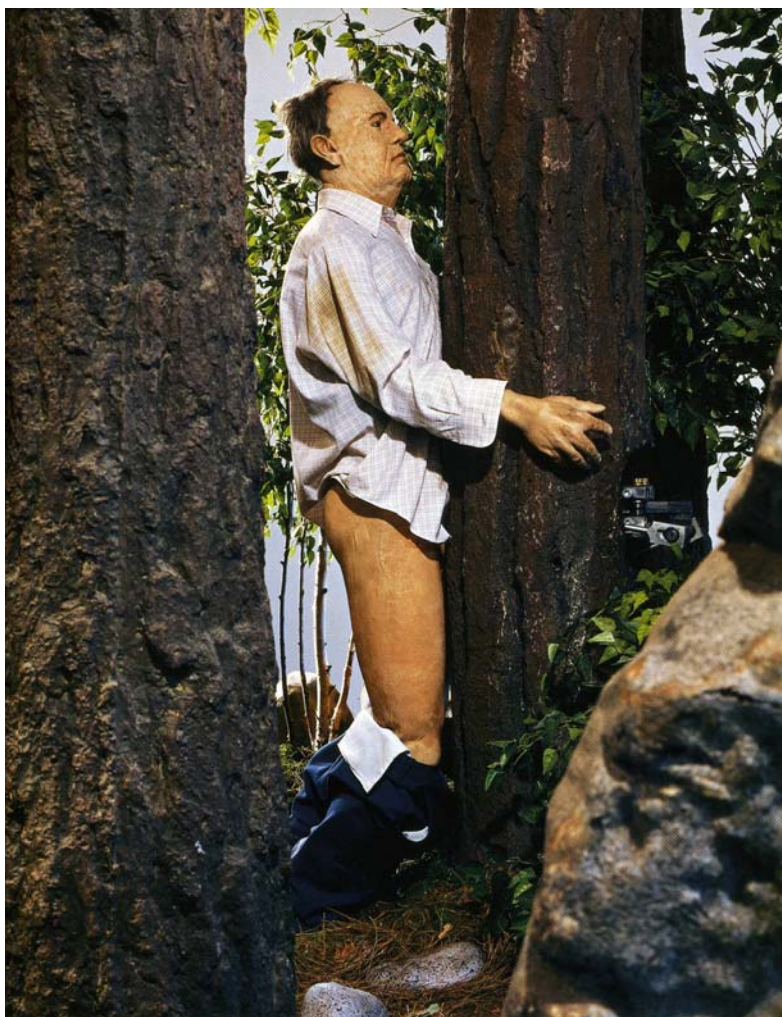


Fig. 3.2 detail of *The Garden*, 1992, showing figure and mechanical motor in tree. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 3.3 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, April 1970, Black basalt and limestone rocks and earth, length 1,500ft, Great Salt Lake, Utah. Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni, courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York. Art © Estate of Robert Smithson/VAGA, New York.



Fig. 3.4 *Mountain Bowling*, 1969-1970, performance, Salt Lake City, Utah, bowling ball. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

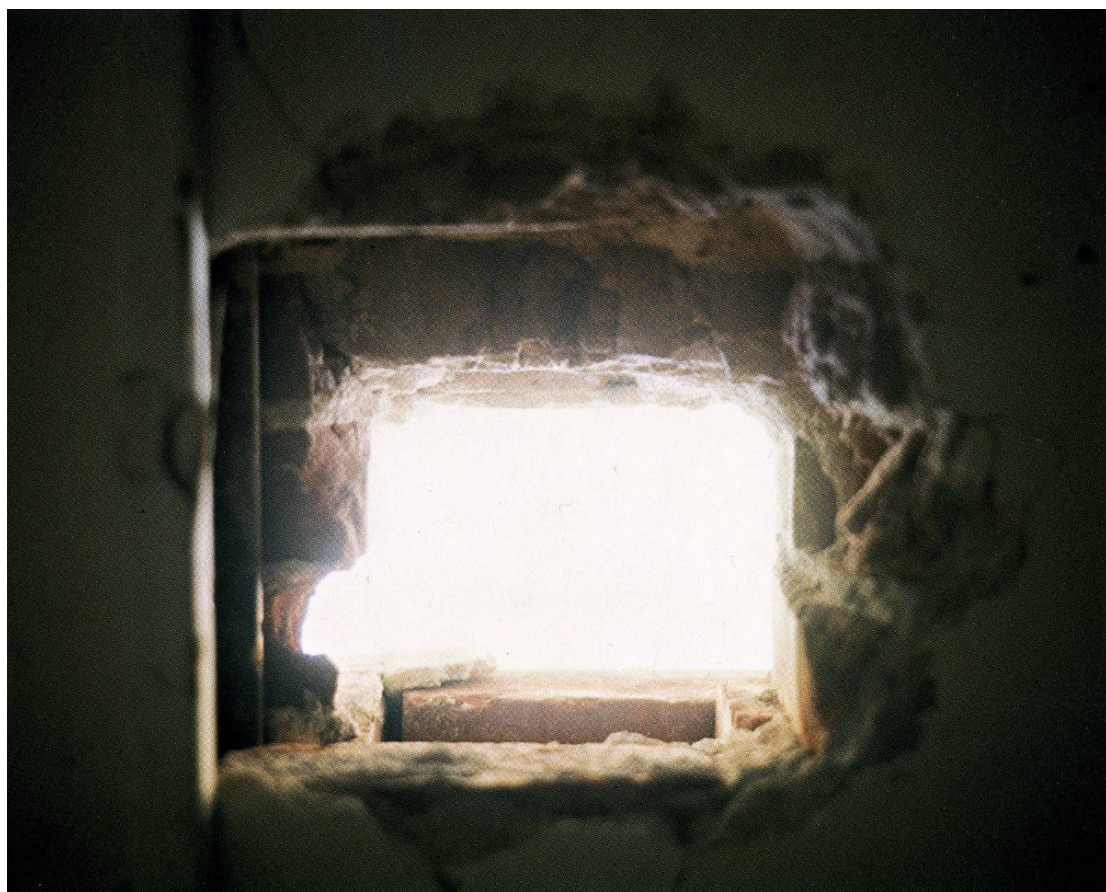


Fig. 3.5 *Making a Window Where There Is None*, 1970, Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

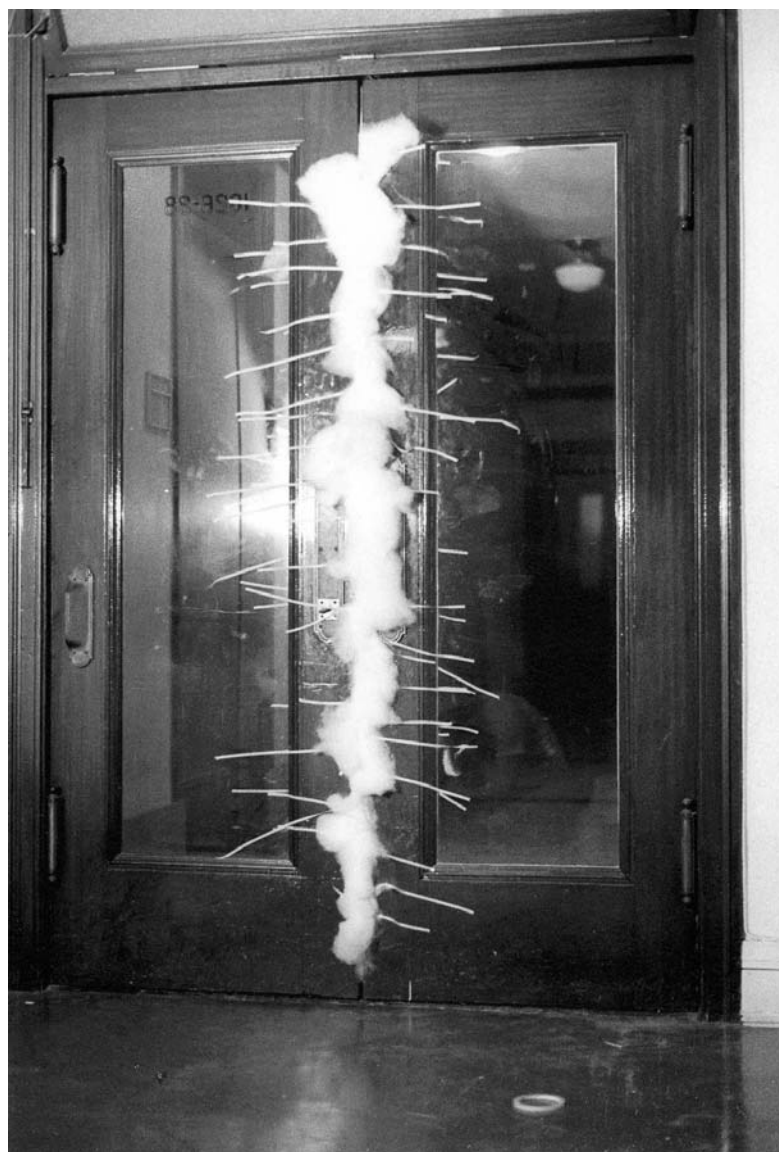


Fig. 3.6 *Cotton Door*, 1971, performance/video tape, Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 3.7 *Cultural Gothic*, 1992, metal, motors, fiberglass, clothing, compressor, urethane rubber, stuffed goat, 96 x 96 x 96 inches. Collection of the Rubell Family, Miami, FL. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 3.8 *Cultural Soup*, 1987, video, 6:59min. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 3.9 *Family Tyranny*, 1987, video, 8:18min. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 3.10 *Fear of Mannequins*, 1971, photographic series, Hollywood Boulevard. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

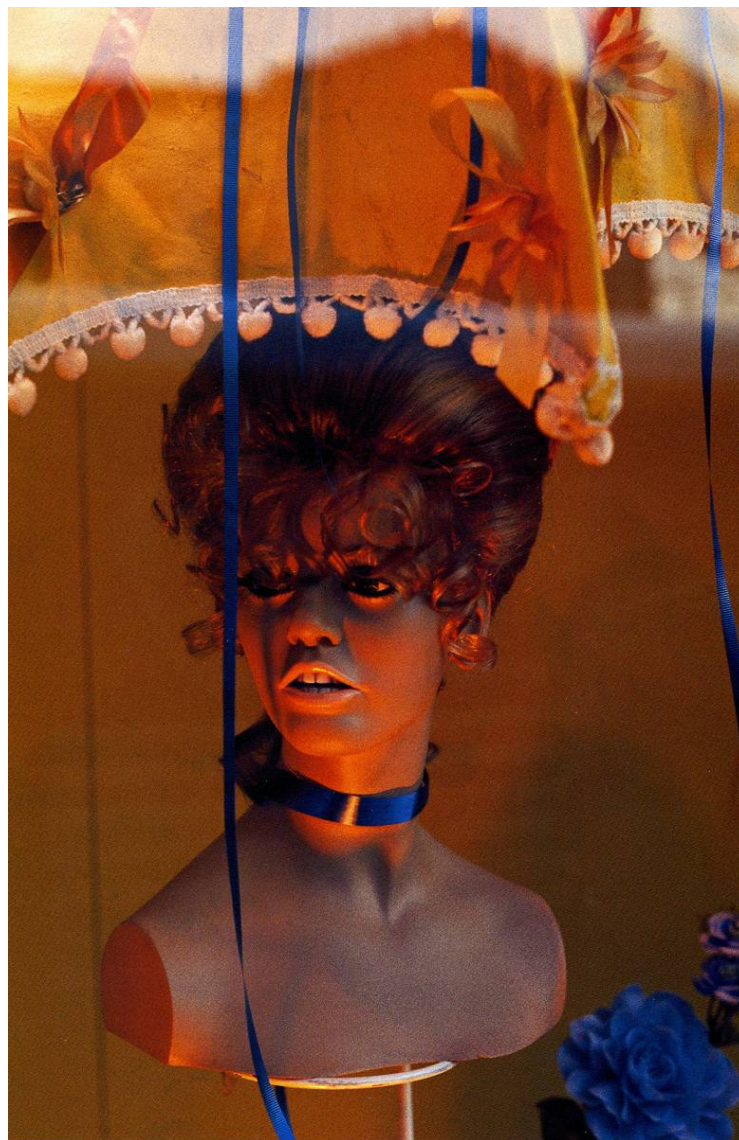


Fig. 3.11 *Fear of Mannequins*, 1971, photographic series, Hollywood Boulevard. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 3.12 Eugène Atget (1857-1927), *Magasin, avenue des Gobelins*, 1925. Gelatin silver printing-out-paper print, 8 1/4 x 6 1/2" (21 x 16.7 cm). Abbott-Levy Collection. Partial gift of Shirley C. Burden. (1.1969.1544) The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 3.13 Barbara Morgan, *Macy's Window*, 1939, natural montage, Willard and Barbara Morgan Archives. © Barbara Morgan Archive, Courtesy Bruce Silverstein Gallery.



