

**Ketchup and Blood: Documents, Institutions and Effects in  
the Performances of Paul McCarthy 1974-2013**

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy

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**November 2014**

## Abstract

Since the 1970s, the work of Los Angeles-based artist Paul McCarthy (b. 1945) has included live performance, video, sculpture, kinetic tableaux, and installation. Tracing the development of McCarthy's work between 1974 and 2013, I undertake a critical discussion of the development of performance in relation to visual art practices. Using one artist's work as a guide through a number of key discussions in the history of performance art, I argue that performance has influenced every aspect of McCarthy's artistic practice, and continues to inform critical readings of his work.

My thesis follows the trajectory of McCarthy's performance practice as it has developed through different contexts. I begin with the early documentation and dissemination of performance in the Los Angeles-based magazine *High Performance* (1978-83), which established a context for the reception of performance art, and for McCarthy's early work. I then examine specific examples of McCarthy's practice in relation to his critical reception: live performances and videos from the 1970s are discussed alongside critical readings of his work influenced by psychoanalysis; and the wider public recognition of McCarthy's object-based art in the 1980s and early 1990s. I then look more broadly at the recent trend of re-enacting historical performances in the Getty's *Pacific Standard Time* project (2011-12), as a mode of engaging with performance history and exploring how histories of ephemeral art are re-iterated over time. Finally, I discuss a number of McCarthy's recent exhibitions and installations that mobilises a wider consideration of the histories of performance and ephemeral practices in art institutions.

McCarthy's work is firmly established in the art world, and I argue that his work also provides a significant touchstone for histories of performance. I look historically at how McCarthy's work has been documented, disseminated, curated, and re-performed, and open wider discussions about ways of engaging with performance history. In turn, I complicate the relationship between performance and the art world; between ephemeral art and object-based art practices; and between scholarly engagements with performance history, and the public presentation of performance in curatorial practices and institutional contexts.

## Statement of Originality

I, Harriet Curtis, confirm that the research included within this thesis is my own work or that where it has been carried out in collaboration with, or supported by others, that this is duly acknowledged below and my contribution indicated. Previously published material is also acknowledged below.

I attest that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge break any UK law, infringe any third party's copyright or other Intellectual Property Right, or contain any confidential material.

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Details of collaboration and publications:

Harriet Curtis, 'Restaging Feminism in Los Angeles: *Three Weeks in January* (2012): *Three Weeks in May* (1977)', *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, 34 (July 2014), 77-85.

Harriet Curtis, 'Performance Legacies in Print and Practice: *High Performance Magazine, 1978-1983*', *Platform*, 8.1 (Spring 2014), 29-43.

Harriet Curtis, 'From Painting to Performance: Figuring the Object in Los Angeles Art', (review of *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy*, by Michael Duncan), *Art History*, 36.1 (February 2013), 224-26.

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## **Acknowledgments**

This project was funded by a College Studentship from Queen Mary, University of London. Additional financial support for a research trip to Los Angeles in 2012 to undertake primary research and conduct interviews was provided by the Queen Mary Central Research Fund (now the Postgraduate Research Fund). I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Glynne Wickham Scholarship fund, which contributed to travel expenses for a conference presentation at Stanford University in 2013.

Dominic Johnson supervised this project, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank him for his support and mentorship throughout the project. It would have been impossible without his guidance, encouragement and generosity.

A number of organisations and individuals gave me their time and enabled access to archival resources during my research. I gratefully acknowledge the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Tate Library, Hauser & Wirth, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Exhibition Archive. I would also like to thank Linda Frye Burnham, Michael Duncan, Paul Schimmel, Kristine Stiles, and John C. Welchman for their time, and generosity in discussing my project.

I would also like to thank other members of staff in the Department of Drama, for their support and guidance throughout my PhD, particularly Huw Marsh, Michael McKinnie, Daphne Rayment, Catherine Silverstone, and Kim Solga. And also to thank my PhD colleagues for their support and solidarity. My thanks in particular to Charlotte Bell, Cat Fallow, and Sarah Thomasson for their invaluable feedback, encouragement, and friendship.

My thanks to family and friends for their love and support, particularly my parents, Alison and Keith Pettit, Tom M<sup>c</sup>Lenachan for reading work in progress, and Chloe Arnold, Jessica Benson-Egglenton, Eve Castle, and Jack Cornish for their friendship, and newfound love for performance art.

### **Note on the Text**

The text of this thesis follows the conventions recommended by the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA), with the exception of ‘ibid.’, which is used throughout.

The bibliography lists works cited in alphabetical order. Additionally, I list the ‘Archives consulted’ for primary material – for example, magazines and journals not in public circulation, artists’ photographs, and unpublished texts – and ‘Personal interviews and correspondence’, conducted with artists, curators, and scholars connected to the artworks, exhibitions and publications discussed in the thesis. I also separately list the digital recordings of Paul McCarthy’s performances that I consulted for this project, access to which was provided by Hauser & Wirth.



## **Introduction**

Since the 1970s, the work of Los Angeles-based artist Paul McCarthy has encompassed live performance, video, sculpture, kinetic tableaux, and installation. Tracing the development and historicisation of McCarthy's work between 1974 and 2013, and examining significant moments or periods in his diverse career, I undertake a critical discussion about the development of performance in relation to visual art practices. Using the work of one artist as a guide through a number of key discussions in the history of performance art – namely, the documentation of performance art, close readings of the disturbing and affective elements of performance, the use of performance objects as surrogates for the artist and the event, and the re-presentation of performances in museums – my research addresses issues of canonicity and the movement of performance into art institutions. I argue that McCarthy's work in performance has influenced subsequent iterations of his artistic practice – including object-based art and multimedia installations – and continues to shape and inform critical engagements with his art.

In this Introduction, I begin by giving a brief overview of McCarthy's teaching and professional activities, before providing a more detailed account of his artistic work between the late 1960s and the present. I then discuss previous writings on the artist, and the landscape of scholarship to which my research contributes. I also include a section on

recent scholarship on McCarthy (2013-14), to indicate the topicality of my research and the prominence of McCarthy's work. I then outline the methodologies that I employ to analyse McCarthy's work – namely, analyses of performance that straddle art history and performance studies, psychoanalytic and affect theory, and museum studies and print culture – to establish the approaches I take to McCarthy's work in subsequent chapters. I then indicate the research methods for the project, namely, archival research, interviews and email correspondence, and critical viewing of live events and documentation. Finally, I outline my rationale for the thesis structure, and provide summaries of the following chapters.

McCarthy was born in 1945 in Salt Lake City in Utah, and studied at the University of Utah between 1966 and 1968. In 1969 he moved to U.S. West Coast where he gained a BFA in painting from the San Francisco Art Institute, and an MFA in film, video, and art from the University of Southern California (USC), Los Angeles in 1972. McCarthy taught film and video at USC (1971-73), performance and contemporary art history at the Otis Art Institute (1992) and was Professor of New Forms (performance, video, installation, and performance art history) at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) between 1984 and 2003. As well as teaching art and performance at institutions around Southern California, McCarthy was also involved in a number of local art activities in Los Angeles. In 1976, McCarthy developed a single issue publication called *Criss Cross Double Cross* and invited 38 artists living and working in Los Angeles – including Barbara T. Smith, Nancy Buchanan, Suzanne Lacy, Allan Kaprow, Chris Burden, and Bruce Nauman – to design a two-page spread of their work.

Although short-lived, the magazine provided a forum for artists to share their work with wider audiences, by documenting performances through text and images.<sup>1</sup> In 1979 McCarthy co-founded – along with artists John Duncan, Barbara T. Smith, and *High Performance* magazine editor Linda Frye Burnham<sup>2</sup> – the Highland Art Agents (HAA), an artist-community group who sponsored contemporary artists, performances, festivals, video screenings and artist publications. In 1981 McCarthy was the chairperson of Performance Art at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), a gallery space founded in 1973 as an exhibition venue for contemporary artists in the Los Angeles area. McCarthy now lives and works in Altadena, California.

McCarthy's long and diverse artistic career has made a significant contribution to histories of art and performance in Southern California, and specifically in Los Angeles. His work is also recognised and celebrated internationally, and the broad scope of his practice beyond performance to sculpture, painting, drawing, and installations, has brought his work to the attention of scholars of art history and performance studies, and to wider art audiences. In my thesis I navigate his large body of work through performance, but also demonstrate the influence of this work on broader art practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Cifarelli, 'Second Life: Criss Cross Double Cross', *East of Borneo*, 29 June 2012, <<http://www.eastofborneo.org/articles/second-life-criss-cross-double-cross>> [accessed 10 July 2014]; and Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2011), p. 252.

<sup>2</sup> In some articles and publications her name is listed as 'Linda Burnham', and I have referenced this accurately where appropriate. I however refer to Linda Frye Burnham throughout the thesis, using her full name in the first mention, and then use the shortened form, Burnham.

## Paul McCarthy's Artistic Work to Date

One of the main themes of McCarthy's work that I draw out in this overview and develop throughout the thesis is the artist's apparent ambivalence to the art world, and his desire to create work that resists both containment by art institutions, and reduction to discrete categories of art. This interest is signalled early on by his use of condiments and bodily fluids in performance, which suggest the physical and political messiness of the body. In his later sculptural works, the polished aesthetic of monochrome and clean lines seems anathema to his earlier visceral, body-based work. However, as I argue, connections between these seemingly disparate art practices can be persuasively read through the lens of performance.

In early performances such as *Saw* (1967) – in which McCarthy destroyed a set of furniture with a saw onstage at the Little Theater at the University of Utah – and *Leap* (1968) – in which he re-performed Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void* (1960), by jumping from a classroom window – McCarthy performed short, experimental actions that were often undocumented. Pieces such as *Too Steep Too Fast* (1968) performed in Marin County, California (and then in the Hollywood Hills in 1972) – in which the artist ran down the hillside as fast as he could until he could no longer control his speed – indicated an interest in movement, momentum, and a loss of control over or containment of the body. In *Saw*, and other early pieces – such as a series of black paintings he created in 1967 by using his hands to apply the paint, the canvases of which were then burnt –

McCarthy's work might be contextualised in terms of auto-destructive art of the 1960s.

In the early 1970s, McCarthy began making video performances – solo pieces with no audience, made specifically for video – which incorporated Fluxus-style actions such as *Lens Sucking* (1973), *Spitting on the Camera Lens* (1974) and *Whipping the Wall with Paint* (1975), which became known collectively as the *Black and White Tapes* (1970-75).<sup>3</sup> The performances recorded in these videos, generally only a few minutes in length, show McCarthy's experimentation with the video camera and the relationship between his naked body and the presumed 'audience', watching through the screen. These pieces often involve McCarthy using bodily substances – saliva, semen, faeces – but also paint as extensions of the body, and in some cases, such as *Face Painting – Floor, White Line* (1972), and *Penis Painting* (1974), he uses his body as a tool for 'making' the art. At this point McCarthy also made a number of colour video performances, such as *Heinz Ketchup Sauce* (1974) – in which he opens a bottle of ketchup with his mouth and smears his whole body with its contents – and *Glass* (1974), in which the artist holds a sheet of glass between the camera and himself, smears the glass with his saliva and presses his face and various body parts against it, distorting them in the process.

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<sup>3</sup> The full *Black and White Tapes* series comprises: *Spinning* (1970); *Ma Bell* (1971); *Black Elbows* (1971); *Face Painting – Floor, White Line* (1972); *Pissing, Microphone* (1972); *Ass End I* (1972); *Ass End II* (1972); *Spit Dicking I* (1973); *Spit Dicking II* (1973); *Whipping a Wall with Paint* (1974); *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint* (1974); *Split-* (1974); *Up Down Penis Show* (1974); *Zippedy Doo Dance* (1974); *Spitting on the Camera Lens* (1974); *Penis Dip Painting* (1974); *Shit Face Painting* (1974); *Icicle Slobber* (1975); *Pipe Shadow* (1975); *Upside Down Spitting – "Bat"* (1975); *Drawing – Semen Drawing* (1975); *Upside Down Pipe* (1975).

In the mid-1970s, McCarthy also began to perform live for small audiences at art spaces or private studios in Los Angeles and Pasadena. He also created a number of visceral video works – including *Hot Dog* (1974), *Tubbing* (1975), *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* (1975), and *Rocky* (1976) – that typically involved a familiar range of food items such as ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard, hot dogs, and raw, ground hamburger meat. Often performing in the nude, and slathering these materials over his body, stuffing them into his mouth and ingesting them to the point of choking, or fashioning them into extra limbs, these performances established the vocabulary of materials and gestures that McCarthy would use throughout his career. In 1974 he performed a series called *Meat Cake* (also recorded to video), in which, seated before a mirror at a dressing table, McCarthy created a 'mask' out of raw ground meat and margarine.<sup>4</sup> He packed this mixture onto his face, secured it in place with adhesive tape, and stuffed a lump of the mixture into his mouth. He then poured in milk, retched, and then taped his mouth closed. In these pieces, McCarthy donned a variety of wigs and women's clothing which, by the end of the performance, were cut, torn or covered in ketchup. Frequently, the performances ended with the artist stuffing his underwear with a glutinous mass of minced meat, margarine and mayonnaise, calmly removing his face mask and quietly exiting the space, leaving the audience to ponder the carnage of the preceding actions.

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<sup>4</sup> There were five performances in the *Meat Cake* series, all made in 1974: *Meat Cake #1, Flowered Dress; Meat Cake #2, White Slip; Meat Cake #3, Blond Wig; Meat Cake #4, Prelude; Meat Cake #5.*

In the 1970s and early 1980s McCarthy also used a range of masks, props, toys, and costumes in his performances. For example: in *Class Fool* (1976), wearing a long wig and a female mask, McCarthy smeared small plastic dolls with ketchup and hand cream, and inserted one into his anus; in *Monkey Man* (1980) he performed wearing a monkey animal mask on a stage littered with Barbie dolls and children's toys; and in *King for a Day* (1983), McCarthy performed wearing a Popeye character mask turned inside out, removed a large doll from a suitcase, smeared it with ketchup and held it between his legs as he moved around the performance space. In these works, McCarthy often interacted with his audience members and moved amongst them, most of whom – in photographs and video documentation of the pieces – seem obliging to the artist's actions, although look a little uncomfortable. In *Class Fool* for example, many audience members left the space before the piece was finished.<sup>5</sup>

In 1983, after over a decade of making performances, McCarthy retired from live works and moved to object-based practices. Also in 1983, McCarthy packed the objects and props he had used in performances over the past decade into trunks and suitcases, which remained locked until 1991, when McCarthy opened them and photographed each object individually. Between the early 1980s and 1990s, McCarthy developed a series of moving sculptures and kinetic tableaux, such as *Human Object* (1982), *Bavarian Kick* (1987), and *Cultural Gothic* (1992), featuring humanoid figures performing as stand-ins for the artist. In his installation *The Garden* (1992), McCarthy created two lifelike mechanical figures within an artificial

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<sup>5</sup> Linda Burnham, 'Performance Interrupts: Interview with Paul McCarthy', *High Performance*, 1.2 (1978), 8-12, 44-45 (p. 8).

forest environment. The piece was first exhibited in a group show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), and gained the attention of local press and the international art world. The significance of *The Garden* in McCarthy's artistic career – his largest and most elaborate installation at the time – and its display in a prominent art institution opened up McCarthy's work to further curatorial and scholarly interest.

In the 1980s and 1990s McCarthy staged a number of collaborative video performances with the artist Mike Kelley, including *Family Tyranny* (1992), *Heidi* (1992), *Fresh Acconci* (1995) and *Sod and Sodie Sock Comp O.S.O.* (1998). These collaborations included satirical or darkly humorous representations of the patriarchal family structure, Los Angeles' adult entertainment industry, American military life, and children's literature.<sup>6</sup> McCarthy also made a number of solo video works, including *Bossy Burger* (1992) and *Painter* (1995) (a semi-solo work since a number of other performers, including Barbara T. Smith as the Painter's art dealer<sup>7</sup> appear briefly in the video), which indicate the artist's fully developed performance style. In these works, McCarthy performs to camera within large wooden sets, gradually creating a chaotic mess amid masses of paint, ketchup and erratic behaviour. McCarthy often performs in the character of a specific public figure, or an amalgamation of several – for example, in *Painter*, he can be identified as Abstract Expressionist painter Willem De Kooning, and in *Bossy Burger*, he wears a character mask of *Mad* magazine mascot Alfred E. Neuman.

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<sup>6</sup> See: *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works* (Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Robert R. Shane, 'Paul McCarthy's *Painter* (1995) as Self-Portrait and Self Loathing', *Art Criticism*, 24.2 (2009), 84-103 (p. 86).



In later, large-scale video performances such as *Piccadilly Circus* (2003), *Bunker Basement* (2003) and *Caribbean Pirates* (2000-05) McCarthy hired a number of other performers to perform alongside or in his place, whilst he takes on a directorial role.<sup>8</sup> In *Caribbean Pirates*, a collaborative project with his son Damon McCarthy, a series of performances are staged and filmed within large set structures, almost like a film set. During the mid-2000s McCarthy also created a number of large, inflatable sculptures made from lightweight nylon fabric such as: *Blockhead* (2003), a black figure, 35 metres high and based on the character of Pinocchio; *Daddies Big Head* (2003), a pink sculpture, 16 metres high, shaped and based on a Daddies Ketchup brand bottle; and *Complex Pile* (2007), an inflatable sculpture, brown in colour, shaped to resemble a huge pile of shit, but lacking the requisite visceral qualities to warrant sensorial disgust.<sup>9</sup> Displayed in parks and open areas or beside large art institutions, these sculptures suggest the wider theme of containment – notably, the attempt to disrupt the environment of art spaces – in McCarthy’s work. In more recent works such as *The King* (2011) and *WS* (2013), two large installations displayed at prestigious gallery spaces in London and New York, McCarthy combines a number of different elements of his previous artistic practice – video performance, mechanised installations, and a critique of the art world and mainstream culture – to create a complex,

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<sup>8</sup> See: Paul McCarthy, *Piccadilly Circus, Bunker Basement* (Steidl: Hauser & Wirth, 2003); and John C. Welchman, ‘First Mate’s Bloody Flux’, in *Lala Land Parody Paradise*, ed. by Stephanie Rosenthal (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), pp. 192-202.

<sup>9</sup> *Blockhead* and *Daddies Big Head* were displayed outside Tate Modern, London, 19 May – 26 October 2003. *Complex Pile* was first shown in the grounds of the Middelheim Sculpture Museum in Antwerp (2007).

multifarious practice that touches on a number of different points in art and performance history.

McCarthy is still a practicing artist, and he continues to present his work at exhibitions, including most recently: *Paul McCarthy: Black and White Tapes* (1970-75) at SPACE gallery in London;<sup>10</sup> *Men in LA: Three Generations of Drawing* at The Box gallery in Los Angeles, where McCarthy's drawings were exhibited alongside those of fellow Los Angeles artists Naotaka Hiro and Benjamin Weissman;<sup>11</sup> and in September 2014 McCarthy will have a solo show, entitled *Paul McCarthy WS SC*, at Hauser & Wirth in London.<sup>12</sup> McCarthy also contributed a series of hyperreal life casts entitled *That Girl* (2013), with accompanying video documentation, to the group exhibition *The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture* at the Hayward Gallery in London, which explored a variety of ways in which artists since the 1980s have used and developed the human form through their work.<sup>13</sup>

*That Girl* was positioned as the centrepiece of *The Human Factor*, as it was displayed so as to be the final piece that visitors saw in the curated structure of the exhibition. The transition in focus from McCarthy's early, private performance works to his status as a major figure in the art world is important to my engagement with his work in this thesis, in which I trace the development of his work as a continuation and adaptation of performance. The rate of production of new works – aided by his production

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<sup>10</sup> *Paul McCarthy: Black and White Tapes*, SPACE studios, London, 24 January – 16 March 2014.

<sup>11</sup> *Men in LA: Three Generations of Drawing*, The Box, Los Angeles, 31 May – 5 July 2014.

<sup>12</sup> *Paul McCarthy*, Hauser & Wirth, London, 13 September – 1 November 2014.

<sup>13</sup> *The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture*, Hayward Gallery, London, 17 June – 7 September 2014.

team at McCarthy Studios in Altadena, California – and the number of exhibitions in which he participates has expanded the scope of McCarthy’s artistic practice and the variety of venues in which his work is presented. In this thesis I explore a number of different ways of engaging with McCarthy’s work, both within the art gallery and beyond. These include examining the artistic and curatorial contexts of McCarthy’s inclusion in large group shows; viewing video documentation of his performances; and observing how the documentation and dissemination of his early work in magazines influenced the development of his successful career.

McCarthy’s artistic practice spans many different genres and mediums, and categorising and describing the breadth of his work is a challenge that many who have written on his art have encountered. In his essay ‘Paul McCarthy’s 40 years of Hard Work – An Attempt at a Summary’, curator Magnus af Petersens highlights this challenge by suggesting that ‘McCarthy moves in and out of his own oeuvre in a way that makes it hard to discern the chronology.’<sup>14</sup> Instead, Petersens looks to the shifts in practice, the repetition, recreation and recycling of McCarthy’s work across different media which, he suggests, ‘has emerged as a theme in itself.’<sup>15</sup> In this thesis I look specifically at the development of performance throughout McCarthy’s practice and how, during his career, it has not only been transferred across different media but has informed and influenced every aspect of his artistic practice. McCarthy’s artistic work as a whole appears difficult to categorise in terms of media used; he might equally be

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<sup>14</sup> Magnus af Petersens, ‘Paul McCarthy’s 40 years of Hard Work – An Attempt at a Summary’, in *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head, Works 1966-2006*, ed. by Magnus af Petersens and Paul McCarthy (Stockholm: Steidl, 2006), pp. 9-23 (p. 10).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

called a performance artist, a sculptor, filmmaker, or installation artist. In any case, a common theme is the variety and breadth of references in McCarthy's work, both to art movements and practices – according to curator Lars Nittve, 'McCarthy has been searching out the points where isms, genres, tastes, influences and strategies intersect'<sup>16</sup> – and contemporary culture, and the difficulty of containing the work to a single genre. In broader histories of art and culture, McCarthy's aesthetic messiness and de-categorisation works against 'the historiography of modern art [in which] the principle of reduction is highly thought of.'<sup>17</sup> Instead of 'purity' he creates mess, an excess of visual and visceral material, which alienates as much as it intrigues. This is significant in that it enables me to challenge accepted histories or understandings of McCarthy's practice, and highlight the role of performance in visual art more broadly.

By focusing primarily on McCarthy's performance works and arguing for the influence of performance on other elements of his artistic practice, this thesis does not seek to offer an encyclopaedic assessment or survey of McCarthy's career. This is partly the case because detailed accounts of his work have already been produced, including: Ralph Rugoff's survey essay 'Mr McCarthy's Neighbourhood', which traces the artist's work from the 1960s to the mid-1990s; and the retrospective exhibition and extensive catalogue publication *Head Shop/Shop Head*, which details McCarthy's work up to the mid-2000s.<sup>18</sup> These, and other major publications on the artist, are discussed in more depth below.

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<sup>16</sup> Lars Nittve, 'Foreword', in *Head Shop/Shop Head*, pp. 5-6 (p. 5).

<sup>17</sup> Petersens, 'McCarthy's 40 years of Hard Work', p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Rugoff, 'Survey: Mr McCarthy's Neighbourhood', in *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon, 1995), pp. 30-87; *Paul McCarthy – Head Shop/Shop Head*, a retrospective

I focus on a number of key works in McCarthy's repertoire – notably, live performances, *Hot Dog* (1974) and *Monkey Man* (1980), video works, *Sailor's Meat* (1975) and *Tubbing* (1975), performance-related sculptural pieces, *Human Object* (1982) and *The Trunks* (1983), and installations, *The Garden* (1992), *The King* (2011), and *WS* (2013) – whilst referring briefly to other pieces that illustrate the breadth of his practice and the influence of performance on his work. Additionally, I complicate rote references to the development of McCarthy's practice – for example, that his work only became important to the art world in 1992 after the exhibition of *The Garden*<sup>19</sup> – and common assumptions – for example, that the difficult or disturbing elements of his work serve to shock or alienate audiences.<sup>20</sup> I focus on the development of performance in McCarthy's career and the influence of performance on his broader practice, whilst navigating the wealth of writing on his work.

### **Writings on the Artist's Work**

The narrative of McCarthy's work that I trace comes not only from the body of work produced by the artist, but is shaped by how scholars and curators

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exhibition, was shown at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, in 2006, and the catalogue *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head, Works 1966-2006*, was published in 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Cameron, 'The Mirror Stage' (extract), in *The Artist's Joke*, ed. by Jennifer Higgie (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 124-28 (p. 124). 'The Mirror Stage' was first published in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Dan Cameron and Lisa Phillips (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 57-63.