Fig. 3.14 Marcel Duchamp, American (born France), 1887 – 1968. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. 1915-23. Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels. 9 feet 1 1/4 inches x 69 1/4 inches (277.5 x 175.9 cm). Made in: United States. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1952.

CHAPTER 4:
 THE ABJECT COLLAPSE OF THE ANIMATE AND THE INANIMATE IN
PINOCCHIO PIPENOSE HOUSEHOLDDILEMMA (1994)

Pinocchio Pipenose Householdlemma (1994)

In the video performance *Pinocchio Pipenose Householdlemma* (1994) [fig. 4.1] McCarthy was clad in a Disney's *Pinocchio* costume complete with a theme park-style mask. Inside a one-room wooden house with Swiss-cheese holes in the walls and roof, McCarthy opened various jars of ketchup and chocolate pudding, and later mayonnaise, and dipped his elongated pipe-nose into them. Often McCarthy uttered childish obscenities like: "He's going to put his big wee-wee in another hole." In a later scene a dummy wearing an identical outfit was introduced and fell victim to McCarthy's dry-humping and simulated sodomy. He force-fed condiments to the dummy through its pipe-nose while asking "Are you alright?" Still later, a second *Pinocchio* dummy was added into the drama. Finally the video ended with the McCarthy *Pinocchio* in bed shaking his head anxiously as if he were having a bad dream, but unable to ever close the wide eyes of his mask. When the video of this performance was exhibited publicly, the audience members were obliged to wear costumes and masks identical to the ones worn by McCarthy and the dummies.

Pinocchio was a potent image for McCarthy because the story resonated with so many themes already operative in his oeuvre: the problem of developing an identity, the pressure to conform to society, and sexual fears. In Disney's movie, Pinocchio was born a puppet, and hoped throughout the story to become a real boy; that is, he was born as a product, a reified object---like the doll in McCarthy's *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982) (see Chapter 2)---but he desired to become an authentic human. In the end of the Disney film, Pinocchio was magically transformed from a puppet into a real boy, which is to say, he became just like everyone else. McCarthy's performance in *Pinocchio Pipenose Householdilemma* was a self-defeating attempt at becoming an authentic individual in a society of conformity.¹³⁹ He performed a visceral ritual against consumer culture, but did so wearing a mask that paradoxically made him look like a product of the culture industry. In this chapter I analyze this work in light of my thesis regarding the role of commodity abjection in McCarthy's work. Abjection is always an ambiguous crossing of borders. In this case, the performance crossed the border between the animate and the inanimate as McCarthy's status as human or commodity was often difficult to discern. This work was a way for McCarthy to try to ward off his fear of being psychically reified into an inanimate consumer product, but it paradoxically transformed both performer and audience into consumer products.

¹³⁹ McCarthy's work has often presented the same story. In my analysis of *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982) in Chapter 2, I argued that McCarthy's performance rescripted his own birth and effectively showed that he was born as a product in a consumer society, ready to consume and to be consumed. There was no escaping this fate since his parents were already consumers conditioned by consumer culture. McCarthy's visceral performance was an attempt to feel something authentic, something not meditated by the culture industry. The lessons of *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* were retold in the scatological food performance of *Pinocchio Pipenose Householdilemma*.

Visceral Defense against Cultural Conditioning

The biggest fear for McCarthy was that the cultural conditioning of films like Disney's *Pinocchio* would turn him into an inhuman automaton like those in his sculpture *The Garden* discussed in Chapter 3. He said: "In a lot of cases it's because my work is related to the body and concerned with animate and inanimate objects. In my case it relates to a fear of the virtual, the fear of being unable to discern a real human from a mannequin."¹⁴⁰ This fear was played out frequently in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*. It was often difficult to distinguish which *Pinocchio* was the performer and which ones were the dummies. In the guise of a product of the culture industry, McCarthy conducted a ritual of abjection to expel the aspects of consumer culture that threatened his identity, particularly with regard to his identity as an organic human.

McCarthy's antidote to the problem of dehumanization in a consumer culture was to try to inject his work with visceral, scatological actions: "My actions are visceral; I want [the work] to be visceral."¹⁴¹ Critic Tom Holbert argued that the scatological and sexual imagery in the work was a defense against the loss of the human feeling in culture at large:

The visceral experience has become the ideal of a specific druglike high that one looks for in extreme sports.... At the same time, to 'want' this visceral experience destroys the ideal of the *jouissance* that leads to the

¹⁴⁰ McCarthy, "Interview by Grady Turner," *Flash Art* 34/217 (March/April 2001): 89.

¹⁴¹ McCarthy quoted in Tom Holbert, "Schooled for Scandal." [pre-review of New Museum show] Trans from German by Mark Georgiev. *Artforum* 39/3, (November 2000): 140.

realm of the real. In a way, McCarthy is acting out the embarrassment of desiring and constructing the thrills of superauthentic experiences. He is showing the utter helplessness and absurdity of the pursuit of a state of ultimate viscosity.”¹⁴²

McCarthy said his work was a “search for a basic kind of activity” and, as Holbert has correctly contended, that statement should not be read as a primitivist impulse, but rather, as a struggle to gain “unmediated knowledge of the mechanisms of desire in the exaggerated presentation of that crossover between media reality and trauma.”¹⁴³ In order for McCarthy himself to fight the cultural conditioning of media and the entertainment industry, he enacted a scatological performance. Like a child who soils his diaper in a refusal to conform to the clean world of the parents who potty train him, he fouled the sanitized image of Disney in order to ward off its effects; or to use the language of Julia Kristeva that I have employed throughout this dissertation, through the bodily ritual of abjection he expelled those elements which threatened to encroach on his own sense of autonomy.

McCarthy was trying to ward off the power that Disney films and the culture industry in general have to instill certain values and on mass scale. Violence and fear were overt in McCarthy’s *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*, and he argued in an interview that these dark aspects were already latent in the Disney version of the story. In Disney’s *Pinocchio*, children who drank and smoked were transformed into donkeys, and Pinocchio’s nose grew bigger if he lied. McCarthy said:

¹⁴² Holbert, 140.

¹⁴³ Holbert, 139.

I think kids are afraid of Pinocchio. A lot of people's relationship to the story is one of fear. When the boy lies, he is physically transformed. He has an erection on his face. At one point he receives donkey ears and a tail, the fear of becoming an animal, the fear of transforming, the losing of control. The loss of control takes place in a carnival, carnival as hell. He goes to hell. [...] You're a young boy and you suddenly, inappropriately have an erection in public.¹⁴⁴

In so far as dominant culture's values are transmitted via the culture industry, a collective super-ego is formed by the threats posed in children's movies and television programming. Disney's *Pinocchio* acted for McCarthy and his generation as a collective castrating father. McCarthy in turn rescripted the trauma of that conditioning in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* by becoming the one that transmitted those threats, rather than being the victim of them.¹⁴⁵

Pinocchio was a simulated human, a puppet who wanted to become a real boy, but McCarthy never became truly human in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*. Despite all of the visceral actions of the performance, his mask never came off. The mask could not come off, because he had no authentic experience to which he could escape. He had been raised on consumer culture, and it had constructed his identity the way parents' conditioning does. McCarthy's actions in the performance were analogous to a child throwing a temper tantrum, not simply because he mimicked immature behavior, but rather, because a tantrum is a child's only available option in the face of a parental rule or demand that causes him displeasure. McCarthy in the house of *Pinocchio Pipenose*

¹⁴⁴ McCarthy, "Interview with James Rondeau," *Paul McCarthy at Tate Modern* [exhibition catalogue], (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 182.

¹⁴⁵ Again I am using Robert Stoller's work on rescripting and perversion cited in Chapter 2. Importantly he called perversion an erotic form of hatred. Sexual gratification in the performance was gained through the anal rage of sadistic acts such as forced sodomy.

Householddilemma was a child fatalistically trapped: no matter how hard he cried and no matter how big of a scatological mess he made, he could not leave his home or escape conditioning of mass culture. Such is the predicament of abjection in which the subject expels those very things which constitute the self in order to establish one's identity.

Consumer Masks and Bodily Ritual

In *Pinocchio Pipenose Householddilemma* the identical masks worn by the performer, the dummies and the audience rendered all parties into mass-produced Disney products.¹⁴⁶ McCarthy presented cultural conditioning through the entertainment industry as a force that reified people by pressuring them all to conform. His mask in *Pinocchio Pipenose Householddilemma* served a dialectical function. It was an apotropaic object, that is, an image of the reification that McCarthy feared and was used by him in a ritual meant to ward off that reification; and yet by wearing the mask he actualized that very fear by conforming to a mass produced image and thereby eroding his own subjectivity.¹⁴⁷ The function of the masks therefore contributed to the aspect of the

¹⁴⁶ Iwona Blazwick pointed out (following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Primacy of Perception*) that we normally live in each other's facial expressions, but masks, particularly those in *Pinocchio Pipenose Householddilemma*, "deny access to fundamental aspects of human communication and empathy." (Iwona Blazwick, "Masks, Statues and Automata: Paul McCarthy as Figurative Sculptor," in *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966-2006* [exhibition catalogue], (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2006), 25.) Masks, Blazwick asserted, make McCarthy half-human and half cartoon. Quoting Ralph Rugoff, she continued: "McCarthy's use of masks invoked a stereotyped identity, submerging his individuality into anonymity of mass production and mass culture." (Rugoff, quoted in Blazwick, 26). The mask restricted his vision, made it difficult to breathe, and most of all obscured human contact; Blazwick argued that this is McCarthy's commentary on mass culture. (Blazwick, 26.)