<sup>20</sup> For example, theatre and arts critic Lynn Barber admits that her initial response to McCarthy's work was: 'Christ, this is filthy, I've never seen anything as filthy as this.' Ralph Rugoff also describes McCarthy – though sympathetically – as 'a master of the taboo-smash, the frontal blow'. Lynn Barber, 'Power and the Glory', *Guardian*, 11 May 2003 <<http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2003/may/11/features.magazine37>> [accessed 25 January 2011]; Rugoff, 'Survey', p. 32.

have categorised his work elsewhere. Scholars have responded to the variety of genres and practices that McCarthy touches upon, resulting in a broad range of literature on the artist.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, McCarthy's performances were documented and reviewed in Los Angeles-based publications such as *Live*<sup>21</sup> and *LAICA journal*,<sup>22</sup> as well as national art publications such as *Arts Magazine*,<sup>23</sup> *The Flue*<sup>24</sup> (a publication of the Franklin Furnace Archive in New York) and international magazines such as Italian journals *La Repubblica*, and *Flash Art*, which covered performances he presented whilst touring.<sup>25</sup> In particular, *High Performance* magazine (discussed in Chapter One), was crucial to the documentation and dissemination of McCarthy's early work in Los Angeles. The magazine's main feature – the 'Artists' Chronicle' – documented the performance work of local and national artists with photographs and short texts. Among these, McCarthy's live performances, including *A Penis Painting Appreciated* (1980), *Monkey Man* (1980), and *Pig Man* (1980), were documented. Additionally, a number of special features, including extended interviews – such as 'Performance Interrupts: Interview with Paul McCarthy' (1978),<sup>26</sup> and 'Paul McCarthy,

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<sup>21</sup> Nancy Buchanan, 'Paul McCarthy, Monkey Man, Los Angeles Performance Festival', *Live*, 1980.

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Smith, 'Performance Paul McCarthy', *Journal, Southern California Art Magazine, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA)*, Los Angeles, January-February 1979, 45-47.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Cavaliere, 'Paul McCarthy Doctor Performance at Anna Canepa', *Arts Magazine*, 3.2 (1978).

<sup>24</sup> Linda Burnham, 'Live Sex Act: A Human Response to the Performances of Barbara Smith and Paul McCarthy', *The Flue*, 2.3 (Summer 1982), 12-14.

<sup>25</sup> Nicola Garrone, 'Performances: Chris Burden e McCarthy', *La Repubblica*, Rome, March 1980; Helena Kontova, 'American Performance Art Week', *Flash Art*, Florence, Summer 1980.

<sup>26</sup> Linda Burnham, 'Performance Interrupts', *High Performance*, 1.2 (1978), 8-12, 44-45.

The Evolution of a Performance Artist' (1985)<sup>27</sup>, presentations of preparatory drawings and previously unpublished texts, added to the weight of McCarthy's presence in *High Performance*. In 'Performance Interrupts', McCarthy's performances from the 1970s such as *Class Fool* (1976) and *Political Disturbance* (1976) are discussed in relation to the audiences who witnessed them, namely a classroom of students at University of California, San Diego in the former, and unsuspecting hotel guests and American National Theatre Conference delegates at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles in the latter. Whilst the purpose of the 'Artists' Chronicle' was to document performances objectively for reception by *High Performance* readers, this interview offers a more nuanced impression of the physiological experience of witnessing McCarthy's live works. Barabara T. Smith's review of *Hot Dog* (1974), in *LAICA journal* – published in 1979 – offers a similarly insightful account of McCarthy's visceral live works, as I explore in Chapter Two.

By contrast, 'The Evolution of a Performance Artist' is a reflective essay written by *High Performance* editor Linda Frye Burnham, whose personal and professional familiarity with McCarthy and investment in providing a platform for his work is evident. Burnham gives an overview of McCarthy's performances to date and begins to reflect on the potentially lasting categorisations of his work. By 1985, McCarthy had stopped making live performances, and as the progenitor of *High Performance* as a magazine devoted to performance by visual artists, Burnham was keen to impress the importance that 'McCarthy's work be seen in an art context',

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<sup>27</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, 'Paul McCarthy, The Evolution of a Performance Artist', *High Performance*, 8.1 (1985), 37-43.

rather than co-opted into ‘a tribal, shamanic, punk or new age context’, which was beginning to become evident elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> Burnham’s particular anxiety was that the development of performance art from visual art practices – the focus of her magazine – would be lost amongst practitioners from other disciplines, such as music and comedy, staking a claim in the heritage of performance art. The trajectory of McCarthy’s representation in *High Performance* – from the documentation of live works of the 1970s to broader reflections on his body of work as a mid-career artist gaining wider recognition – offers a valuable context for understanding the presentation and reception of works at a time when there was little in the way of rigorous scholarship on McCarthy’s practice.

In the early 1980s, art critic Thomas McEvilley and art historian Kristine Stiles began to analyse McCarthy’s performances alongside wider theoretical ideas on the primacy and influence of the unconscious, and the authority of the performing body over spoken or written language. In his article ‘Art in the Dark’, published in *Artforum* in 1983, McEvilley positions McCarthy’s work alongside that of Carolee Schneemann, the Viennese Actionists, Kim Jones, and Chris Burden, artists producing abject, visceral, body-based works that are rooted, McEvilley argues, in the performative gestures of Abstract Expressionism and Dionysian ritual.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, McEvilley argues for a celebration of this messy art – messy on account of the liberal use of bodily fluids and representational substances, animal blood, carcasses and raw meat, but also in its tendency to trouble the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 41. The relation of McCarthy’s work to shamanism became something of a rote reference after the publication of Thomas McEvilley’s essay ‘Art in the Dark’, discussed below.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas McEvilley, ‘Art in the Dark’, *Artforum* (Summer 1983), 62-71 (p. 65).



boundaries of what might be counted as art. McEvelley calls on critics not to turn away from such art and ‘contract’ instead around the familiar, ‘commodifiable esthetic object’, but to address the value in an art which necessarily ‘manipulat[es] semantic categories, by dissolving their boundaries selectively and allowing the contents of one to flow into another’.<sup>30</sup> More broadly, McEvelley points to the fact that whilst, in the 1960s, art audiences unaccustomed to performance and body art may have found the work to be ‘offensive and even insulting’, the gradual integration of performance art into art world discourse in subsequent decades provides a clear context for the work, and sets up critical framework for further investigation.<sup>31</sup>

In ‘Art in the Dark’, McCarthy is one of a number of artists whose work exemplifies the abject, visceral art that McEvelley champions, though the consistent destabilisation of genres and practices highlighted here can also be seen, I argue, throughout McCarthy’s career. By contrast, in her essay ‘Imploring Silence, Words and Performance Essence: A Polemic’, published in *High Performance* in 1985, Stiles takes McCarthy’s live performance *O, O, Inside* (1983) as the focus of her discussion.<sup>32</sup> In response to trends in performance art of the 1980s – notably, performed monologues, often autobiographical, revelatory or confessional solo pieces that she characterises as ‘superficial content in the guise of complicated rhetoric and dramatic hyperbole or language that is used to camouflage anxiety through jesting, teasing and ironical posturing’ – Stiles argues for

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> Kristine Stiles, ‘Imploring Silence, Words and Performance Essence: A Polemic’, *High Performance*, 8.1 (April 1985), 33-36.

the primacy of the body, its movements, gestures, and non-verbal modes of communication in performance.<sup>33</sup> For Stiles, in *O, O, Inside McCarthy* demonstrated the very concept of physicality that she was attempting to articulate. In the piece, McCarthy performed, bodily, inside a large structure shaped like a human figure – a doubling of the body – whilst mumbling nonsensical and at times inaudible phrases, thus diminishing the importance of linguistic clarity.

Published in *High Performance* in the pages preceding ‘The Evolution of a Performance Artist’, Stiles’ essay has the effect of setting up a tribute to the efficacy of McCarthy’s performance practice, which Burnham then compounds. For Stiles, the characteristically non-linguistic elements of McCarthy’s performances indicate the primacy of the body and the visual. Often McCarthy’s performances are punctuated by non-linguistic forms of communication; groaning, grunting and retching are common, with identifiable words and phrases few and far between. However, I argue throughout the thesis that this is more than just a recurring aesthetic choice in McCarthy’s work, that the artist deploys a kind of base, non-specific language to disrupt stable conclusions about his work.

Both Stiles and McEvilley’s articles are polemical in tone, and are influential and important touchstones for studies on McCarthy’s work. Each writer boldly states the importance of investing in artists whose work disrupts and disturbs boundaries, defies easy categorisation, and presents often dystopian or unsettling visions of the human condition. In turn, both Stiles and McEvilley hail McCarthy’s work as revelatory and representative

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

of such work that might easily be overlooked. For Stiles, McCarthy's work is significant because witnessing it enabled her to articulate (ironically, in written text) her dissatisfaction with overly wordy performances, and the physical embodiment of performance art that risks being lost. McEvilley's article is important because it contextualises McCarthy's practice not only among his peers but also his predecessors. It might be considered as a partner essay to Stiles' polemic – which perhaps risks championing McCarthy's work as an entirely isolated and unique practice – by working against the idea that dark and messy performance art is anathema, and situating it within a recognisable genealogy of influence.

In the 1990s, curatorial interest in McCarthy's work resulted in an increase of solo exhibitions – for example, *Painter* (1995) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Paul McCarthy* (1996) at Tomio Koyama Gallery in Tokyo, and *Santa Chocolate Shop* (1997) at Hauser & Wirth in Zurich – and scholarly writings on his work increased also. In 1996 the first major publication on McCarthy's work – entitled *Paul McCarthy* – provided a detailed overview of the different elements of his art from live performance to kinetic sculpture, an in-depth interview with the artist, excerpts of the artist's writings and preparatory sketches, and extracts of interviews from other sources and secondary readings. Ralph Rugoff's survey 'Mr McCarthy's Neighbourhood', guides readers through McCarthy's working practices from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s, and relates his work more broadly to artists including Yoko Ono, Stan Brakhage, Allan Kaprow, and Ed Kienholz. Rugoff addresses significant historical moments in McCarthy's career, particularly those that centre on a shift in artistic

practice – such as his retirement from live performance in the early 1980s – but also looks broadly at themes that connect across McCarthy’s work, such as the exploration and distortion of the human body. In his discussion of *Rear View* (1991-92), a plaster sculpture of a headless and limbless body atop a wooden table, what he calls the first in McCarthy’s series of ‘traumatised or mutant bodies’, Rugoff emphasises the humorous and performative element of the piece.<sup>34</sup> A light shining from the figure’s anus invites audience members to peer in, and on doing so they see a miniature model of a Swiss village. As Rugoff highlights, ‘to peep into the work one has to bend over in such a manner that one’s own rear end is pointedly exhibited, transformed into a spectacle for others.’<sup>35</sup> As Rugoff points out in an endnote, though the ‘social background’ to this work is important – that ‘in the 1980s, a kind of war was launched in the U.S. against the asshole and all it stood for’, notably ‘media hysteria over AIDS’ – he does not bring this context into direct discussion with McCarthy’s work.<sup>36</sup> As a survey, Rugoff’s essay offers a detailed account of McCarthy’s artistic work, the methods that he employs, and the themes that he touches upon, primarily within the bounds of formal analysis, thus providing a starting point for scholars elsewhere. However, Rugoff’s discussion of *Rear View* perhaps also represents a missed opportunity to draw on the potential socio-political implications of McCarthy’s work which, as I highlight, is one of the more slippery elements of his art; McCarthy presents violent or disturbing objects, images and gestures in his work but often forecloses the assumption that

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<sup>34</sup> Rugoff, ‘Survey’, p. 73.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 87, endnote 20.

there is any connection between the work produced and the subject who makes it.

Rugoff does however usefully complicate simplistic critical readings of McCarthy's work – notably, that his representation of sex and violence serves merely to 'assault [...] our nice etiquette and systematic euphemisms' – and offers a more complex impression of McCarthy's oeuvre, and the multiplicity of art historical and popular culture references.<sup>37</sup> I also aim to unpick received ideas about McCarthy's work, and open up a more in-depth engagement with his artistic practice through the lens of performance. I do this in order to show the complexity of McCarthy's work, and the effectiveness of approaching this complexity through performance.

In an interview with McCarthy published in the same volume, Kristine Stiles unearths and analyses some of the underlying themes in McCarthy's work, namely: latent violence; repressed memories; subject/object relations; and the centrality of the body in performance. This extended interview has been an important reference point for my project for several reasons. It is structured primarily around McCarthy's performances, and whilst object-based works are discussed – such as the metal sculpture *Dead H* (1968) – these are considered in relation to their performativity, and as an extension of McCarthy's interests in the body. In the interview, Stiles presses McCarthy on what I understand as some of the most important questions in his work, notably, on whether his use of violence in performance might be considered gratuitous, and why performance in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

particular is the best medium to engage with themes of violence and alienation.<sup>38</sup>

This interview is important because it functions as a site of struggle between Stiles' academic reading of McCarthy's work, and McCarthy's resistance to neat categorisations of art and theory. Stiles' interpretation of McCarthy's work is clearly influenced by psychoanalysis and particularly a deployment of issues around trauma. As a text that attempts to connect McCarthy's work to wider theoretical frameworks, this interview influences subsequent interpretations of McCarthy's work that emphasise its relation to psychoanalytic theory, including: Amelia Jones' essay 'Paul McCarthy's Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity'; and Anna-Lena Werner's article 'Architecture as Frame for Trauma: Video Installations by Paul McCarthy'.<sup>39</sup>

In discussion with me via email, Stiles indicated that the interview had in fact been reordered for publication – against her request – to de-emphasise the deeper analyses of McCarthy's own traumas (he indicates that in 1971-72 he experienced something akin to a nervous breakdown in which he 'mistrusted reality completely'<sup>40</sup>), but rather to discuss the theme of trauma more generally in his work.<sup>41</sup> Stiles was keen to push past the 'usual emphasis' on ketchup as a representative of blood, and insist that McCarthy grapple with deeper issues, notably, the significance of

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<sup>38</sup> Kristine Stiles, 'Interview: Kristine Stiles in Conversation with Paul McCarthy', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Ralph Rugoff (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 8-29 (pp. 20-22).

<sup>39</sup> Amelia Jones, 'Paul McCarthy's Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity' in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Dan Cameron and Lisa Phillips (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 125-31; Anna-Lena Werner, 'Architecture as Frame for Trauma: Video Installations by Paul McCarthy', *Performance Research*, 16.1 (2011), 153-63.

<sup>40</sup> Paul McCarthy cited in Stiles, 'Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy', p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> Kristine Stiles, unpublished email correspondence with the author, 23 August 2011.

architecture in his work and its relationship to trauma.<sup>42</sup> These insistences do appear in the text, and particularly at moments when Stiles asserts a particular reading – for example, McCarthy’s choice of masks in performance might be related to childhood memories, and *Dead H* might be related to trauma and the Vietnam War<sup>43</sup> – but McCarthy appears to sidestep the issue.

I read McCarthy’s resistance to confirming or denying such readings as a strategy that can also be seen more widely in his work. For example, in interview with Stiles, McCarthy admits that he often cannot place where his ideas for performances – particularly traumatic or violent ones – come from: ‘Are they specifically my traumas, or someone else’s that I have witnessed either directly or through the media?’<sup>44</sup> This muddling of private and personal, internal and external references is an important element of McCarthy’s work; where the sliding semiotic function of condiments and bodily fluids disrupt the scene of performance visually, the mixing of personal and cultural memories destabilises perceptions of reality and fantasy.

In the 2000s, McCarthy had two major retrospective exhibitions – *Paul McCarthy* (2000) in the U.S. (in Los Angeles, which then travelled to New York), and *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966-2006* (2006) in Stockholm – which indicates the acclaim that McCarthy’s work began to receive across the U.S. and Europe.<sup>45</sup> The exhibitions themselves

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, pp. 19, 26.

<sup>44</sup> McCarthy, cited in *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> *Paul McCarthy*, MOCA, Los Angeles, 12 November 2000 – 21 January 2001; New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 22 February – 13 May 2001. *Paul McCarthy*

were influential in the further dissemination of McCarthy's work – I outline my approach to the role of exhibitions and art institutions in the section on methodology below – and each was accompanied by a substantial catalogue. *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966-2006*, for example, contains a vast amount of visual documentation of McCarthy's performances, installations, and object-based works, which might be used as a visual survey of his work. The breadth of the work represented adds gravity to curator Magnus af Petersens' 'Attempt at a Summary', and the catalogue offers both a deluge of visual material – a testament to the messiness and chaos (and breadth) of McCarthy's practice – and a number of different approaches to categorising and thematising McCarthy's work. Notably, catalogue essays by Iwona Blazwick and by Thomas McEvilley divide the work more specifically into two broad categories: objects, statues and kinetic sculpture; and live performance and video.

In her essay 'Masks, Statues and Automata', Blazwick suggests that *Looking Out, Skull Card* (1968) – McCarthy's rudimentary mask-like object, made from a piece of cardboard with two eye-holes cut out – is a significant work not only in McCarthy's practice but as one of 'the most disruptive, protean and decisive objects in the trajectories of modern sculpture'.<sup>46</sup> *Looking Out, Skull Card* 'incorporates action and object, performer and viewer', and can also be seen as a generative work from which 'his anthology of masks, heads, mannequins and robots [...]

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*Head Shop/Shop Head: Works 1966-2006*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 17 June – 3 September 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Iwona Blazwick, 'Masks, Statues and Automata: Paul McCarthy as Figurative Sculptor', in *Head, Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head, Works 1966-2006*, ed. by Magnus af Petersens and Paul McCarthy (Stockholm: Steidl, 2006), pp. 25-32 (p. 25).



proceed[s].'<sup>47</sup> Blazwick draws connections, through this piece, across McCarthy's artistic practice, from live performances to video and even to the animatronic figures such as *Bavarian Kick* and the hyperrealistic *Mechanical Pig* (2003), and suggests that they influence and inform each other; by looking at one object or piece from McCarthy's artistic career one would be able to access a variety of other interconnected modes of working. This approach has influenced the structure of my thesis, which suggests that McCarthy's wide-ranging practice might be read substantially through performance, and that performance and other modes of art-making, such as sculpture, are not so easily separated.

Drawing from Petersens' essay – which stages the curator's genre trouble in the task of categorising and valuing McCarthy's work – I argue that McCarthy's work may be difficult to categorise, but that this might be the case partly because of the use of containers or signifiers of artistic practice. Terms like 'sculptor', 'painter', 'performance artist', for instance, point to the medium of practice but also act as convenient modes of classification, which McCarthy's work destabilises. I do not attempt to tidy up McCarthy's practice into a reading that considers everything under the category of 'performance', but to complicate structures already in place to provide a unique perspective on McCarthy's work, and on the relationship between ephemeral art and object-based practices.

In his catalogue essay 'Paul McCarthy: Performance and Video Works: The Layering', McEvelley categorises McCarthy's performance work according to '[e]arly structural films and videos' (roughly 1970-74),

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

‘the Ritual Films’ (1975-78), ‘works of the Sacred Clown – Social and Pop satire’ (1991-96), and ‘works of the chaotic cinema style’ (1996-2005).<sup>48</sup> McEvelley’s categorisation is useful for me because it provides a model for how a discussion focused primarily on performance might be structured. Grouping McCarthy’s performance works according to dates and periods of activity as McEvelley does has the advantage of concentrating a breadth of related work into distinct categories that can be concisely articulated. I do the same in reference to periods of McCarthy’s work – such as, video works of the 1970s, and humanoid sculptures of the 1980s and early 1990s – that I expand upon in Chapters Two and Three.

A period not covered in McEvelley’s survey is between 1979 and 1990; the ‘Ritual Films’ finish in 1978, and the ‘works of the Sacred Clown’ begin in 1991. This may be the case partly because McEvelley argues that McCarthy’s work in performance can be seen ‘as a gradual stage by stage revelation of cinema in video’, and so he focuses primarily on McCarthy’s videos.<sup>49</sup> The period in which McCarthy temporarily retired from performance (1983-91), would therefore not serve McEvelley’s argument. By contrast, I reclaim this period of McCarthy’s work as explicitly related to the development of his performance practice. As I argue in Chapter Three, by integrating performance objects into sculptures and creating surrogate performers, performance continues to inform McCarthy’s work and enables him to develop longer and more complex performance installations in the 1990s.

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas McEvelley, ‘Paul McCarthy: Performance and Video Works: The Layering’, in *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head, Works 1966-2006*, ed. by Magnus af Petersens and Paul McCarthy (Stockholm: Steidl, 2006), pp. 35-50 (p. 36).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Whilst the *Head Shop/Shop Head* catalogue is concerned with categorising and valuing the diversity of McCarthy's artistic career, the essays in the *Paul McCarthy* catalogue introduce more complex theoretical categorisations. In her Introduction, which provides a brief overview of received ideas about McCarthy's practice that later essays complicate further, Lisa Phillips highlights the visceral and challenging nature of McCarthy's work, primarily in relation to his performances and videos: 'It is unrelenting and obsessive in its anxiety and often difficult, even painful, to look at', she writes, '[i]t is so [...] disturbing that if you didn't know him, you might be full of fear and apprehension.'<sup>50</sup> I explore this concept in more depth in Chapter Two, and outline in the section below on the methodologies of my project how I begin to approach such characterisations of McCarthy's work. It is interesting to note, however, that overviews of McCarthy's work – Rugoff's 'Survey' for example – often start with bold statements about the iconoclastic nature of McCarthy's work and its potentially alienating qualities, and then detail how he has built up a complex and culturally significant body of work. For example, Phillips also emphasises McCarthy's interest in consumer culture and popular entertainment – 'Hollywood, television, theme parks – and how these sanitized images intersect with the dark underside of American life where child abuse, insanity, rape, pornography, and violence lurk'<sup>51</sup> – which by this point are established reference points for writings on his work. These become concrete markers around which to validate McCarthy's work, and

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<sup>50</sup> Lisa Phillips, 'Introduction: Paul McCarthy's Theater of the Body', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Phillips and Dan Cameron (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 2-5 (p. 2).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

their re-articulation on the occasion of McCarthy's retrospective, effectively compounds his position as a critical figure in the art world. In Chapter Two I complicate the connections between the challenging visual and visceral elements of McCarthy's performances, and the wider cultural issues that his art appears to represent. My assertion is that McCarthy's work cannot be read so straightforwardly as a cultural critique of, for example, violence on television or consumer culture – although it does do this in part – but that his apparent ambivalence on these issues is in fact one of the more perplexing elements of his practice.

In his contribution to the 2000 catalogue, Dan Cameron similarly highlights the achievements and influence of McCarthy's work, and emphasises the moment in 1983 when McCarthy retired from performance and began to make sculptural works as a radical change in practice.<sup>52</sup> Although my own narrative of McCarthy's work similarly pinpoints this moment as pivotal, I argue that it indicates a continuation, or adaptation, of performance practice through objects. Cameron reaches a similar conclusion, but suggests that it is objects, rather than performance, that opened up the later stages of his career. 'McCarthy has always been a sculptor at heart', Cameron suggests; producing objects was a 'way of capturing certain essential characteristic of his performances in a relatively permanent state, while opening up possibilities for making objects as effective a tool for expressing his ideas as events and images had been before.'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Dan Cameron, 'The Mirror Stage', in *Paul McCarthy* (2000), pp. 57-63 (p. 60).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, in her essay ‘Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity’, Amelia Jones brings together a number of latent themes in McCarthy’s work – notably, his use of architectural and embodied space in performance, and returning the ‘repressed male subject to a shameless, Edenic state or primitive lust’ – and makes them explicit.<sup>54</sup> Notably, she draws on Stiles’ description of *O, O, Inside* – also known as *Inside Out Olive Oil* (1983) – in ‘Imploring Silence’ to explore the artistic connections between McCarthy’s work and Happenings, Fluxus performances, and the Viennese Actionists, and readings of the subjective and psychological interpretations of his work. Perhaps the most significant proposal Jones makes in this essay is that the use and manipulation of the penis in McCarthy’s work – for example, in his video work *Sailor’s Meat* (1975) the artist straps a hotdog sausage to his penis and uses it to simulate sex with a half-empty jar of mayonnaise – is consistently ‘enacted as a *removable object*’.<sup>55</sup> Taking from the Freudian concept of the penis as ‘specifically marked as a symbol of masculine authority (the phallus)’, and of castration anxiety, Jones suggests that McCarthy’s body of work presents ‘what might be thought of as an extended castration narrative’ and ‘does not avow castration but *enacts* it on multiple registers.’<sup>56</sup>

In Chapter Three, I discuss McCarthy’s use of performance objects – and their particular significance beyond the performance event – alongside two psychoanalytic theories of objects: D. W. Winnicott’s object relations in *Playing and Reality*; and Sigmund Freud’s concept of the fetish. For Freud,

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<sup>54</sup> Jones, ‘Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body’, p. 128.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129. Emphasis in original.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

the fetish represents and ‘remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it’, a concept that McCarthy subverts by continually enacting gestures of castration.<sup>57</sup> Jones’ essay sets up reference points such as this to indicate how McCarthy’s work might extend and complicate Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In Chapter Two – in which I discuss themes of memory and trauma in McCarthy’s work – and Chapter Three, I refer to useful connections between McCarthy’s work and psychoanalytic theory, before extending my discussion to the material conditions of the production and reception of McCarthy’s work. Jones’ essay is significant in foregrounding psychoanalytic theory as an effective approach to the discussion of McCarthy’s work, although my aim is both to acknowledge its significance and propose a companion context for his work; namely, the documentation and dissemination of his work within art institutions, magazines and print culture, and art history.