¹⁴⁷ The aspect of mass production was underscored not only by the identical nature of the masks, but also by their machine-like design. The perfectly cylindrical pipenoses looked like red industrial pipes, and lacked the organic quality of the red phallic nose used on one of the masks in Stanley Kubrick's equally sexually aggressive film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

performance that I have been calling commodity abjection. McCarthy's visceral and apotropaic performance had the look of a primitive ritual, but in the end it had no magical significance and only furthered the abject confusion between animate and inanimate.

I raise this point about magic ritual because Thomas McEvilley and Iwona Blazwick¹⁴⁸ claimed that when McCarthy wore a mask it evoked ancient pagan and shamanistic traditions. However, McCarthy's masks also emphasized what he perceived to be the totalizing conformity of consumer culture. While McCarthy's work was not directly informed by the writings of Frankfurt School Marxists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, I believe their work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides a better theoretical model for understanding *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*. In that work Adorno and Horkheimer addressed the dialectic of ritual and consumer culture. According to them the shaman wore various masks representing a multiplicity of spirits, because shamanism did not presuppose the unity of the subject or of nature. Unlike the shaman's masks, the masks in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* all looked the same and were in turn modeled after the character from the Disney film. As opposed to the multiplicity of spirits in shamanism, Adorno and Horkheimer claimed that consumer society does presuppose a unity of the subject and by doing so it proclaims the rights of the individual (whether in the language of "inalienable rights" or "consumer choice") while paradoxically coercing those individuals into conformity.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Iwona Blazwick and Thomas McEvilley in *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966-2006*, cat., 25 and 35-50.

¹⁴⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer wrote: "Enlightenment dissolves away the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery, but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation, by relating every existing thing to every other. ...it amputates the incommensurable. Not merely are qualities dissolved

Each mask in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*---McCarthy's, the dummies', and even the audience's---was identical. As such they were exchangeable, so none of them had any intrinsic value. The singularity of McCarthy's body, by contrast, was presented as a counter to the masks' serial nature. His body's singularity was akin to the singularity of a sacrificial offering in a magic ritual. Adorno and Horkheimer noted that in the logic of magic (as opposed to the logic of consumer culture) the arbitrariness of the specimen to be sacrificed is coupled with the uniqueness of the chosen victim who is given a representative status that is "non-exchangeable even in the exchange."¹⁵⁰ The body in McCarthy's work echoed this non-exchangeable aspect of magic ritual. He has, in fact, stressed the point that it is *his* body under the mask in his performances (a point missed in the literature which described the body in his work as merely a social body).¹⁵¹

in thought, but human beings are forced into real conformity. The blessing that the market does not ask about birth is paid for in the exchange society by the fact that the possibilities conferred by birth are molded to fit the production of goods that can be bought on the market. Each human being has been endowed with a self of his or her own, different from all the others, so that it could all the more surely be made the same. But because that self never quite fitted the mold, enlightenment throughout the liberalistic period has always sympathized with social coercion. The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual and in the scorn poured on the type of society which could make people into individuals" (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments* [1944/47], ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8-9).

An immanent critique of enlightenment relevant to an analysis of McCarthy, because the bourgeois economy and the shift from competitive to corporate capitalism (what Jameson following Ernest Mandel calls "late capitalism") are both outcomes of enlightenment thinking according to Adorno and Horkheimer. In fact, the enlightenment was initiated as a way for the emerging bourgeoisie to claim rights within their society. In short, enlightenment is tied to its material conditions, and those material conditions are those of capitalism, which is both operative and under critique within McCarthy's work.

¹⁵⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, 7.

¹⁵¹ As he stated in a recent interview regarding a work in which he played U.S. president George W. Bush: "I'm making a point here that it's me under the mask. I'm riding a double line: I present Bush as having a pathology, and, as it happens this pathology has connections to my own pathology, my obsessions and concerns" (McCarthy, "Paul McCarthy talks about *Piccadilly Circus*, 2003," *Art Forum* 452/5, (January 2004): 123).

However, the singularity of McCarthy's non-exchangeable body was subverted through the conformity of that body to an ever-sameness of the inanimate and iconic mask. By wearing the mass-produced, pop culture mask, the singularity of his performance was funneled through what Adorno and Horkheimer called the "universal fungibility" of consumer culture.¹⁵² Counter to the multiplicity of animism, everything in consumer society is reduced to an exchange value, including human life and labor:

Individuals shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them. Animism endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things. On its own account, even in advance of total planning, the economic apparatus endows commodities with the values which decide the behavior of people. Since, with the ending of free exchange, commodities have forfeited all economic qualities except their fetish character, this character has spread like a cataract across the life of society in all its aspects. The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behavior on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one. Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures.¹⁵³

McCarthy's unique body in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household Dilemma* became standardized by the Disney mask and costume.

The problem of universal fungibility operative in McCarthy's work had its precedent in Pop art. In the quotation above, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote that universal fungibility made possible the totalizing effects of capitalism in advance of total planning. This was the very phenomenon that Warhol described in the quotation I

¹⁵¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, 7.

¹⁵² Adorno and Horkheimer, 7. The fungibility was manifest in the bourgeois exchange economy in which exchange value becomes the use value, resulting in the fetishizing of commodity that distances the consumer from the labor of the producer.

¹⁵³ Adorno and Horkheimer, 21.

referenced in Chapter 2, albeit in less critical terms, when he said that in the United States “Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we’re getting more and more that way,”¹⁵⁴ even in the absence of communism’s total planning. Warhol’s Coke bottles and Campbell’s soup cans were emblematic of his claim that everyone acts and eats alike. While Warhol said that he thought everybody should look like everybody else, it was to McCarthy’s “horror,” in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* that everyone really did look alike: performer, inanimate dolls, and audience members all wore identical Pinocchio costumes, the readymade design of which was provided by the culture industry. His visceral ritual did nothing to mitigate that fact. Even the visceral elements were mass-produced, identical and fungible: cans of pudding, jars and bottles of mayonnaise and ketchup.

Abjection and Architecture

In the “household” dilemma of *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* the tiny one-room wooden house with holes like Swiss-cheese was a metaphor for the body and the psyche, and a place which stifled the potential for an authentic bodily or psychological experience. McCarthy described the ways in which the architecture of the piece played a similar role as the mask, acting as a body, with an inside and an outside, and holes that show the body’s permeability:

¹⁵⁴ Andy Warhol, “Interview by Gene Swenson” [1963], in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 747.

...the...masks create this shell around you. You look out the eye holes from the inside. The body has to do with inside and outside in that we perceive the outside from inside but we can't perceive the inside from outside. The internal functions of the body are housed inside this mysterious sack. The architecture of the body, with its orifices and holes leading in, has to do with what we understand and what we have access to.¹⁵⁵

The architecture of the work represented both the body and household. The body and home are places where familial trauma and social trauma were acted out, and like the mask, the reification of the body as house blurred the line between animate and inanimate. The body, both literally (the body of McCarthy the performer) and figuratively (the architecture as a body) became the site McCarthy's ritual of abjection; but paradoxically both of those figurative and literal bodies were also representative of the social conditioning in a consumer society that was meant to be expelled through the ritual.

Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott claimed that in order for true creativity to happen, and for a child to make the transition from internal fantasy to outer reality, his or her home had to be a "facilitating environment," that is, a place that is nurturing so that the child could feel safe to explore new ideas and test them out on real objects.¹⁵⁶ The house in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household* was not a facilitating environment, and it was not a place where McCarthy could actualize individual creativity. Instead, he described the set of this performance as a place which trapped him and reinforced repetition rather than transition:

¹⁵⁵ Paul McCarthy, "Interview by Grady T. Turner," 89.

¹⁵⁶ See D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* [1975], (London: Routledge, 2002).

Within the figure also exists the character which reverts to a kind of repetition that only points to some notion of survival. In *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*, within the architecture of our surroundings exists the dilemma. For me there is no solution except for a kind of numbness, or to live with the acceptance. The undulating and convoluted repetition. The character is trapped: trapped in its surroundings. [...] ...the character...just goes from dilemma to dilemma.¹⁵⁷

Though the architecture was permeable, it was still inescapable. It trapped the performer in a prison of conformity. McCarthy's description of the house as analogous to the mask further reinforced the notion that the home is a place of conformity and coercion, where the child's instincts are repressed and he is molded into an automaton. In this environment he was unable to make the transition to reality and instead kept feeding, talking to, and copulating with the dummies as if they were real people.

Costumes and Conformity: Role of Audience in Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma

Outside of the architecture the situation was just as dire. In Chapter 1 I argued that McCarthy's audience in *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* and *Tubbing* (1975) was reduced to a bunch of "couch potatoes" because they had to watch the performance via a television monitor. This situation was exacerbated in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*. The audience experienced the performance through a video recording, and the label on the videocassette read "This tape should be played in private situations to viewers wearing the PINOCCHIO costume suit delivered with the tape [...] Limited Edition: 25 Single Packs, 15 Couple Packs, 4 Party Packs."¹⁵⁸ The costume,

¹⁵⁷ McCarthy, "Interview with Stiles," *Paul McCarthy*, (London: Phaidon, 1996), 21

¹⁵⁸ Text quoted in Phaidon catalogue, p. 90.

identical to the performer and the dummies', included a Disney-version Pinocchio mask with a long pipe-nose [fig 4.2]. By including the audience, *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* became a microcosm of mass culture in which McCarthy played the part of the culture industry, rather than that of a passive consumer. He re-scripted his own trauma of social conditioning by becoming the force to which everyone was compelled to conform.¹⁵⁹ In that sense costumes constituted a virtual violence against the subjectivity of the individual audience members. Had one person chosen not to comply, then he or she would not have seen the performance, and would have been like the only child at school who did not get to go to Disneyland and could not therefore talk about it with the other children. The consumer elements expelled through McCarthy's process of abjection were projected onto the audience so that he could confuse their identity in a way that mirrored his own internal confusion.

Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma showed all the figures inside and outside of the household looking exactly the same as prefabricated Disney characters. Warhol's brand of Pop art had already brought the issue of serial repetition in consumer culture to the fore, as seen in his Campbell's soup cans and Brillo boxes. McCarthy's

¹⁵⁹ Giacinto Di Pietrantonio argued that whereas in earlier performances in the 1970s McCarthy's audience in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*: "shared the stage with the artist as props for the show...the audience shares the role of the leading player"; Di Pietrantonio connected this to Kaprow's *Happenings* which blurred the distinction between audience and art (Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, "Focus: *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*," Phaidon catalogue, 90.) However, the analogy to Kaprow in this instance is superficial. The audience members were not liberated from their roles as passive observers to active participants, rather, their positions as passive observers or consumers was reified. Rather than identify with the character in the video through a capacity for empathy, the audience is further alienated from him, and from each other, through repetition and conformity. Ralph Rugoff also noted how the role of Kaprow had changed in this piece. He wrote that this work: "...harks back to Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* of the early 1960s dissolving of the line separating audience and performer...but unlike Kaprow, McCarthy is less interested in breaking down the distinctions between art and life than in exploring the symbolic contagion of identity...the process of contamination by which living bodies become representations." (Rugoff, 50)

work was all the more chilling because he did not serialize inanimate objects, but the human performer and the human audience. His performance thereby realized the very fear he announced in the interview above of not being able to distinguish the human from the non-human. The coercion brought on by consumer culture was abject in that it blurred the boundary between the visceral body and an inanimate commodity.

The Waning of Affect and Schizoid Culture

In concluding this chapter I want to examine the affect described by McCarthy in one of the interviews that I cited above, and ultimately connect it to a claim, which I have made elsewhere in this dissertation, that his work signals a waning of art's capacity to be critical under late capitalism. Insofar as affect belongs to the individual, the waning of affect in McCarthy's work revealed that the stability of his sense of individual identity was deteriorating, as is the case in Julia Kristeva's account of abjection. The erosion of his sense of self was described by McCarthy as a symptom of the coercive effects of consumer culture.

For all the visceral actions intended to enable McCarthy to feel something, he said in the end that *Pinocchio Pipenose Householdilema* left him with a "kind of numbness" and a mere "acceptance" of the problems he saw:

Within the figure also exists the character which reverts to a kind of repetition that only points to some notion of survival. In *Pinocchio Pipenose Householdilema*, within the architecture of our surroundings exists the dilemma. For me there is no solution except for a kind of

numbness, or to live with the acceptance. The undulating and convoluted repetition.¹⁶⁰

In McCarthy's view of consumer society, a view that I have argued fellow-traveled with Adorno and Horkheimer's (though he arrived at his view intuitively and independently from their intellectual analysis), one is born a consumer, and raised by television culture and the entertainment industry. McCarthy's sense of subjectivity was confused by this upbringing. His abject fear of the inability to distinguish his animate body from the inanimate world of consumable objects resulted in his inability to know if his feelings were actually his or simulations from the media:

I think that in part my work does refer to my own private, forgotten or repressed memories and that I seem to play them out unconsciously in my actions. It is from those repetitions that I recognize them as existing, but I am not sure how they relate to me. Are they specifically my traumas, or someone else's that I have witnessed either directly or through the media?¹⁶¹

As already seen in Chapter 1 with regard to his mental confusion after the media coverage of the American war in Vietnam, McCarthy's trauma vis-à-vis media culture has resulted in disillusionment. In this instance he even suggested a slight break with reality insofar as he was unable to distinguish his memories from cultural images. McCarthy's confusion and inability to identify emotions could be described as what psychologists call alexithymia, that is, according to psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall's definition: "the specific inability of a person to name his emotional states or to recognize

¹⁶⁰ McCarthy, "Interview with Stiles," 21

¹⁶¹ McCarthy, "Interview with Stiles," 14.

the existence of his affectivity.”¹⁶² The flattening of affect in alexithymia reemerges as a psychosomatic disorder, and in McCarthy’s case led to what he described above as “undulating and convoluted repetition.”

The alexithymia or “numbness” that McCarthy experienced during his scatological ritual was symptomatic of what Frederic Jameson called the displacement or waning of affect in the postmodern era.¹⁶³ Jameson argued that in postmodernism there was a shift away from “Van Gogh-type madness” and concepts such as alienation and anxiety, to the flatness of Warhol’s images of stars such as Marilyn Monroe “who are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images.”¹⁶⁴ Jameson’s theory is particularly relevant here because as a Marxist, he linked this change in affect to the material conditions of commodity society. *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* is characteristic of this shift: the madness of the performance is no longer that of McCarthy, but McCarthy in the guise of a flat commercial product. Jameson wrote: “This shift in the

¹⁶² Joyce McDougall, *A Plea for a Measure of Abnormality*, (New York: International Universities Press, 1980), 437. Earlier views of alexithymia (such as Nemiah and Sifneos 1970 study “Psychosomatic illness: A problem in communication,” *Psychother. Psychosom.*, 18: 154-160) held that it was a personality defect. McDougall, however, argued that it could be a response to overwhelming affective experience and traumatic events” that could also be “within the capacity of anyone” (MacDougall, 438).

¹⁶³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991/2003), 3.

¹⁶⁴ Jameson, 11-14. In theory the depth models of Freud and Marx have been replaced with surface analyses of intertextuality. (Jameson, 12) This new postmodern flatness is not the exploration of the flat surface of the canvas as in Modernism, but a flattening of the psyche analogous to the flatness of images in commercial culture. Flatness becomes the dominant model and leads to a condition of schizophrenia in which there is a disconnect between affect and language, and between affect and image: “the ideal schizophrenic, indeed, is easy enough to please provided only an eternal presence is thrust before the eyes, which gaze with equal fascination on an old shoe or the tenaciously growing organic mystery of the human toenail.” (Jameson 10)

Postmodernism ended the dilemma of modernist subjectivity and the bourgeois ego as seen in Edvard Munch’s *Scream*, for instance, but it is also the “end of psychopathologies of that ego...waning of affect.” (Jameson 15).

dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation."¹⁶⁵

It is important to note that Jameson did not mean that psychopathologies have disappeared; rather, his claim was that it is harder to locate them in the postmodern era without a centered subject. McCarthy's doubt and confusion---"Are they specifically my traumas, or someone else's that I have witnessed either directly or through the media?"---revealed that he had trouble distinguishing his subjectivity from the rest of society. This meant that conversely his subjectivity was dispersed throughout consumer society. Thus it became harder for him to locate his emotions and traumas because he could not locate his sense of self.

Without a sense of subjectivity to house his affects his only defense was to feel numb, what he called a "solution." However, those affects still manifested themselves through the actions that he described as "undulating and convoluted repetition." Freud contrasted remembering and repetition. He observed that his patients acted-out repetitively things that they had repressed, that is, things they could not remember. The patient "cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering."¹⁶⁶ Freud's observations are helpful in light of McCarthy's claim that he could not remember which memories were his. He described

¹⁶⁵ Jameson, 14.

¹⁶⁶ "We may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through" [1914] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. XII, (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), 150).

the repetition in the performance of *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* as pointing to “some notion of survival.” The compulsion to repeat was a defense for him; in fact Freud pointed out that patients often preferred the repetition of repression to working-through as symptoms surfaced. He also noted that compulsion to repeat was particularly strong among his younger patients: “Young and childish people in particular are inclined to make the necessity imposed by the treatment for paying attention to their illness a welcome excuse for luxuriating in their symptoms.”¹⁶⁷ McCarthy seems to luxuriate in his symptoms (or what Kuspit called “fetishization of pathology”¹⁶⁸), and significantly his brand of repetition in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* was acted-out as childish behavior: taking on the guise of a Disney character, playing with food, and speaking about sexuality in childish terms such as “Daddy’s big wee-wee.”

Jameson observed in consumer culture the numbness, repetition, and inability to distinguish reality from simulation that is evident in McCarthy’s *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*. He therefore claimed that schizophrenia had become a dominant mode of being in postmodern culture. A philosopher’s diagnosis of schizophrenia may seem ridiculous and even insulting to those individuals and families who suffer from schizophrenia.¹⁶⁹ However, in psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s work, there is clinical justification for Jameson’s claims. Winnicott wrote about culture in a similar way, though

¹⁶⁷ Freud, 152-3.

¹⁶⁸ Kuspit, “Into the Anal Universe,”

¹⁶⁹ This is a diagnosis also given by Deleuze and Guattari as way to attack Freud: “a schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch...” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1972], Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. xvii). Their idealization of the schizophrenic is in fact a symptom of the schizophrenic state of culture that Jameson described.

used the less extreme, and perhaps more accurate form of the word “schizoid” meaning: “Of, relating to, or having a personality disorder marked by extreme shyness, flat affect, reclusiveness, discomfort with others, and an inability to form close relationships.”¹⁷⁰ In fact, many aspects of *Pinocchio Pipenose Household Dilemma* seemed to echo the definition of schizoid: McCarthy hid behind a mask that made him look like everyone else, he felt only numbness, and his art was about copulation with inanimate dummies rather than about human relationships. Winnicott continued by arguing that it is difficult to draw a distinct line between health and the schizoid state (or at times even between health and full-blown schizophrenia). One can even become successful in life, like McCarthy who was a professor at UCLA at the time of *Pinocchio Pipenose Household Dilemma* and is still a successful artist, while possessing schizoid tendencies.

People may be leading satisfactory lives and may do work that is even of exceptional value and yet may be schizoid or schizophrenic. They may be ill in a psychiatric sense because of a weak reality sense. To balance this one would have to state that there are others who are so firmly anchored in objectively perceived reality that they are ill in the opposite direction of being out of touch with the subjective world and with the creative approach to fact.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ schizoid. Dictionary.com. *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/schizoid> (accessed: August 10, 2008). Neither schizophrenia nor schizoid should to be confused with multiple personality disorder, though somehow the confusion of the two has made its way into popular parlance.

¹⁷¹ Winnicott, 66. Schizoids come to therapy, as all do, “...to achieve unit status or a state of time-space integration in which there is one self containing everything instead of dissociated elements that exist in compartments, or are scattered around and left lying about.” (Winnicott 67) Those scattered and dissociated elements could also be described as “beta elements” or “bizarre objects” using the language of psychoanalyst W.R. Bion whose work I reference in the following chapter.

Winnicott suggested that the problem of schizoid tendencies and mental illness in general could be the result of environmental factors, and thus affect people on a mass scale.¹⁷²

This moment in Winnicott's work opens the possibility for reading damage to psychic health on both an intra-psychic *and* social level, as Jameson was doing by locating schizoid tendencies within consumer society. It is precisely this double diagnosis that I am claiming is evident in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*.

Jameson's diagnosis of late capitalist culture as schizophrenic (what I am claiming should more accurately be described as schizoid), gives a clearer picture of McCarthy's problem in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*. The Pinocchio motif was important to McCarthy, because in the story Pinocchio was born as a puppet, a mere copy of a human: simulacrum was thus paradoxically anterior to reality.¹⁷³ Likewise

¹⁷² Factors such as having been dominated or humiliated at home, having survived a concentration camp, or having lived under the lifelong persecution of a cruel political regime can all seriously damage an individual's capacity for creativity. (Winnicott, 67). Winnicott cited French post-structuralist and social-historian Michel Foucault and claimed that creative living has not always existed, for example one thousand years ago. (70)

¹⁷³ A note on *Chocolate Blockhead Nosebar Outlet*: Pinocchio has made another significant appearance with the paradoxically monumental and inflatable *Blockhead* sculpture [fig. 4.3]. The *Blockhead* was an inflatable dark brown sculpture of a seated cartoon figure with a block head and a Pinocchio nose, and a reciprocal hole for a mouth. McCarthy remarked on the commercial aspects of the piece and the irony of a transient monument:

This type of inflatable is tied...to advertising. They're used for big companies---like McDonald's, Budweiser and Coors---for promotional events. They are used for film promotions, Spiderman, Godzilla, whatever. I'm trying to subvert inflatables---subvert them away from commercial spectacle. They can be about another dialogue---other issues, sculpture. [...] I am interested in inflatables being just a skin. They are an empty, hollow form. The scale can be monumental but temporary. They are here today and gone tomorrow (McCarthy, "Interview with James Rondeau," *Paul McCarthy at Tate Modern* [exhibition catalogue], London: Tate Publishing, 2003, 180).

McCarthy has described the piece as "a conglomerate of minimalism, architecture and cartoon." (182)

Drawings leading up to the final work show Pinocchio in a variety of phases including likeness of the character in Disney's film. A toilet was replaced by books in the final sculpture. There was also one in which McCarthy had an idea for a funnel in Pinocchio's head and a pipe between his legs that one could urinate: "Pinocchio is a urinal." (182) The theme is a repetition of earlier ones: that both art and consumer culture have been reduced to excrement.