### **Recent Scholarship on McCarthy’s Work**

The topicality of McCarthy’s work, and of my thesis, is evidenced by several recent publications on the artist. The *Oxford Art Journal* has published two articles on McCarthy’s work – by Milena Tomic on re-enactment in McCarthy and Kelley’s collaborative works (2013), and by Rachel Federman on the spaces and architectures in which McCarthy’s

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<sup>57</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Fetishism’ (1927), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931) The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, 24 vols, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), XXI, pp. 152-57 (p. 154).

performance works are presented, including via video and film projections in art galleries (2014).<sup>58</sup> Tomic's article in particular is useful for contextualising McCarthy's work in relation to recent trends in re-performance (as discussed in Chapter Four), and complicates the critical elements of McCarthy's work – namely, his commitment to failure as a political objective. McCarthy's work has since moved on from solo performance and small collaborative works to large multi-media installations, but Tomic's article brings McCarthy's performances back into focus, and demonstrates his continuing relevance to debates in contemporary art and performance.

Cary Levine's book *Pay For Your Pleasures: Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon*, published in 2013, considers the work of three Los Angeles artists, and contextualises their work more fully within the social and political environment of the 1970s.<sup>59</sup> Levine looks at the development of McCarthy, Kelley and Pettibon's work in performance, drawing, and sculpture, and the influence of a variety of subcultures – notably, musical influences and each artists' involvement in the Los Angeles punk and music scene. First, taking each artist's work in turn and offering detailed analyses of their cultural and artistic significance, and looking to connections across their work – for example, each artist's attempt or struggle to conceptualise masculinity – Levine discusses the interconnections of each under three further headings: gender, sex, and the

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<sup>58</sup> Milena Tomic, 'Fidelity to Failure: Re-enactment and Identification in the Work of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy', *Oxford Art Journal*, 36.3 (2013), 437-56; Rachel Federman, "'An Idealistic Utopian Thought": Paul McCarthy and the Spaces of Transmission', *Oxford Art Journal*, 37.1 (2014), 1-26.

<sup>59</sup> Cary Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures: Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

disillusion of adolescence. Significantly for McCarthy's performances, Levine makes explicit connections between his gender-bending visceral works and the influence of feminist artists in Los Angeles in the 1970s. As Levine recounts, McCarthy was invited by Judy Chicago to attend some performances by students at the Feminist Art Program (FAP), formed by Chicago in 1970 at Fresno State College and relocated to the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts) in 1971.<sup>60</sup> Levine argues that McCarthy's practice can be 'firmly linked' to that of FAP artists who 'examined female identity and patriarchal oppression through a mix of explicit bodily imagery, role playing, exaggeration, satiric humor, and flagrant defiance of social norms'.<sup>61</sup> To demonstrate this connection, Levine cites McCarthy's 'subsequent interest in costume and role playing, his play with identity and gender, his use of exaggeration and parody, and – perhaps most important – his broad focus on power structures and social conditioning.'<sup>62</sup>

Levine's publication brings a much-needed consideration of the social and political implications of McCarthy's work particularly, as Amelia Jones points out that performances made by 'the famous "straight White men" from LA during the [1970s], notably [Allan] Kaprow, [Chris] Burden, and McCarthy, was not then and is not now generally viewed as having been politically motivated or, in fact, linked to any coalitional or identity-related political concerns.'<sup>63</sup> I also briefly discuss McCarthy's performance work alongside the work of female artists, notably, Carolee Schneemann, Barbara T. Smith (both in Chapter Two), Karen Finley (in Chapter Three)

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Jones, 'Lost Bodies', p. 129.



and Suzanne Lacy (in Chapter Four), artists who share aesthetic or processual connections – for example the ritual of Schneemann’s *Meat Joy* (1968), and Finley’s visual and vocal assault *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989) – and those who share a history of living and working in Los Angeles, namely, Smith and Lacy. In my connection of McCarthy’s work to that of female artists, I aim to highlight the breadth of references that influence his work, and diversify the connections across art history.

### **Methodologies and Approaches**

Throughout the thesis, I argue that McCarthy’s performance works – live and video recordings – have influenced the visual, compositional and political elements of his artistic practice, and more broadly, I focus on the importance of performance in object-based works. The influence of performance on object-based practices – and its positioning in art histories as both a productive and disruptive form – is well documented. In particular, Amelia Jones’ scholarship on body art, gender, performance, documentation and visual art since the 1990s has been influential for the methodologies and approaches I take to McCarthy’s work in a number of ways. In “‘Presence in Absentia’: Experiencing Performance as Documentation”, Jones articulates the familiar frustration of art and performance historians, that they were not present at the initial event and can only access the work

through documentation.<sup>64</sup> Rather than viewing this non-presence as an obstacle preventing further discussion of the work, Jones delves further into the parasitical relationship between performance and documentation. Similarly, I look at documentation throughout this thesis in order to access and analyse McCarthy's performances. However, I also look at the public dissemination of his practice – namely, in print culture and in galleries and museums in Chapters One and Four respectively – to provide a more complex picture of the circulation and reception of his work.

Similarly, in 'Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Los Angeles Performance Art in Art History', Jones explicitly positions herself as bound by the limitations of her own subjectivity.<sup>65</sup> In her essay, Jones seeks to uncover lost or forgotten bodies of work – primarily performances made by artists whose bodies are identified as marginalised by art history – but at the same time uncovers and explicates her own blind spot, namely, her limited access to and knowledge of Asian-American performance history. In my choice to research McCarthy's art, I am working within a particular history and practice of performance that made itself known to me through studying art history – I first encountered McCarthy's work during my MA at the University of Nottingham – which has now been transferred to a new context and exposed to a new environment of study in the Department of Drama at Queen Mary. Jones works with apparently set structures and binaries – for example, the live event versus the document as a subject of

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<sup>64</sup> Amelia Jones, "'Presence in Absentia': Experiencing Performance as Documentation', *Art Journal* 56.4 (Winter 1997), 11-18.

<sup>65</sup> Amelia Jones, 'Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Los Angeles Performance Art in Art History', in *Live Art in LA: Performance Art in Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. by Peggy Phelan (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 115-84.

study, and the discriminatory marginalisation of artists based on gender, sexuality, or ethnicity – and complicates them from within. In a further example with relevance to my thesis, in *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Jones revises the lineage of performance art to Abstract Expressionism and action painting – which she re-names the ‘Pollockian Performative’, in her ‘Revision of the Modernist Subject’.<sup>66</sup> McCarthy disrupts the genealogy of action painting in several works, including his video piece *Painter* (1995) – discussed in Chapter Three – and *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint* (1974), discussed in Chapter Four. Like Jones, I operate within a repertoire of known work – McCarthy’s diverse artistic practice – and seek to complicate modes of thinking around his work, primarily to argue that the critical efficacy of his wide-ranging work might be read persuasively through performance.

More recently, Jones has turned to unpacking the disciplinary connections and crossovers between art history and performance studies, particularly in the context of re-enactments of historical performances, and the revival and renewal of marginalised histories. In her essay ‘The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in History’, Jones considers the crossing of art historical and performance studies perspectives in relation to ‘how visual and embodied cultural expressions come to *mean*’, that is, through the performative.<sup>67</sup> The performative, ‘loosely understood [...] as the reiterative enactment across time of meaning (including that of the “self”

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<sup>66</sup> Amelia Jones, ‘The “Pollockian Performative” and the Revision of the Modernist Subject’, in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 53-102.

<sup>67</sup> Amelia Jones, ‘The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in History’, in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. by Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012), pp. 11-25 (p. 12). Emphasis in original.

or subject) through embodied gestures, language, and/or other modes of signification’, Jones argues, ‘opens the supposedly static work of art constructed by art history to the temporal, and to the vicissitudes of invested and embodied engagement by visitors to, participants in, or viewers of the work’.<sup>68</sup> Whilst performance studies ‘tends to *dematerialize*, [and] to think of culture as equally performative’, art history provides ‘rigorous ways of thinking about how specific objects, images, performance works function culturally, and about how to understand the connectedness of such material/materials and the vicissitudes of social and political history.’<sup>69</sup>

However,

while art history, with its connected institutions and discourses (the art exhibition, art gallery and market, curatorial practice, and art criticism), insists on containing the artwork as a discrete and knowable “object,” a consideration of the performative “de-contains” the work, reminding us that its meaning and values are contingent.<sup>70</sup>

Jones conceptualises the crossover between art history and performance studies as performatively enabling the ‘de-containment’ of seemingly stable art works, and valuing rigorous analysis of objects, images and events within a wider context. She suggests that studying the processes by which performance gets written into art history, and ephemeral events, images and

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

objects reiterated across different periods and institutions, taking from both art history and performance studies might be an effective approach.

Jones' representation of disciplinary crossovers in the study of performance art mirrors the development of performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan's definition of performance. In the seminal *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Phelan declared the primary ontological status of performance as its 'disappearance': 'Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.'<sup>71</sup> As noted earlier, my analysis of McCarthy's work is conducted primarily via critical viewing of documentation. Whilst Phelan's point perhaps undermines the significance of documentation in performance, and the relevance of performance to nuanced readings of McCarthy's object-based works that I propose, the prevalence of her ontology is impossible to ignore. Matthew Reason has suggested that ironically 'the centrality of this discourse of transience' – in other words, 'the sheer number of times that performance is described as transient, ephemeral, fleeting, temporary, momentary' – has preserved this ontology not only as the basis for scholarly studies of performance, but 'exists first in each of our own experiential knowledge, whether as an audience member, researcher or practitioner.'<sup>72</sup>

Performance scholar Philip Auslander has also argued against disappearance as the primary ontological status of performance, by

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<sup>71</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 9.

suggesting that performance is always already an act of reproduction, since live performance is inseparable from the mediating technologies that record it.<sup>73</sup> However, in 2012, in her essay ‘Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral’, Phelan builds on definitions of the ephemeral in performance and dematerialisation, by suggesting that in fact live art ‘is not so thoroughly exceptional’ in its ephemerality: ‘Paint fades; sculpture contends with gravity; drawing loses its shadow if left in light too long.’<sup>74</sup> She highlights the activities of art institutions, namely collecting and displaying paintings and sculpture, which, each time they are brought out, are re-assembled or re-performed in a new context. Specifically, she looks to the sculptural works of Eva Hesse, whose ‘decision to work with perishable materials stands on the threshold between two ways of thinking about the performative force of object-based art’, and creates a kind of ‘slow ephemerality’, in which the art work, if defined by its materiality, slowly fades.<sup>75</sup>

Both Phelan and Jones are responding to a context in which performance art has become progressively integrated into art galleries and the art world, and re-performance and the recovery of marginal histories of performance through re-enactment has become commonplace. For example, *Live Art in LA* (to which both Phelan and Jones contributed) was commissioned by the Getty Research Institute as part of the *Pacific Standard Time (PST) Performance and Public Art Festival* in Los Angeles in

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<sup>73</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 40.

<sup>74</sup> Peggy Phelan, ‘Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral’, in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California*, pp. 1-38 (p. 12).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

2012 (discussed in Chapter Four), which was dedicated to re-evaluating the history of performance art in Los Angeles through a series of exhibitions, re-performances, and newly commissioned works. This large-scale festival was invested not only in revising histories of performance art through re-enactment, but more broadly, and as I argue, the tactics employed for re-evaluating performance histories also applied to a wider re-appraisal of Los Angeles art history, and specifically for the positioning of McCarthy's work in several different narratives of art. In this way, performance influences and destabilises otherwise neat categories of art history, and – to paraphrase Jones – 'de-contains' artworks, it makes them unstable, elusive, and demands that they be returned to. Jones' approach to seeking out the disciplinary connections between art history and performance studies, and the contribution this makes to both, acts as a key foundation of my analysis of McCarthy's work.