McCarthy's dilemma in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* was that his subjectivity was constituted in and by a consumer culture (as evidenced by the fact that he had trouble distinguishing between his own feelings and those he witnessed in mass media), which by its nature runs counter to singularity. There was nothing original in McCarthy's performance. Everything was a copy of something else, even as he tried to assert an imitation of personal expression.¹⁷⁴ Mass culture for Adorno and Horkheimer, and I am arguing for McCarthy as well, was a form of decentralized social coercion on a mass scale, which happened all by itself as Warhol claimed. This coercive social situation set the stage for McCarthy's schizoid response in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*.

In a culture of conformity McCarthy lost the capacity for creative living as Winnicott claimed could happen in a schizoid society, but he also lost the potential for criticality. Lisa Philips's categorization of McCarthy's work as "pop expressionism" is a useful contradiction. Warhol's work hailed in a "new kind of flatness or depthlessness," a

At the base of the figure was a vending machine that sold only "Paul McCarthy's Chocolate Nose Bar," cylindrical chocolate bars that mimicked the Pinocchio-nose of the *Blockhead*. Photographs of a model opening and then consuming the bar reveal that when the consumer eats the bar it will appear that he or she has the elongated nose of Pinocchio, and it will also appear as if the consumer is sucking on a phallus (see [fig 4.4] The chocolate in this piece is meant to be identified, as in his performances, with excrement as revealed by a preliminary drawing which shows the sculpture defecating long bars onto which are written "giant turds." [fig. 4.5]

Blockhead and its vending machine appear to form a satirical commentary on Pop art. The large, puffy and playful sculpture of Claes Oldenburg, who also made large scale public works, is still large and puffy, but the forlorn, hybrid Blockhead looks resigned and dejected. The bright color of Oldenburg's Pop has been replaced with the dark aesthetic of minimalism. The vending machine full of identical nose bars turns egalitarianism into conformist totalitarianism. Furthermore, McCarthy's piece turns its consumer into a "sucker" who paid money to "fuck" him- or herself by sucking on the phallic/scatological chocolate bar.

¹⁷⁴ McCarthy in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* was like the replicants (androids who are nearly indistinguishable from organic humans) in Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* (1982) which is frequently cited in postmodern literature, such as Jameson's. Without a history of their own they clung to photographs of other people's memories. Likewise McCarthy is an American clinging to a childhood composed of mediated images. They mourn the loss of past they never had, and constantly try to act human by mimicking the emotions of other people. The story of the replicants is so compelling because it represents a crisis felt by subjects in real life in the postmodern world.

literal superficiality,¹⁷⁵ and the modernist exploration of depth psychology was replaced by surface depthlessness. Like Warhol's Pop art, McCarthy's *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* was a pastiche of readymade consumer forms, but it was also a pastiche of expressionism, a form of art which by its very nature was supposed to signal the presence of an authentic subject. He was incapable of expressing authentic emotion, because as he said, he did not feel emotion, he felt numb. The prevalence of pastiche, as opposed to parody, signals art's inability to be critical under late capitalism---a period in which the celebration of the individual in classical capitalism has been replaced by a homogenizing corporate and bureaucratic structure¹⁷⁶---as Jameson suggested in relation to Warhol. In the quotation below Warhol's name could be easily substituted with McCarthy's, and his soup cans and Coke bottles for the masks in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*:

...one of the central issues about postmodernism itself and its possible political dimensions: Andy Warhol's work in fact turns centrally around commodification...Coca-Cola bottle or Campbell's soup can, which

¹⁷⁵ I prefer Jameson's term "depthlessness" to flatness: flatness could be confused with the modernist credo, whereas depthlessness by contrast emphasizes both the flat surface of the image and the flattening of affect and psychical space. This loss of interiority in art was later addressed at "The Fate of Interiority in Modern and Postmodern Art" a conference organized by Jessica Thomas and held at Stony Brook Manhattan on March 5, 2005 which included contributions by Donald Kuspit, Francis O'Connor, Steven Poser, and Sue Taylor, and for which I was the moderator.

¹⁷⁶ Using terms borrowed from the German Marxist Ernest Mandel, Jameson contrasted late, multinational or corporate capitalism with the earlier phase of classical or competitive capitalism (Jameson 3-4). As Jameson wrote in his 1982 essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" originally delivered as a lecture at the Whitney Museum of Art:

...yes, once upon a time, in the classic age of competitive capitalism, in the heyday of the nuclear family and the emergence of the bourgeoisie as the hegemonic class, there was such a thing as individualism, as individual subjects. But today, in the age of corporate capitalism, of the so-called organization man, of bureaucracies in business as well as in the state, of demographic explosion---today, that older bourgeois subject no longer exists (Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, 115).

explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital, ought to be powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, then one would surely want to know why, and one would want to begin to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or critical art in the postmodern period of late capital.¹⁷⁷

Abjection is a process by which subjectivity is constituted through a defensive expulsion of that which is alien to it. McCarthy sensed that consumer culture was alien to his true self, but when he was unable to distinguish between psychological events that were his, from those that were from the media, it became difficult to establish his self's border. His fear of the inability to distinguish the animate from the inanimate (or, using terms of Winnicott whose work I reference above, the "me" from the "not-me") as realized in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household Dilemma* as his interior reality mirrored the artificial mask that shaped his exterior. With the lines between interior and exterior, and animate and inanimate dissolved, his sense of self was no longer separate from consumer society, and the former's critical distance from the latter collapsed. The dilemma of *Pinocchio Pipenose Household Dilemma* was that the performance reinforced the very aspects of conformity and reification that its visceral actions were meant to subvert.

¹⁷⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 9.



Fig 4.1 *Pinocchio Pipenose Householdilemma*, 1994, performance/video/installation, 43:58min, Villa Arson, Nice, France. Collection of Contemporary Art Fundacio "la Caixa," Barcelona, Spain. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig 4.2 Audience watching a video recording of *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma*, 1994. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 4.3 *Chocolate Blockhead Nosebar Outlet*, 2000, steel, vinyl coated nylon fabric, fans, wood, refrigerated dispensing machines, chocolate bars, paint, glass, rope; foundation 60 feet 11 inches x 52 feet 2 ½ inches; inflatable, 85 feet x 37 feet x 56 feet. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig 4.4 *Blockhead* customer eating “Paul McCarthy’s Chocolate Nose Bar,” 2000. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

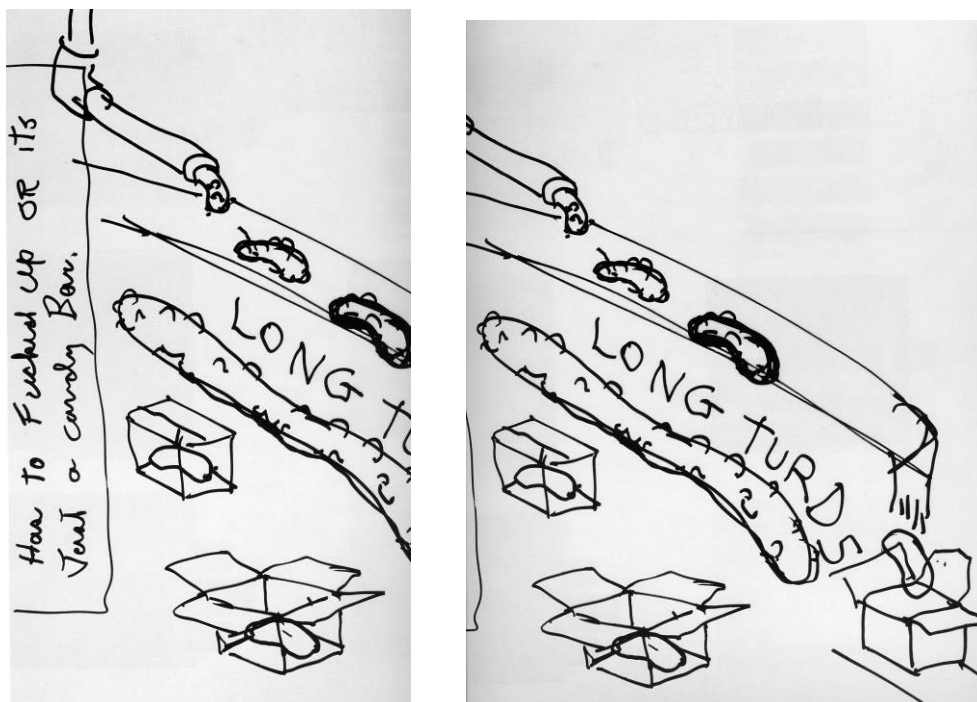


Fig. 4.5 *Long Turds*, 1999, Marker on velum, 19x24in. Preliminary sketch for *Chocolate Blockhead Nosebar Outlet*, 2000. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

CHAPTER 5:

PAINTER (1995) AS SELF-PORTRAIT AND SELF LOATHING

Painter (1995) was a video performance in which McCarthy simultaneously parodied his father, the art world, and consumer culture, and he effectively equated all three with excrement. The whole scene was made to look like a children's television art show, though the painter who was supposed to be teaching was the one acting like a child. This work was a culmination of many of the themes discussed in this dissertation, but most of all it was a pastiche of expressionism, like *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* (Chapter 4), that again signaled the incapacity of art to be critical in a consumer society (in contrast to the criticality of avant-garde art during modernism). This time commodity culture was shown not only to have infected McCarthy's sense of self and his family life, but art as well. By parodying specific artists, and collectors and dealers in general, he explicitly addressed the commercial sale of art in the gallery system. In this chapter I analyze *Painter* in light of my thesis regarding commodity abjection. While this work was a parody of family members and artists, I argue that it ultimately was a cynical parody of himself, his artistic practice and his commercial success. In *Painter* McCarthy projected his internal hostility into his representations of his father, artists and collectors, but then perceived the aggression as coming from them

rather, than from himself. The work was utterly abject because he was trying to expel and mock the very elements that constituted his own identity.

Painter (1995)

In *Painter (1995)* [fig 5.1] McCarthy wore a blonde wig styled similar to Willem de Kooning's hair, a giant bulbous nose, painter's gloves enlarged to the size of a cartoon character's hands, and a painter's smock. The performance imitated an art instruction television show for children. It began with McCarthy giving directions into the camera's lens in a patronizing tone as if talking down to a child, though his speech was slurred and at times unintelligible. Most of the performance took place in one room with faux wood paneling, but every once in a while he would step out of the room into the hallway or the bedroom across the hall. As the camera followed the viewer could see that the painter's studio was part of a cheaply built suburban home.

Throughout the performance McCarthy painted with paint and condiments on giant canvases. He used brushes as tall as he and other oversized phallic objects pivoted against his crotch. While performing these actions he would make bizarre noises and speak absurd phrases. On several occasions he chanted "Dekoooooning" like a howling coyote. At another point while playing with a canvas he kept singing: "If the women could see me now, my boy, pop goes the weasel."

McCarthy gave instructions on mixing "paint" (mayonnaise and ketchup) while whimpering like a little child. He was surrounded by several puffy paint tubes each taller than him, labeled "RED," "BLUE," "BLACK," and "SHIT." He threw the RED tube on a

table, cut it down the middle like a surgeon opening a chest cavity, and then poured black paint into it. Later, after squatting over a fake office plant in the bedroom and urinating, he went into the hallway and drove his arm in and out of the SHIT tube for several minutes. A disturbing, sloshing sound could be heard.

One of the most significant moments in the performance was a scene in which McCarthy cut his cartoon hand with a butcher knife. In the hallway he held one finger of his cartoon glove out from under his smock to make it look like a penis and dipped the tip in red paint to simulate the glans. Then he walked back in the studio and fell asleep standing up, and snored loudly. Sleepwalking he sat down at a table and started stabbing his fingers. Waking up and whimpering he began to hack the former penis-finger with a butcher knife [fig. 5.2]. Eventually his whimpering gave way to laughter and then fascination with his destruction. He kept chopping the finger-penis repeatedly for several minutes longer until finally he simply pulled off what was left.

The film cut back and forth between the performance described above and two other locations: his art dealer's office and a televised talk show with two collectors and a host. His dealer (played by American performance artist Barbara T. Smith) wore a similar bulbous nose. He told her that he had shows in Europe and he threw a temper tantrum while demanding more money. At times he crawled around on the floor like a toddler, and made loud "Bronx cheers" whenever she tried to speak. In a later scene on the set of the fake talk show, two collectors, a woman from Germany and her husband from California, gave a laundry list of the work they owned by El Lizzitsky, Mark Rothko,

Mike Kelley, Gerhard Richter, and Martin Kippenberger. McCarthy sat quietly and listened.

The video ended with the messy painter in the living room of his home with his dealer. A line of collectors were outside his door. One of them came in, and the painter got on a table and bent over. While the painter stared off looking bored, the collector sniffed his bare anus for about a minute with his bulbous nose. Finally the collector got up. Enthralled with his experience, he smiled to the dealer, and said approvingly that it was “Very nice!”

Painter was partially funded by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. When it was shown at the Museum, some paintings from the performance remained on the set while others were hung on the gallery walls.¹⁷⁸

Parodies of the Father

As previously cited in Chapter 2, psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel observed that the pervert’s world is always at once a rejection and parody of the father’s world.¹⁷⁹ Both McCarthy’s biological father and his father-figures in the art world were parodied in *Painter*, and both were shown to be vulgar products of commodity culture.

¹⁷⁸ Ralph Rugoff pointed out the result was that their status as props or sanctified works of art was ambiguous. Drawings produced during the piece were also shown. They were theatrical, appearing to be unconscious imagery, but actually referred to the performance; the viewer, Rugoff claimed, had to reconnect the past and present like a psychoanalyst (Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” *Paul McCarthy*, (London: Phaidon, 1996), 72).

¹⁷⁹ Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 11.

The worlds of the father, of art, and of commerce were all reduced to excrement, which is the final outcome of the anal-sadistic universe as Chasseguet-Smirgel described it. The associations made between his father and commodities show how deeply personal the problems of consumer culture were for McCarthy. He identified with those consumer elements as they had come to constitute part of his identity; but then he attempted the impossible task of trying to abject or expel those elements from his psyche through his visceral performance.

Parody of the Father

In *Painter* ketchup and the butcher knife were two symbols employed to mock the world of his father. McCarthy's father was a grocery store butcher who "put ketchup on everything."¹⁸⁰ In Chapter 2 I argued that McCarthy's work was a way of rescripting the early childhood trauma of seeing his father in a bloody butcher's apron¹⁸¹ so that McCarthy could play the terrifying butcher rather than the scared child. This same intrapsychical strategy was operative in *Painter*. Nearly twenty years after *Contemporary Cure All* (1978), McCarthy was still reenacting the same traumas. As Robert Stoller claimed, and as I suggested in the previous chapter with regard to *Pinocchio Pipenose*

¹⁸⁰ McCarthy, "original manuscript of 'A Dialogue with Language Itself' Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy," pp. 120-134.

¹⁸¹ McCarthy, "original manuscript of 'A Dialogue with Language Itself' Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy," pp. 120-134.

Householddilemma, rescripting trauma is not what Freud called “working-through,” rather it is repetition. McCarthy recognized the repetition of his work and even went so far as to call it a “kind of solution” to trauma.¹⁸²

In *Painter* McCarthy played a butcher who cut up his own fingers, one of which had been painted previously in the performance to look like a penis. The cutting was a highly ambivalent act (akin to the patricidal/self-punishing symbolism of his cutting of the mask that represented his grandfather in *Contemporary Cure All* analyzed in Chapter 2). In one respect, McCarthy was castrating his father by chopping his father’s hand; but in another respect, by playing his father he was also castrating himself. In this scene of self-mutilation McCarthy had fallen victim to what psychoanalyst W.R.D. Fairbairn would have called his “internal saboteur.”¹⁸³ The internalized and repressed threatening aspects of his father caused himself to denigrate himself to the point that he tried to destroy himself.

Ketchup is a condiment that McCarthy associated with his father. It was used in *Painter* to represent violence, as when he cut himself with the butcher knife, but also to mimic mature masculine sexuality. Frequently, as he had done in past performances, such as *Grand Pop* (1977) [fig. 2.2] and *Karen Ketchup Dream* (1975) [fig. 2.3], McCarthy held the ketchup bottle like a penis as he squirted or poured out its contents.

¹⁸² McCarthy, “Interview with Stiles,” *Paul McCarthy*, (London: Phaidon, 1996), 21

¹⁸³ W.R.D. Fairbairn, “The Repression and the Return of Bad Objects” [1943], in *An Object-Relations Theory of Personality*, New York: Basic Books, 1954, pp. 59-81, cited in Michael St. Claire, *Object Relations and Self-Psychology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 55-56.

McCarthy's parody of his father was a childish substitute for mature genital sexuality. The sexual nature of the parody was evident not only through the phallic imagery of the glove's penis-finger and the ketchup ejaculations from the phallic bottle, but in his language as well. He began the performance speaking like one in authority, but later he sang the children's song "Pop goes the weasel" while saying "If the women could see me now, my boy!"

Ketchup is also a cheap condiment, that is, a consumer product. McCarthy in this piece, as in his earlier works, associated his father with a cheap consumer product. As I explained in my analysis of *Contemporary Cure All* (1979) in Chapter 2, McCarthy viewed ketchup as both a symbol of his father and as a pop icon. He said in interview: "There is a correlation to the Campbell soup can. It [ketchup] was something so central to the dinner table. But the fact is my father put ketchup on everything."¹⁸⁴ The abjection and parody of his father in both *Contemporary Cure All* and *Painter* was simultaneously an abjection of consumer culture. McCarthy was asserting that family life is contaminated by consumerism, and therefore one's subjectivity first formed in early childhood is likewise contaminated by consumerism. Both performances are impossible expulsions of the very elements that have constituted McCarthy's subjectivity since a very early age.

¹⁸⁴ McCarthy, "original manuscript of 'A Dialogue with Language Itself' Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy," pp. 120-134.

Parody of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art

Intertwined with the attack on his father was the transference of that aggression to figures of the art world. McCarthy equated his father the butcher with the Abstract Expressionist painter Willem de Kooning. Frequently throughout the performance he howled “dekoooooooooning” fetishizing the elder artist’s name and emptying it of meaning, while also creating an empty parody of his gesture. (McCarthy’s painted gestures lacked the sort of mature empathy with the medium displayed by the elder artist and his contemporaries such as Hans Hofmann.) As Chasseguet-Smirgel observed, the pervert needs to tear down the world of the father in order to be able to present his own immature sexuality.¹⁸⁵ The destruction and parody of the father with ketchup and the meat cleaver was necessary so that McCarthy could hold giant paint brushes, substitutes for the father’s phallus, and paint giant pseudo-Abstract Expressionist paintings.

McCarthy’s disregard for Abstract Expressionism (in addition to his parody of de Kooning, Mark Rothko’s name was mentioned by the two collectors) was shared by a number of West coast artists of his generation who felt marginalized from the New York art world,¹⁸⁶ but McCarthy’s envy of the senior world of artists functioned as a kind of

¹⁸⁵ Chasseguet-Smirgel, 4-5. The infantile sexuality of *Painter* distinguishes the work from Robert Rauschberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953).

¹⁸⁶ In 1992 Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna held the “LAX” show. This was a smaller version of the “Helter Skelter” show presenting transgressive new art from the American west coast. However, the show was slightly less sensationalized owing in part because its title was changed from a reference to Charles Manson to the International Air Transport Association’s code for the Los Angeles International Airport, but also because the show’s distance from Los Angeles allowed a different perspective on the social context of the work. The show was accompanied by a two-day symposium on contemporary art in Los Angeles.

Michael Duncan reported that the influence of Viennese Actionists (one of whom, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, on several occasions pretended to cut off his own penis during his performances) was a frequent point of discussion at the symposium and that McCarthy and Kelly participated in a Nitsch performance in California in 1978. (Duncan 41) Duncan drew parallels between McCarthy’s hot-dog and

“psychological autoimmunological disorder, an attack by the mind on itself”¹⁸⁷ causing him to chop up his own hand. Abstract Expressionism was arguably the movement with which American art began to dominate the world art scene. At that time the center of the art world moved to New York City. That was the legacy that McCarthy, a young California based American artist, inherited in the following decades. The Abstract Expressionists were the fathers of the art world into which he was born. This marginalization was personal for McCarthy, who at one point in his life said he would never set foot in Manhattan.¹⁸⁸ (His recognition in New York and subsequent arrival there in the 1990s only occurred after he achieved fame in California and Europe.)

Critic Harold Rosenberg called Abstract Expressionism “essentially a religious movement”¹⁸⁹ and described the Abstract Expressionist’s canvas “as an arena in which to act...”¹⁹⁰ McCarthy transformed this “sacred” arena into a play pen for infantile activities. The bulbous noses and anus sniffing likened the smell of paint to the smell of feces. (Duchamp, who like McCarthy also began his art career as a painter, used to call

ketchup works and the early filmed actions by Mühl. (Duncan 41) While McCarthy has always been leery of the associations made between him and the Viennese Actionists, the symposium raised an important point regarding a significant similarity between the Viennese Actionists and many of the Los Angeles artists. Both groups, Duncan pointed out, “have had to fight to draw international attention to art based outside the usual power centers. The plus side of underdog status however, is a feeling of community impossible to achieve in New York or Paris. As Lari Pittman put it, this group of L.A. artists is unified by their sense of ‘non-apology.’” (Duncan, 41-42)

¹⁸⁷ Margaret J. Black and Stephen A. Mitchell describing the work of Wilfred Bion, in *Freud and Beyond*, (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 103.

¹⁸⁸ Paul McCarthy, “Interview by Grady Turner,” *Flash Art* 34/217 (March/April 2001): 89.

¹⁸⁹ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in *The Tradition of the New*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960), 31.

¹⁹⁰ Rosenberg, 25.

painting “olfactory masturbation.”¹⁹¹) The Abstract Expressionist painter was reduced to an infant playing with his feces.

Painter was not the first time McCarthy made fun of Abstract Expressionism. Like the mockery of his father, the parody of these art world father figures was an obsession that McCarthy was unable to work through. In each instance his parody was marked by aggression. In a performance titled *Whipping a Wall with Paint* (1974), McCarthy irreverently mimicked the action painting of Jackson Pollock as he dipped a piece of canvas or carpet in a five-gallon bucket of dark paint and then hurled it around an empty gallery, brazenly and indiscriminately splashing it on the walls and windows. The work was violent and puerile: he was not painting or dancing, or dripping as Pollock had done, rather, he was a sadist who was “whipping” the gallery. As McCarthy said in an interview (in response to a question about *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint*): “The splattering of the paint or the residue of ketchup as in *Bossy Burger* [another video food performance a few years before *Painter*] or other pieces seem to suggest that an act of violence has happened.¹⁹² The act of whipping with paint was something that McCarthy associated in this quotation with ketchup, the symbol of his father. Twenty-one years later (*Painter* was performed when De Kooning was 91, just two years before

¹⁹¹ Cited in Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade* [1984], Trans. Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 33-34.