In an interview with Kristine Stiles, McCarthy was asked why 'performance seemed to be the best medium' to express his ideas, to which he responded:

It is a physical process, making an object while in character, in persona. It is related to everyday life, the passing of time. The mediums of action/performance and object/sculpture get confused. I am interested in images produced during the performance. My photographs of performances are more about painting than

performance; they are images in rectangles to be placed on the wall or in a book. They are not the performance.<sup>76</sup>

In his typically non-linear manner of describing his work, McCarthy's explanation of his interest in performance touches upon: the physical labour of performing; the performance of everyday life; temporality; the creation of objects and images in performance; the interconnection of live actions and sculptural objects; the documentation of live works and circulation of photographs; and the mistaken assumption that live events and performance photographs are interchangeable. In this extract, and more broadly across his career, McCarthy's work acts as a nexus of references, not only to performance but also art history, pop culture, Hollywood film, psychoanalysis, Walt Disney, and theatre, the influences and references of which are clear to see (as I will discuss). My reasons for structuring this thesis around performance however, is, as McCarthy indicates, related to the connections that performance makes between ephemerality and materiality, between high art and everyday life, between objects, images, and actions, and significantly, how performance might be able to destabilise or unsettle seemingly discrete categories of work. My aim is not to contain the work but to use one category (or anti-category) to open up the ways of reading McCarthy's practice. He works fluidly between media, genre, and disciplines, which, as I argue, all might be read through or connected to performance. In this way McCarthy's work offers a persuasive case study

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<sup>76</sup> Stiles, 'Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy', p. 20.



for thinking about the relationship between performance and object-based art, and between performance studies and art history.

As I indicated earlier, scholars such as Stiles and Jones have conducted discussions of McCarthy's work that are informed by psychoanalytic theory. Similarly, in his categorisation of the development of McCarthy's performances, McEvelley assigns each stage to varying states of subjectivity. Early performances, for example, represent 'the autistic situation of the single performer videotaping himself; then consciousness dualizes or splits, there is a subject and an object – the single performer with a camera-person.'<sup>77</sup> Eventually his work expands 'into an increasingly multifarious world', although works staged are still 'all centred around the character played by McCarthy.'<sup>78</sup> In Chapter Three – in which I discuss McCarthy's use of performance objects – I briefly discuss the possibility of the performance object as fetish (via Freud), and offer a more sustained engagement with D. W. Winnicott's work on transitional objects and phenomena. Like McEvelley's development of performance from the solo subject to subject-object, which then broadens out to wider cultural context, I too read McCarthy's work as a gradual expansion of subjectivity in performance, and the manipulation and eventual decaathexis of performance objects (selling them in the art market as sculptures) enables McCarthy to develop an expansive repertoire of work.

Psychoanalytic theory also informs parts of my thesis – for example, subject-object relations in art – and is a useful tool for unpacking some of the complex and sometimes confusing elements of McCarthy's work. For

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

example, in Chapter Two I deploy Julia Kristeva's work on abjection to analyse the visceral and affecting experience of witnessing McCarthy's performances live – articulated in an account by artist Barbara T. Smith – and my own reflection on his video work *Tubbing* (1975). However, as Petersens has suggested, McCarthy's work is often 'so overwhelming that one easily confuses the man with the work.'<sup>79</sup> I aim to avoid readings of McCarthy's work as biographical reflections of his internal psyche – although his work does seem to provoke this tendency, as I will discuss – because it risks reducing the complexity of the work, and potentially ignoring the material and cultural factors that are so central to McCarthy's practice. This approach is reflected in the structure of the thesis, in which the two central chapters – Two and Three – employ aspects of psychoanalytic theory to carry out a sustained and focused engagement with McCarthy's work, and are bracketed by Chapters One and Four, which explore broader contexts for his art, namely, dissemination via print culture and exhibitions in museums and galleries.

In her essay 'Psycho-Phallus (Qu'est-ce que c'est?)' Mignon Nixon discusses a photographic portrait of Louise Bourgeois (by Robert Mapplethorpe) (1982) holding her phallic-shaped sculpture *Fillette* under her arm, with a wry smile on her face. Nixon works systematically through a number of claims about the portrait, the pose, and the object as 'an intervention in Modernist history', suggesting 'that, even at its most aesthetically radical, sculptural abstraction regulates itself to the patriarchal

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<sup>79</sup> Petersens, 'McCarthy's 40 years of Hard Work', p. 9.

order through its consummate sublimation of bodily form.’<sup>80</sup> Using a psychoanalytic framework, Nixon persuasively argues that Bourgeois’ *Fillette*: ‘works against abstraction’; ‘reworks the fetish’; ‘works as a part-object’; and ‘does theoretical work’.<sup>81</sup> Specifically, Nixon works against ‘art criticism’s dominant paradigm for expressing the relation between art and theory: namely, that the work of art demonstrates or applies a theoretical principle’, and looks to elevate ‘art [that] intervenes in theoretical discourse’, art that ‘theorizes’, but which is ‘too seldom recognised.’<sup>82</sup> Whilst this critique might be applied to different theoretical frameworks for art analysis, Nixon focuses particularly on psychoanalytic theory, the status of which, she claims, ‘art history has tended to disregard [...] as a discourse, and instead has too often been determined to find in it a set of interpretative keys.’<sup>83</sup>

Throughout the thesis I indicate how McCarthy’s work has been theorised by scholars using psychoanalytic theory, and discuss the effectiveness of this approach. Primarily, I take from Nixon’s argument that whilst the artist’s work may appear suitable or appropriate to illustrate examples of psychoanalytic theory it may also be the case that the work itself does the theorising, actively intervenes and destabilises certain readings. Similarly, my reading of McCarthy’s work is precisely linked to the promise of destabilisation that it offers, particularly of the boundaries between performer and audience, between representations of male and

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<sup>80</sup> Mignon Nixon, ‘Psycho-Phallus (Qu’est-ce que c’est?)’ in *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. by Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 397–408 (p. 400).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 397, 400, 403, 406. Emphasis in original.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

female personas, between reality and simulation, and between subject and object.

In Chapter Two, I depart somewhat from psychoanalytic theory and look to recent scholarship on affect and emotion in art, to offer a different perspective on McCarthy's work. Moving between approaches influenced by psychoanalysis and by affect theory offers a unique way to access McCarthy's work, since the former examines the subject (the artist/the art) and the latter seeks to position the viewer/audience within the scene itself, and reads emotions as an important political and intersubjective engagement with the work. It also contextualises the challenging, upsetting, or disgusting elements of McCarthy's practice – particularly his visceral performances from the 1970s – within wider theoretical frameworks.

In her essay 'How Ron Makes Me Feel: The Political Potential of Upsetting Art', Jones investigates the force and variety of feelings felt when watching live artist Ron Athey 'perform or looking at a photograph of Athey's bleeding, penetrated body'.<sup>84</sup> Jones suggests that audiences of Athey's work may feel anger, empathy, love, revulsion, or any combination of these emotions, upsetting spectators emotionally, but that his 'practice also upsets structures of art – systems of judgment by which we discuss, organize, curate, and otherwise make sense of the special domain of objects or performances we deem aesthetic.'<sup>85</sup> In Chapter One I introduce the challenging nature of McCarthy's work by focusing on its censorship from the catalogue of the Long Beach Museum of Art video exhibition in 1976.

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<sup>84</sup> Amelia Jones, 'How Ron Makes Me Feel: The Political Potential of Upsetting Art', in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. by Dominic Johnson (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2013), pp. 152-78 (p. 152).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

In Chapter Two I explore in depth McCarthy's stomach-churning, visceral performances of the 1970s, juxtaposing my own reading of the video performance *Tubbing*, with Barbara T. Smith's experience of the live performance *Hot Dog*. Similarly, I discuss the effect not only of producing upsetting emotions – fear, revulsion, sympathy – but also the destabilisation of neat categories of art that McCarthy's work effects. Whilst the visual and visceral spectacle of McCarthy's performances wanes as he moves towards object-based art in the 1980s and 1990s, this destabilisation of art categories continues in different ways, and can be seen in his large-scale installations in recent years (discussed in the Conclusion).

Jones goes on to express how Athey's work 'addresses feelings, but also the potential content and force of these feelings', enabling her 'to explore how it opens up circuits of intersubjective identification and desire that are fundamentally social and thus potentially political.'<sup>86</sup> In my discussion of McCarthy's performances in Chapter Two, I suggest that his work addresses feelings, primarily of alienation and arguably also (in the case of Smith's reading of *Hot Dog*) feelings of empathy and care, but that the political potential of these feelings remains ambiguous. Throughout the thesis, although particularly in Chapter Two, I note that McCarthy often presents violent or traumatic images that appear on one hand to be a gesture of critique (for example, of violence in film and on television, or the ideological violence inherent in consumer culture; he refers to the notion of violently 'force-fed' images<sup>87</sup>); on the other, he seems merely to perpetuate and participate in the representation of violence without a constructive

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Stiles, 'Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy', p. 26.

political or affective aim. This is a difficulty inherent in McCarthy's practice, which I identify throughout the thesis; my subjective reading of his video performances in Chapter Two is, like Jones' reading of Athey's work, an attempt to come closer to the affective and political potential of McCarthy's work, where 'structures of art' or 'systems of judgement' might otherwise have failed, or are outdated.<sup>88</sup>

A further context for my research is the study of performance documentation, objects and live events in museums and art galleries, as the public framing and dissemination of McCarthy's work. In Chapters Three and Four in particular, I look at major group exhibitions – such as *Helter Skelter: L. A. Art in the 1990s* (1992), *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (1998), and several exhibitions in the *PST* programme (2011-12) – in which McCarthy's work has been presented, and the influence of this framing on the subsequent development of his career. As performance scholar Meiling Cheng has suggested, art museums – and by extension, art curators and museum directors – hold the 'power to regulate and transmit knowledge', of what might be considered 'historical truth' and 'valuable art'.<sup>89</sup> As a result, Cheng argues, '[t]he viewing public temporarily assumes a suspension of disbelief in exchange for the experience of being informed, provoked, or entertained', which, she suggests, in the exercise of '*consensual illusion*', might in fact be characterised as '*theatrical*'.<sup>90</sup> In my analysis of exhibitions in which McCarthy is included – notably, exhibitions of his object-based or

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 89.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

installation work, and in other cases, photographic and video documentation of his performances – I highlight the ideological work of his inclusion and visibility, but also how re-iterations of his practice in these spaces contribute to the narrative of performance that his work traces. Primarily, the presentation of performance objects, detritus, documents, and progressively, live events, expands the reception and positioning of McCarthy's work beyond the art world, and towards consideration within theatre and performance contexts.

In *Theatre & Museums*, Susan Bennett points out that traditionally, 'museums traffic mostly in material designated as representing the past, while theatrical performance takes place resolutely in the present, ephemeral, resistant to collection.'<sup>91</sup> Performance art, however, as Bennett highlights, has been characterised by an historical, and arguably, ongoing move 'between drama and art, stage and museum', with the effect 'that theatre and performance studies scholars and visual arts scholars have each claimed the practice for their own discipline.'<sup>92</sup> I also take the position that developments in and variants of performance art, notably, those that I identify within McCarthy's practice, might be claimed for both visual art and performance histories. In Chapter One I focus on the specific development and documentation of performance as live events by *visual* artists – a characterisation enforced by *High Performance* editor, Linda Frye Burnham. In Chapter Two however, I consider the theatrical elements of McCarthy's performances, alongside histories of theatre and experimental

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<sup>91</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre & Museums* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

performance as outlined by Beth Hoffmann in ‘Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art’.<sup>93</sup> Through Hoffmann, I suggest that the theatrical elements of McCarthy’s work might be reclaimed, and that performance studies offers an effective companion context to art history and visual culture, in which to study McCarthy’s characteristically interdisciplinary practice.

The importance of studying the context for the dissemination and reception of McCarthy’s work is outlined further below, in my use of archival research and print culture – specifically, *High Performance* magazine and the essential role it played in the documentation of McCarthy’s early practice. In Chapter One, I discuss *High Performance* not only in terms of its content and particular framing of performance art – notably, allowing the form to flourish away from unfavourable comparisons to other art and performance genres – but account for magazine and journal studies as an effective methodological approach to studying performance. In her article ‘The Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde: Performance Art as Democratic Culture, 1970-2000,’ Britta B. Wheeler traces the institutionalisation of performance art through a number of different stages between 1970 and 2000.<sup>94</sup> She uses the timeline of *High Performance* magazine – particularly the late 1970s to the mid-1980s – as an historical record of performance trends, and in particular, its move away from experimental practice towards institutionalisation in art galleries and

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<sup>93</sup> Beth Hoffmann, ‘Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art’, *Performance Research*, 14.1 (2010), 95-105.