Painter Philip Guston similarly called paint “colored dirt,” though he did not reject painting as did Duchamp and McCarthy. (Philip Guston, quoted by Morton Feldman, *The New York Times*, February 2, 1964 cited in Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990),. 2)

¹⁹² McCarthy, “Interview by Kristine Stiles,” 8.

his death in 1997) the violence of his whipping returned as he transferred his violent mental image of his father to de Kooning..

Curator Roberto Ohrt pointed out that *Painter* not only mocked de Kooning, but also Claes Oldenburg. The gigantic puffy representations of paint tubes---one of which was labeled “SHIT”---were just a few example of the piece’s overall Pop palette.¹⁹³ In fact, McCarthy shared in one interview that his intention was to make fun of Pop; more than a parody of De Kooning himself, it was intended to parody the celebrity status that arose around art world figures like him:

I had gone and I bought a black wig, a brown wig, and a blonde wig, and the day of the performance, I put the blonde wig on, and when I put it on I said, “Oh Warhol, oh I’m Warhol.” Then I looked in the mirror and went, “Oh no, I’m DeKooning. [...] But the intention of that piece is not to be DeKooning; It’s about this painter who’s a fan of DeKooning and wants to be like DeKooning.”¹⁹⁴

De Kooning had become in the piece an artist celebrity, an image like the figures in Warhol’s portraits that other artists wanted to become. However, unlike the slick and fun quality of Pop, McCarthy’s work was instinctual, scatological and grotesque. Behind the Pop veneer of Oldenburg’s work was a tube full of excrement.

As with the attack on his biological father, his attack on these father figures of the art world---De Kooning, Oldenburg, and Warhol---is intertwined with an attack on consumer culture. McCarthy’s grievance with De Kooning was over the celebrity status

¹⁹³ Roberto Ohrt, “A Zombie from the Alphabet,” in *Paul McCarthy: Brain Box Dream Box* [exhibition catalogue from Van Abeemuseum Eindhoven], ed. Eva Meyer-Hermann, (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2004), 142.

¹⁹⁴ McCarthy, “original manuscript of ‘A Dialogue with Language Itself’ Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy,” pp. 120-134.

he had attained in the art world; and Pop art, such as that of Oldenburg and Warhol, embraced consumerism and celebrity culture. On McCarthy's analysis, art is infected by the same consumerist elements as family life is. McCarthy as an artist is heir to the traditions of these elder artists, just as he is heir to the ketchup consuming traditions of his father. Abstract and Expressionism and Pop were the dominant styles during the early formative years of McCarthy's artistic life. His ritual of abjection was meant to expel those elements of art that had formed his artistic identity, but that had become problematic with respect to his identity because of their associations with consumer culture.

Perversion and the Art Market

The pop element of *Painter* was significant because it connected the commercial world to the world of the father, and McCarthy reduced both to excrement. The giant brushes acted as fetishes, a defense against the castrating power of the meat cleaver wielding father. However, they were a poor substitute for the mature world of the hardworking grocery store butcher or the world of established museum art. Big and shiny, the SHIT tube idealized the feces which it was meant to refer. Manzoni did a similar thing in 1961 when he canned his feces in shiny metal containers and sold them for their weight in gold. According to Chasseguet-Smirgel, the pervert must idealize his anality so he can pretend to himself and to others that his pregenital sexuality is equal if

not superior to genitality.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, as she wrote: “One has only to scratch the surface and the excremental nature of the phallus will reappear under the shiny coating.” In Manzoni’s case, all one needed was a can opener to reveal the excrement that is masquerading beneath. McCarthy opened the SHIT tube shoving his arm and fist in and out emptying it of its contents. In the cases of Manzoni’s shit cans and McCarthy’s tube of shit-paint and his use of cheap condiments as paint, the question of art and its relation to commodification came to fore. Both artists made an analogy between art and commodity, and then asserted that beneath the surface of art and commodities one only finds excrement.

McCarthy played a painter who wanted more money from his dealer for his scatological art. The collectors with bulbous noses smelled the painter’s anus approvingly. While McCarthy did not make a direct reference to Freud’s writings, Freud had made a connection between personal instinct and the social desire to collect money that can explain the analogy McCarthy makes between the sale and collection of art on the one hand and excrement on the other:

We know that the gold that the devil gives his paramours turns to excrement after his departure, and the devil is certainly nothing else than the personification of the repressed unconscious instinctual life... The original erotic in defaecation is, as we know, destined to be extinguished in later years. In those years the interest in money makes its appearance as a new interest which had been absent in childhood.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Chassuguet-Smirgel, 91.

¹⁹⁶Sigmund Freud, “Character and Anal Erotism” [1908], in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 9 (London: 1959), 174-175.

McCarthy desublimated the art world showing money and paint as anal eroticism. The pleasure of painting---playing with its softness and thickness, smelling it, and buying it---was nothing more than infantile love of defecation.

This psycho-cultural connection that Freud had asserted between money and excrement, unconsciously surfaced in *Painter*. Yet again McCarthy displayed his buttocks as art as he done in the early video works such as *Mooning* [fig. 2.5]. In Chapter 2 I connected the anal exhibitionism of those works, as well as the birth scene in *Contemporary Cure All* (1979) [fig. 2.4], to the humiliating experience he had when he asked his mother about his breech birth. Embarrassed that he came out “ass first and bent over”¹⁹⁷ he rescripted the situation so that he had control over it and could humiliate his audience. What was once a humiliating event became a source of pride in *Painter*. In fact the painter even seemed to be blasé about the whole sale as he waited for the collector to finish smelling his anus. Like the feces of Manzoni’s shit cans, or the shiny SHIT tube, the artist’s buttocks were idealized in *Painter*, and presented as an example of artistic genius.

McCarthy’s *Painter* was puerile, as nearly all of his work has been. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this is because he was psychically stuck, still dealing with the traumas of childhood, such as the memories of his father and his mother laughing at him about his breech birth. In *Painter* (as well with *Whipping a Wall with Paint*) he made a mess by drawing on walls, something which children often do. McCarthy enacted the philistine argument against pure abstraction: “My child could do that.” In *Painter* the art

¹⁹⁷ McCarthy, “Interview with Linda Montano,” 97.

dealer even told him that he was immature. As Ulrike Groos described the performance in his catalogue of McCarthy's videos:

In the gallery owner's office, a hefty argument takes place between her and the artist. In formulaic repetitions of increasingly hysterical fury, the painter complains about lack of payment and that he is not being looked after properly ("I want you to pay the money. I want all the money, right now...I have shows in Europe with big catalogues"). However, the gallery owner treats him like a child and chides him condescendingly ("You are a spoilt child"). At this, the artist really does throw tantrums, spits, turns sulkily in circles, grunts and moans, crawls around on the floor and destroys supposed works of art in the office.¹⁹⁸

However, McCarthy's work also puts the blame for this infantile behavior on consumer culture. Here McCarthy's assessment of consumer culture resonated with Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that the masses are kept immature by the culture industry ("The overripeness of society lives on in the immaturity of the ruled."¹⁹⁹) Adults become children trying to buy new toys for themselves including works of art. McCarthy demonstrated this was a problem for art by presenting his critique of the art market through the guise of a children's television art program with cartoon imagery (giant white gloves, bulbous nose).

McCarthy's performance accused the art world's museum and gallery system of cultivating and encouraging artists' puerilism, including his own. Indeed, he was right. After all, the Museum of Modern Art had paid him to make this video making fun of the major artists in the museum's collection, such as de Kooning, Rothko, and Gerhard

¹⁹⁸ Ulrike Groos, *Paul McCarthy, Videos: 1970-1997*, Yilmaz Dziewior ed., (Cologne: Walther König, 2003), 146.

¹⁹⁹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments* [1944/47], Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 28.

Richter. The museum's directors were anus-sniffers insofar as they were engaged in the same practices as the collectors in the film. The bulbous-nosed, anus-sniffing collectors were despised in the performance. When they were asked which Rothko they owned they argued over whether it was red and black, or red and brown, until the woman unequivocally asserted that it was from his red and black period. The implication of this scenario (which has not been acknowledged in the literature to date on *Painter*) was that all Rothko's paintings look the same, and that the collectors were dolts by pretending to see a difference.

The role of art in a consumer society was at issue in *Painter*. McCarthy equated the sale of art with the consumption of cheap consumer goods like food condiments. He also suggested that it was all excrement, linking the desire to paint, to collect money and art to the infantile pleasure of defecating. Though his attack on art was rooted in early childhood trauma like most of his imagery, McCarthy also put the blame on the art world for positively reinforcing the eccentric and anal expulsive behavior of artists.

Épater le bourgeois: Suburbia and Filth

The cheap set of *Painter* looked like a room from a suburban house. It had faux wood paneling and a white door with standardized molding. At times the camera and the action moved into the hallway, the bedroom across the hall, and eventually the living room where the final "sale" was made to the collector. The rooms were decorated with an occasional artificial plant. In the interview I cited in Chapter 3, McCarthy talked about

how he was affected by the suburbanization of his rural childhood town. It affected him deeply as evidenced by the fact that he wandered into the topic while answering a question about sexual imagery in his work in the quotation that I referenced in Chapter 3. He said that he had come from a repressed sexual environment. He blamed his sexual repression not only on the religious climate of his community, but on its transformation from a rural town to suburbia: “I came from a pretty repressed sexual environment. [...] They were beginning to build suburbs and tract houses, and now it is just like the San Fernando Valley---all tract houses.”²⁰⁰ The standardized look of the set in *Painter* replicated the look of the mass-produced tract houses (often referred to pejoratively as “cookie-cutter” homes) that overtook his hometown. Significantly he connected that style and the suburban environment to sexual repression. In *Painter* he attempted to defile that bourgeois environment by breaking its taboos with sexually explicit and scatological imagery. The food products he used, ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard and chocolate syrup are all condiments for a suburban cookout or family picnic.

As McCarthy transgressed the boundary between food and filth in relation to suburban bourgeois culture, he did so as a member of that culture. The border (between food and filth on the one hand and middle class propriety on the other) that was called into question in *Painter* was one that defined his identity. The rejection of suburban decorum was an abjection of elements that comprised his self as much as he felt they were alien to his self. American suburban homes have toilets, plumbing, and sewage

²⁰⁰ McCarthy, “Interview with Linda Montano,” in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, ed. Montano, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 97.

systems. Excrement is quickly flushed away with a toilet; the abject is rushed out of sight. Since the nineteenth century, the eradication of odor has been a hallmark of bourgeois culture. As social historian Alain Corbin explained, in the mid-nineteenth century excrement and odor gained a social dimension. The bourgeois viewed the poor and laborers as animals wallowing in their own feces; in turn the ruling classes viewed the bourgeois the same way.²⁰¹ Odor became a symbol of the rising bourgeois class's abject, that which they had had to expel to maintain their sense of identity, an identity with characteristics similar to McCarthy's suburban culture. *Painter* disturbed the boundaries and rituals constructed by suburban bourgeois culture to keep the abject of its feces and odor at bay. When McCarthy used paint labeled "SHIT" he was defecating on his suburban world as if to eliminate that world from himself.