<sup>94</sup> Britta B. Wheeler, ‘The Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde: Performance Art as Democratic Culture, 1970-2000’, *Sociological Perspectives*, 46. 4 (2003), pp. 491-512.



theatres. Similarly, I reflect on the historical significance of *High Performance* in documenting and disseminating performance art, but also utilise it as a critical tool to open up wider debates about the cultural and critical context of performance documentation. Notably, I contribute to studies of the magazine's structure, and question its objectivity – not to diminish the magazine's influence, but to highlight how influential print culture has been on the history of performance art, and ultimately, for McCarthy's practice.

### **Research Methods**

Alongside these methodologies and theoretical approaches, I employed a number of research methods for my project. Primarily, I undertook archival research at institutions in London and Los Angeles. I accessed back issues of *High Performance* magazine, and other publications such as *Artforum* at the Tate Library archive in London, and primary material at the *High Performance* archive at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in Los Angeles. In both cases this provided primary material – performance photos, performance texts, artist interviews, editorial papers and contributor files – and secondary material, including critical articles, related publications, readers' responses and contextual documents. Accessing this volume of material enabled me to develop a full chapter around the magazine, discuss aspects of its production and development in detail, and explicate its significance for the early documentation and dissemination of performance art. As a primary resource, the magazine contains some of the only

documentation of performances – including McCarthy’s – from its time of publication.

I also accessed files on the exhibition *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* (1992) – as discussed in Chapter Three – at the exhibitions archive at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles. This included files on the research and development of the exhibition, extensive press coverage including critical reviews that questioned the particular characterisations of Los Angeles art prominent in the exhibition, and interviews with the curator and featured artists. Material gathered from this archive is significant in contextualising the reception of the exhibition, and in particular how it contributed to the canonisation of contemporary Los Angeles artists in the 1990s.

In Los Angeles I also accessed material on past projects and exhibitions at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), an art gallery, performance space and archive, established in 1978. In my discussion of exhibitions and events in the *PST* programme I primarily analyse those that I have seen in person (see below on critical viewing). However, archival work at LACE offered insight into its contribution to performance histories of Los Angeles, and more specifically, the representation of McCarthy’s sculptural piece *Humanoid* (1982), and an exhibition recognising the legacy of *High Performance* entitled, *High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978-1982* (2003).

I also conducted a number of interviews and email correspondence with editors, curators and scholars associated with or invested in McCarthy’s work. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview McCarthy

himself, as his working schedule during my time of research was such that there was no opportunity to meet and discuss his work. I was however able to meet and discuss with a number of associated individuals, the objectives of my research and their unique approaches to representing and understanding McCarthy's work.

In January 2012, I met with John C. Welchman, Professor of Modern Art History at UC San Diego, who has written extensively on McCarthy and also Mike Kelley – with whom McCarthy often collaborated – and contemporary art in Southern California. Welchman offered personal insights into the practice of writing about McCarthy and Kelley, and made pedagogical suggestions about the structure of my project. Notably he emphasised that a focused study on McCarthy's performance practices would make for an interesting and important line of enquiry, and encouraged me to develop further the position of my own project on McCarthy's work in relation to existing research.

In 2012 I also interviewed Paul Schimmel – then chief curator at MOCA – and curator of *Helter Skelter* (1992), *Out of Actions* (1998), and *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art, 1974-1981* (2011). We discussed each of these exhibitions, McCarthy's place within the various histories of each of them, Schimmel's curatorial interests and practices, and the practicalities and pitfalls of curating group exhibitions. An important practical point that emerged was the possibility of interpreting curatorial actions too literally, and to consider large group exhibitions in particular as something more like a set of negotiations between a group of collaborators. This has contributed, for example, to my consideration of *Helter Skelter* as a

moment of recognition for McCarthy (among other Los Angeles artists) on an internationally recognised (though importantly, Los Angeles-based) stage.

I also initiated email contact with Linda Frye Burnham, editor of *High Performance* magazine (1978-86), and Michael Duncan, curator of *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles* (2012), in which McCarthy's work featured. Burnham's influence on the representation and dissemination of McCarthy's work in the 1970s in Los Angeles was substantial, and I focus on this particular context in Chapter One. Burnham provided an insight into the founding principles of *High Performance* magazine – notably, the significance of performance documentation, and the imperative to provide a space for its circulation – and the suitability of McCarthy's work for this particular mode of dissemination. As an extension of Chapter One, in Chapter Four I focus on another context for McCarthy's work, namely, its circulation in exhibitions. Duncan provided perspective on the genealogy of figurative art in Los Angeles, of which he considers McCarthy a significant part. Again, the imperative for this narrative of figurative art to be told, and McCarthy's prominence within it, has shaped my argument for the significance and influence of McCarthy's work.

I also contacted Kristine Stiles, Professor of Art, Art History and Visual Studies at Duke University, who has written extensively on McCarthy's work. Stiles provided a reflection on the particular focus of her scholarship on McCarthy and other artists (such as John Duncan, discussed in Chapter One), in relation to trauma and the unconscious. She admitted that initially she found the use of psychoanalytic theory to discuss

performance art problematic, as it threatened to swamp the performance with over-intellectualised language. It has, however, since become a mainstay in her writing, and her work on McCarthy has certainly influenced the psychoanalytic leaning of writing on his work. My own relationship to theory in the understanding and analysis of McCarthy's work is influenced by this; that it is an appropriate and persuasive tool for drawing out the theoretical work that his art does, but that looking to wider material and reception contexts for his work is essential. Navigating a number of psychoanalytical concepts in my research – for example, object relations, trauma, and dreams – has enabled a close reading of affective, psychically and physiologically challenging elements of McCarthy's work, although I also emphasise the importance of considering the wider historical and material contexts of performance art.

During the course of my research I have also undertaken a series of critical viewings of exhibitions – notably, *L.A. RAW* and *Under the Big Black Sun* – performances, talks, and video recordings of McCarthy's work. On a research trip to Los Angeles in 2012, I was able to see many of the live events that I discuss in Chapter Four. These include: curatorial and scholarly lectures by Glenn Phillips (co-curator of the *PST Performance and Public Art Festival*), Michael Duncan, and Thomas Crow (director of the GRI, 2000-07); artists' talks by Kim Jones and Barbara T. Smith; and performances from Liz Glynn's *Spirit Resurrection* programme and Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in January*. Often, these events were accompanied by publications, pamphlets and online information, and observing the connection between the live events and their documentation

helped to develop a sense of how histories of performance are constructed and circulate in contemporary culture.

Similarly, viewing exhibitions and installations in London such as Paul McCarthy's *The King, The Island, The Train, The House, The Ship* (Hauser & Wirth, 2011) enabled me to develop material for my Conclusion, which reflects on McCarthy's recent works and demonstrates how the elements of performance I discuss have influenced his ongoing practice. Hauser & Wirth – McCarthy's representing gallery – also provided me access to digital recordings of McCarthy's performances, particularly those from the 1970s, which are otherwise only accessible through photographs and exhibition screenings.

### **Thesis Structure and Chapter Summaries**

Following the Introduction – which focuses primarily on the scholarly context of the thesis explicitly in relation to McCarthy's work – Chapter One consider contexts for the criticism, appreciation and dissemination of McCarthy's work, and performance art more generally. In Chapter One I offer a context for the broader implications of reading an art magazine – specifically, *High Performance*, although I explore other journal publications alongside it – as a discursive object. My strategy for approaching the material for Chapter One – consulting archival material and back issues of *High Performance* held in specialist libraries – I also claim as a methodology (as noted above). In Chapters Two and Three, I offer a close

and extended analysis of McCarthy's works between the mid 1970s and the early 1990s, focusing particularly on broadening analyses of his performance work, and its influence on his wider practice. These two chapters are bracketed by Chapter Four, in which I expand out to consider a different context in studies of McCarthy's work, namely, the exhibition. In Chapter Four I look at the *PST* art and performance programme (2011-12), during which McCarthy's work appeared in several different exhibitions. This chapter offers a further, more recent context for the reception and dissemination of McCarthy's art. Chapters One and Four mirror each other by taking two similar approaches to contextualising McCarthy's work – namely, Chapter One on printed matter and Chapter Four on exhibitions and art institutions – whilst Chapters Two and Three offer a more focused consideration of the detail and complexity of McCarthy's art.

The chapters are arranged roughly chronologically, and trace the development of McCarthy's artistic practice from the mid-1970s to 2013, focusing specifically on his use of performance and the various ways it has been deployed in his work. Using McCarthy's work as a guide, I also address a number of key discussions in the history of performance, notably: the documentation and dissemination of performance art; scholarly readings of performance influenced by psychoanalysis and affect theory; performance objects as stand-ins for the artist's body; re-enacting historical performances as a method of engaging with performance history; and the integration of live performance and documentation into art institutions.

In Chapter One, I introduce *High Performance* magazine (1978-83), as an early vehicle for the dissemination of McCarthy's performances. *High*

*Performance* was established as a unique publication which provided coverage for performance art that was otherwise lacking in the mainstream U.S. art press. Specifically, it nurtured performance by *visual* artists, since its editor Linda Frye Burnham considered other types of performance (theatre, dance, music, comedy), to be already satisfactorily represented elsewhere. The significance of *High Performance* has been recognised in recent years by curators and performance scholars, particularly in the revival and renewal of histories of performance art in Los Angeles as part of the *PST* festival (discussed in Chapter Four). In this chapter I establish the artistic and critical context for McCarthy's early performances in Los Angeles, and highlight the significance of *High Performance* in the development of artistic and scholarly interest in his work. More broadly, I indicate the role that art magazines and journals play in shaping the way that performance art history is disseminated to contemporary audiences.

In Chapter Two, I focus in on two of McCarthy's video performances from the mid-1970s – *Sailor's Meat* (1975) and *Tubbing* (1975). These works are often paired curatorially and in surveys of McCarthy's work, and share a number of aesthetic and stylistic themes – not least the signature use of ketchup, mayonnaise, cold cream, sausages and ground meat – that McCarthy uses throughout his career. These are by no means the only performances in which McCarthy uses these substances – I point to a number of earlier performances in which they were used, and to their appearance in later performance and sculptural works – but I argue that *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing* are important touchstone performances in his career. Notably, scholarly writings on these performances from the mid-



1990s onwards open out broader theorisations of McCarthy's work, particularly in relation to ritual, theatricality, trauma, and abjection. I analyse various characterisations of McCarthy's performances as 'a theatre of regression',<sup>95</sup> and as 'architecture of the body',<sup>96</sup> before presenting my own subjective reading of the works.

In Chapter Three I focus on the moment – in 1983 – when McCarthy retired from making live performances and turned to object-based works, including kinetic sculptures and installations which, in many ways, were influenced or shaped by his performance practice. McCarthy often recycled objects used in his performances as sculptural pieces that enabled him to begin selling his works and contribute more substantial works to international exhibitions such as *Helter Skelter* (1992), and *Out of Actions* (1998). I argue that McCarthy's object-based practices are an extension of his performance work, and that in creating humanoid figures and kinetic tableaux McCarthy installs objects that perform in his absence. I situate McCarthy's practice within wider discussions of the interrelationship of objects and subjects, performance remains, commodity production and performance labour.

Chapter Four looks more broadly at the recent trend of re-enacting, adapting or appropriating historical performances as a way of engaging with performance history and contributing to histories of ephemeral art as they are reiterated over time. Specifically, I look at the *PST* programme, commissioned by the Getty and held in Los Angeles between 2011 and 2012, in which a wide range of re-performance strategies were used to

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<sup>95</sup> Rugoff, 'Survey', p. 33.

<sup>96</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, 'Interview: Stiles in conversation with McCarthy', p. 23.

revisit and re-write histories of Los Angeles art. McCarthy's work appeared in several different exhibitions in the programme, relating not just to performance, but to histories of abject art, Abstract Expressionism, and 1970s artistic pluralism. His performance work was primarily displayed through non-live media, photographs and videos which document the events, whilst his contemporaries such as Suzanne Lacy staged large-scale re-enactments of works from the 1970s. Lacy's activist performance project *Three Weeks in May* (1977) was re-performed in 2012 and, as I argue, the political efficacy of the work was maintained throughout. Lacy's work provides a counterpoint to McCarthy's, which in *PST* was framed as significant to the history of Los Angeles art, but with little significance to the contemporary socio-political context of the city.