The house in *Painter* was in disorder. The rooms became messier and messier as the performance progressed. What began as a clean tract house, began to look like one of Jan Steen's moralizing genre scenes in which a household goes awry from bad parenting that allows imperial infants to run wild [fig. 5.4]. By the end of *Painter* the house had become a latrine, thoroughly degraded by McCarthy's anal-sadistic performance.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* Trans. Aubier Montaigne, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 144. . One striking aspect of the set of McCarthy's *Bossy Burger* (1991), which was redisplayed at McCarthy's retrospective at the New Museum in 1999, was its odor of spoiled milk and food. Considering the widespread scatological imagery throughout McCarthy's oeuvre, one expected that the odor would be that of feces.

²⁰²This household degradation occurred two years later in McCarthy's *Santa's Chocolate Shop* [fig. 5.5]. In a two-story plywood house cans of chocolate syrup were poured on the performers from one floor to another. The scene was a scatological disaster. See my "Santa's Fecal Gift: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Paul McCarthy's *Santa's Chocolate Shop*," *Art Criticism* 18/2, (Fall 2003): 84-103.

McCarthy was trying to expel the influence of his suburban upbringing by symbolically eliminating it like excrement. However, no matter how hard he tried to expel the effects of his environment they were never completely gone, they still formed a core component of his identity. Robert Mapplethorpe said of suburban Long Island, where he was raised: “I come from suburban America. It was a very safe environment, and it was a good place to come from in that it was a good place to leave.”²⁰³ McCarthy, by contrast, never left. The painter, like the Pinocchio character in the previous chapter, was trapped in his house. He slept, ate, painted, defecated and even entertained his art dealer and some collectors in that room.

Cynicism and Self-Loathing

Painter (1995) significantly was done not at a time when McCarthy was marginalized, but precisely at the moment when he was becoming part of the mainstream art world. McCarthy’s attack on the New York art world at that moment in his career was the height of hypocrisy. The Museum of Modern Art had funded and exhibited *Painter*, and McCarthy was in the Whitney Biennial the same year. In the two preceding years he had even had some of his first shows in some New York City galleries. These shows included his first solo show at Luhring Augustine (after already having been featured in a group show there the previous year), as well as the group show “Identity and Home” at

²⁰³ Robert Mapplethorpe, cited in the “Biography” from The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, Inc. (2007). Accessed online: <http://www.mapplethorpe.org/biography.html>

the Museum of Modern Art.²⁰⁴ Along with his new recognition in New York galleries and museums he was featured in a number of major art publications. 1993 was a year in which McCarthy's work became the subject of reviews and feature articles in *Flash Art*, *New Art Examiner*, *Art in America*, and *The New York Times*.²⁰⁵ In 1994 McCarthy's *Tomato Head* sculptures were featured on the cover of *Art Forum* in conjunction with Ralph Rugoff's feature article on McCarthy. The character in *Painter* demanded more money because he "had shows in Europe." In fact, McCarthy for decades had numerous solo and group shows in Europe; the most prestigious was arguably the 1993 Venice Biennale.

More than a parody of his father, de Kooning or Pop art, *Painter* was really a cynical parody of McCarthy's own success. He, like Duchamp, began his career as a painter. This work was not really a caricature of de Kooning, rather, it was typical of McCarthy's food performances. McCarthy, not de Kooning or anyone else, was the artist who made his name by showing his bare buttocks like his character at the end of the film. The work was utterly abject not only because of its entropic degeneration into a scatological mess of food products, but because McCarthy was trying to perform a ritual to exorcise this aspect of himself to which he had so long been opposed. He was the one who said at one time that he would never set foot in New York, but pursued a path to

²⁰⁴ For example, 1995: "Bruce Nauman, Mike Kelley, Franz West, and Paul McCarthy," David Zwirner Gallery; 1994: "Dirty," John Good Gallery, "Altered," Two-person show, Rudolf Schwarzkolger and Paul McCarthy, Austrian Cultural Institute, New York; 1993: "Drawing the Line Against AIDS," Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, "I am the Enunciator," Thread Waxing Space.

²⁰⁵ See bibliography p. 153 of Phaidon catalogue.

have his work showcased at the Museum of Modern Art and in solo shows in Chelsea galleries.

The images in *Painter* were McCarthy's introjections²⁰⁶ that he then expelled into through the ritual of abjection. That is, they were internalized persecutions or inner dangers, which he perceived as originating from the outside world, that he then abjected into the external world of the performance and its props. The parodies in *Painter* are his vision of his father, of Abstract Expressionism, and finally of art's role in a consumer and television society. Curator Magnus af Petersens noted that it was difficult to tell whether McCarthy in *Painter* was wearing a smock or a hospital gown.²⁰⁷ Perhaps this was McCarthy's suggestion that contemporary art---abstract painting, Pop, or otherwise---was suffering from a sickness. With my thesis regarding commodity abjection, I would like to suggest that perhaps McCarthy was the sick patient. The internal saboteur is after all internal. The world in this performance was, for him, full of so many "bizarre objects" as psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion would say.²⁰⁸ That is, McCarthy's projected his internal hostility into the external representations of his father, the Abstract Expressionists, and the art dealers and collectors, but then he perceived the aggression as coming from those

²⁰⁶ Michael St. Claire has given this summary of the classical definition of introjection formulated by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein: "Introjection, [an] important and primitive mechanism that is present and available to the very young infant, is the mental phantasy by which the infant takes into himself something that he perceives in the outside world. Thus, any danger or deprivation from the outside world enters and becomes an inner danger. Frustrating objects and sources of anxiety, even though external to the infant, become internal persecutors of the terrified infant by means of introjection" (Michael St. Claire, *Object Relations and Self Psychology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 37).

²⁰⁷ Magnus af Petersens, *Paul McCarthy Head Shop / Shop Head. Works 1966-2006* [exhibition catalogue], (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2006), 21.

²⁰⁸ See: W.R. Bion, "Differentiation of the psychotic from the non-psychotic personalities," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 37, (1957): 268

people and not from himself. In an unconscious act of self-loathing, he ridiculed the very figures that represented himself. At the same time he performed an exorcism on himself to abject that which was internalized. It was significant that McCarthy used his *own* body in the parodies of his father the butcher and De Kooning (this is a point I raised also in Chapter 4 when analyzing the role of the mask in *Pinocchio Pipenose Household Dilemma* (1992)). McCarthy was the one playing childishly with butcher meats and condiments while he described his own father as “hardworking” for maintaining a seven-day-a-week work schedule.²⁰⁹ McCarthy was the one who had made a career of dropping his pants and scatological performances, but then tried to accuse the art dealers and collectors of being the anus sniffers. His rituals were an attempt to expel those aspects of his psyche that on the one hand formed his identity, and yet on the other felt completely alien to him.

²⁰⁹ McCarthy, “original manuscript of ‘A Dialogue with Language Itself’ Jeremy Sigler and Paul McCarthy,” pp. 120-134.



Fig. 5.1 *Painter*, 1995, performance/video tape/installation, Los Angeles, CA; with Brian Butler, Sabina Hornig, Paul McCarthy, Frederik Nilsen, and Barbara Smith, 50:01min. Collection of the Rubell Family, Miami, FL. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 5.2 *Painter*, 1995. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 5.3 *Whipping a Wall with Paint*, 1974, performance/video tape, Pasadena, CA. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Fig. 5.4 Jan Steen, *The Feast of St. Nicholas*, 1665-68, Oil on canvas, 82 x 70 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Courtesy Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 5.5 *Santa's Chocolate Shop*, 1997, performance/video tape/installation, Los Angeles, CA. Flick Collection, Zurich, Switzerland. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

CONCLUSION

Paul McCarthy's oeuvre from the late 1960s through the 1990s has consistently been a visceral defense against elements from his family life and consumer culture that he has felt encroach on his subjectivity. He has tried to expel these introjections through a ritual process of abjection. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection highlighted the ambiguous status of borders, particularly in relation to the human body and the fluids which pass in and out of it. On her analysis, subjectivity is always in process: a sense of self is formed by expelling that which is alien to one's self. The process becomes ambivalent, traumatic, and Sisyphean, because in order to expel something from the self it must have already been a part of the self. McCarthy's art of bodily performances, which incorporates foods and liquid condiments and blurs boundaries between human and animal, organism and machine, food and excrement, and Pop art and expressionism, has lent itself well to Kristeva's theories. The confusion that McCarthy has expressed through his work and in interviews over not being able to distinguish his true self from consumer culture gave rise to the process that I have called commodity abjection. Commodity abjection does not simply symbolize a general predicament for subjects living under late capitalism; rather, it is a deeply intimate ambivalence that disturbs McCarthy's sense of self and his perception of his own family, and he in turn acts-out its traumas with his own body.

McCarthy's parents and grandfather are frequent targets of his scatological parodies. The traumatic memory of his father the butcher who wore a bloody apron and

“put ketchup on everything” is one of the most common images in his work. McCarthy re-scripts early traumatic experiences in such a way as to make himself the aggressor. McCarthy’s parodies of family figures are intertwined with his critique of consumer culture. His own family has been conditioned by consumer culture and has passed that conditioning on to him. The intimacies of family life are infected with mass produced condiments and television culture.

McCarthy’s own body has been the site for these parodies and rituals of abjection. The bodily consumption of food plays an important role in the formation of identity and can change one’s being (as symbolized, for example, in the classical myth of Persephone who ate Hades’ pomegranate seeds, and then became part of his underworld forever). According to the artist, McCarthy’s father and himself, like most Americans under late capitalism, have become effectively reified into commodities through their consumption of ready-made food. McCarthy’s rituals are a way of trying to expel those elements of consumer culture which have been formative in his psychological development; but precisely because those elements do constitute a fundamental aspect of his sense of self, their expulsion is a rejection of his own subjectivity. The rituals intended to defend a core sense of self paradoxically leave him lacking a sense of subjectivity. Despite the visceral quality of the works intended to awaken the feeling of an instinctual self, McCarthy is left with “a kind of numbness” as he called it, while he engages in directionless and repetitive actions.

Ultimately, McCarthy’s work calls into question the capacity of art to be critical in a late capitalist society. I showed that McCarthy’s work asserted that the space of

subjectivity has been flattened by the hegemony of consumer culture. McCarthy has found it impossible to cultivate a unique or true self in a society where the formation of his identity and sexuality have been coerced by the entertainment industry. McCarthy was raised on consumer culture by parents who were likewise products of that culture, and his work shows him to be condemned to reification.

In this dissertation I have contributed to the literature on McCarthy by offering the first lengthy academic study to focus exclusively on his work. I have attempted to integrate psychoanalytic and Marxist theories in this investigation, because I believe his work calls for such an analysis. Visceral performance, references to his family and pop culture imagery are all interwoven in the artwork such that it is impossible to discuss each one in isolation and still remain attuned to the integrity of the work. Previous research on McCarthy has analyzed his work in relation to consumer culture or looked at it using psychoanalytic theories, but such approaches, even the psychoanalytic ones, have only taken into account the work's social context. This dissertation is the first to look at the intertwining of McCarthy's personal family imagery with his psychical response to consumer culture; and in doing so, it is the first to connect an analysis of the artwork's consumerist elements to an analysis of statements in which he has revealed his feelings and phantasies about his parents and grandfather.

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