In the Conclusion I briefly explore several of McCarthy's exhibition and installation pieces between 2008 and 2013: *Paul McCarthy's Low Life Slow Life* (2008-09); *Pig Island* (2003-11) and *The King* (2011); and *WS* (2013). In these large-scale works, McCarthy brings together many of the themes explored throughout his work – for example, the centrality of the artist's body in the work, the appropriation of fairy tales, consumer culture, and psychoanalysis – and presents them in prestigious institutional settings. As the culminating discussion of the thesis, I point to the role of performance in McCarthy's ongoing artistic practice and the complexity with which he balances a cross-section of art historical, performance, and cultural references.

Colour photographs of McCarthy's works are primarily used to illustrate Chapters Two and Three, although one image is also used to

illustrate McCarthy's piece *The King* in the conclusion. In Chapters Two and Three I offer a sustained, close analysis of a number of McCarthy's works, often referring to the distinctive visual qualities of the pieces that produce certain effects, for example, the feeling of nausea in a particular moment in *Tubbing* (1974), and the influence of the performance space and audience arrangement in *Monkey Man* (1980). The images in this instance are not used in lieu of my own descriptions and analyses, but rather, to offer visual evidence for my claims so that the reader might engage visually with McCarthy's work. By contrast, Chapters One and Four discuss more broadly the contexts in which McCarthy's work has been documented and disseminated – namely, *High Performance* magazine and the *PST* programme – and the role of illustrations and visual analysis becomes less crucial to the arguments made.

Throughout the thesis, I highlight the critical moments in McCarthy's work in which the influence of performance becomes apparent, and draw them out to consider the wider critical focus of his practice. In particular, I highlight McCarthy's apparent ambivalence or resistance to commit to fixed readings of his work, and suggest that performance enables him to disrupt or unsettle easy conclusions. As I will demonstrate, the apparent simplicity or boorishness of McCarthy's performances – particularly their visceral, alienating qualities – is a key tactic in his work. More broadly, I argue that reading artistic practices through performance, or with an eye to the particular destabilising characteristics of the form, might open up wider discussions about the connections between performance and visual art.



## Chapter One

### **Documenting Performance in Los Angeles:**

#### ***High Performance Magazine 1978-83***

First published in 1978, *High Performance* was described by its founding editor Linda Frye Burnham as ‘the first magazine ever to be devoted exclusively to performance art, defined then as live performance created by visual artists’.<sup>1</sup> Founded in Los Angeles and published quarterly until 1997, *High Performance* documented the work of performance artists both locally and internationally, providing a forum for a diverse range of performance practices. According to Jenni Sorkin, who curated an exhibition on the history and legacy of *High Performance* in 2003,<sup>2</sup> the magazine ‘was central to the development, expansion, and legitimization of performance art as a medium distinct from theater, creating both an audience and a venue for the dissemination of live experimental and conceptual, body-based work.’<sup>3</sup> One of the major features of the magazine, the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ (published between 1978 and 1983), consisted of black and white photographs and descriptions of performances submitted by artists. *High Performance* sought to publish the work of artists who were little known, or had little opportunity to disseminate their work through other channels; subsequently,

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, ‘*High Performance*, Performance Art, and Me’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 30. 1 (Spring 1986), 15-51 (p. 15). *Performance Magazine* was first published in the UK in June 1979 and was also initiated in part to disseminate documentation and provide a forum for a growing interest in performance art.

<sup>2</sup> *High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978-1982*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Jenni Sorkin, ‘Envisioning High Performance’, *Art Journal* 62. 2 (Summer 2003), 36-51 (p. 37).

the 'Artists' Chronicle' 'contains some of the only existing description[s] and imagery of many early, key performances, many of which were not videotaped'.<sup>4</sup> An historically important publication, for performance art in the Southern California and elsewhere, *High Performance* provided a space for artists to share their work with an international audience.

The representation of McCarthy's work in *High Performance*, and the role the magazine played in the dissemination and recognition of his work is one of the main focuses of this chapter. McCarthy featured frequently in the magazine between 1978 and 1985, in a range of different contexts. His performances – including *Monkey Man* (1980) and *A Penis Painting Appreciated* (1980)<sup>5</sup> – were documented in the 'Artists' Chronicle', and works such as *Political Disturbance* (1976) and *Class Fool* (1976), and collaborative projects such as *Close Radio* (1976-79) were documented and discussed in interviews such as 'Performance Interrupts'<sup>6</sup> in 1978, and 'Paul McCarthy, The Evolution of a Performance Artist'<sup>7</sup> in 1985. As discussed in the Introduction, Kristine Stiles' in-depth analysis of McCarthy's work *Inside Out Olive Oil* (1983) in 'Imploring Silence' was an important turning point in scholarship on McCarthy's work, as Stiles began to relate his work to wider theoretical frameworks.<sup>8</sup>

McCarthy's collaborations and organising activities were also documented in *High Performance*. For example, as a member of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> *High Performance*, 3.3-4 (1980), pp. 78-79, 80-81.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Burnham, 'Performance Interrupts: Interview with Paul McCarthy', *High Performance*, 1.2 (1978) 8-12, 44-45.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Burnham, 'Paul McCarthy, The Evolution of a Performance Artist', *High Performance*, 8.1 (1985), 37-43.

<sup>8</sup> Kristine Stiles, 'Imploring Silence, Words and Performance Essence: A Polemic', *High Performance*, 8.1 (1985), 33-36.

Highland Art Agents, his efforts in collaboratively organising the *Public Spirit* performance festival in Los Angeles were documented in a double issue in 1980<sup>9</sup>; and a performance programme he organised in 1983 entitled ‘Paul McCarthy Orders Espresso’, inviting ‘like-minded artists’ such as the Kipper Kids, Frank Moore, Karen Finley, and Johanna Went, whose art makes ‘an awful mess and walks an erratic line between horror and humor’, was also featured in *High Performance*.<sup>10</sup> McCarthy also devised articles and visual pieces for *High Performance*, including a piece called ‘Point Out’ in 1981, in which he asked four artists – Paul Cotton, VALIE EXPORT, Adrian Piper, and Lil Picard – to submit texts and visual material that he then arranged as a published item in *High Performance*.<sup>11</sup> His aim was to ‘initiate more interest in the performance and actions of these artists’, who, he felt, had received little opportunity for recognition in Southern California; ‘where most of the readers of *High Performance* [were] located.’<sup>12</sup>

As such, McCarthy’s presence in *High Performance* was significant, and as I argue, provided a generative forum and environment for the development of his performance work, and his professional recognition among other artists. Performances from the mid-1970s such as *Sailor’s Meat* (1975), *Political Disturbance* (1976) and *Class Fool* (1976) are discussed at length in *High Performance*, and McCarthy is characterised as a veteran performance artist; even at this relatively early stage in his career McCarthy had a considerable following in Los Angeles. Although the rule

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<sup>9</sup> *Public Spirit* was documented in *High Performance*, 3. 3-4 (1980).

<sup>10</sup> ‘High Performance ‘Hot Shorts’’, *High Performance*, 6.1 (1983), 5 (p. 5).

<sup>11</sup> Paul McCarthy, ‘Point Out’, *High Performance*, 4.1 (1981), 2-47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

for submissions to the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ was that performances had to have taken place within 12 months of the previous issue, extended interviews and special features on McCarthy often included documentation of earlier pieces, providing a history of the form that predates *High Performance*.

Celebratory characterisations of McCarthy as a leader in his field of performance by *High Performance* writers – for example, Stiles,<sup>13</sup> Nancy Buchanan,<sup>14</sup> Richard Hertz,<sup>15</sup> and Burnham<sup>16</sup> – indicated how important individual artistic practice was in shaping the wider landscape of performance art. The trajectory of McCarthy’s performance career also coincided with the development of performance art, as articulated through *High Performance*. Notably, the last issue of the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ in 1983 coincided with McCarthy’s retirement from live performance in the same year. Whilst the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ had become saturated with submissions and the effort to represent them all within the magazine became untenable, for McCarthy, performance had begun to wear him out, and he became disenchanted with contemporary modes of performance-making.<sup>17</sup> In this chapter, I analyse the early documentation of McCarthy’s performances in *High Performance*, and discuss how the definition of performance art developed through the magazine influences and shapes McCarthy’s practice.

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<sup>13</sup> Stiles, ‘Imploring Silence’.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Buchanan, ‘Paul McCarthy, *Vented Trilogy Quiz* or *Monkey Man*’, *LIVE*, 4 (Fall 1980), reprinted in *High Performance*, 3.3-4 (Fall/Winter 1980), p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Hertz, ‘L.A. Flesh Art’, *High Performance*, 3.3-4 (Fall/Winter 1980), 136-38.

<sup>16</sup> Burnham, ‘The Evolution of a Performance Artist’.

<sup>17</sup> Kristine Stiles, ‘Interview: Kristine Stiles in Conversation with Paul McCarthy’, in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Ralph Rugoff (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 8-29 (p. 14).



More broadly, *High Performance* helped to shape the way performance art history is presented to contemporary audiences. Perhaps problematically, it has also meant that complex and affecting performances such as McCarthy's – examples of which I explore in detail in Chapter Two – are often defined by or reduced to a single, static image. Tracey Warr suggests that '[w]ith the disappearance of the original source in performance the performance photograph itself takes on the role of icon'.<sup>18</sup> Particularly within the circulation of *High Performance*, a publication that might also be characterised as iconic in its trademark pared-down format, photographs come to represent live performances that would have only been seen by a small audience. Thus, as Warr suggests, the 'photograph as icon is compromised and contradictory because it is both indexical [...] and documentary';<sup>19</sup> it is both a representative of performance (albeit a deceptive stand-in for the event), and a photograph in and of itself. However, instead of clarifying the occurrence of live events, the sliding semiotic function of the performance photograph 'enhances its iconic capacity – encouraging the development of legend by giving us enough but nothing too definite'.<sup>20</sup> In McCarthy's performances, images and materials take on several different semiotic functions – which I expand on in Chapter Two – and oscillate between different representations or perceptions of reality; like the performance photograph, McCarthy's performances offer 'nothing too definite'. Documentation of his performances in venues such as

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<sup>18</sup> Tracey Warr, 'Image as Icon: Recognising the Enigma', in *Art, Lies and Videotape: Exposing Performance*, ed. by Adrian George, (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2003), pp. 30-37 (p. 35).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

*High Performance*, points more towards the mythologizing nature of photographs than to the accuracy of documenting his works. As I argue in Chapters Two and Three, the ambiguous elements of McCarthy's work are the most challenging and critically effective.

After an overview of the initial aims and objects of *High Performance*, and analysing its significance alongside its contemporary art and performance publications, I return to the representation of McCarthy's work. Specifically, I demonstrate how McCarthy's early work was supported by the magazine, which provided a substantial platform for the development of his practice.

### ***High Performance: Initial Aims and Objectives***

In her inaugural editorial in 1978 Burnham set out three major aims that determined the tone and format of *High Performance* during her time as editor.<sup>21</sup> Firstly, *High Performance* aimed to present a broad spectrum of work by visual artists working in performance, thus indicating the diversity of performance-making practices within the magazine and beyond it. This tone of inclusivity is perhaps contradictory to Burnham's definition of performance as utilised exclusively by *visual* artists, however this definition would later be expanded as artists' work increasingly drew on the connections *between* genres such as theatre, comedy, music, and cabaret as well as visual art. Secondly, *High Performance* aimed to provide a space for

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<sup>21</sup> Under Burnham 32 issues of *High Performance* were published; she resigned as editor in 1986.

artists outside the New York City ‘art capital’ to present their work through documentation and descriptions of their own choosing, rather than via art critics.<sup>22</sup> Above all this would give artists authority over the presentation and dissemination of their work, and allow them to share their experiences of creating and performing their own works. Thirdly, *High Performance* aimed to reach a wide audience of readers by avoiding academic jargon and overly-theoretical writing in editorials and articles, which Burnham perceived to alienate public audiences.<sup>23</sup> These aims arose not only from Burnham’s personal interest in performance art, and recognition of its scarce and often unfavourable coverage in the art press, but also as a reaction against the perceived dominance of criticism over artistic voice in contemporary art journals and magazines. Through *High Performance*, Burnham hoped to give focus and credibility to an art form which had thus far received little significant attention, allowing for the development of a specific performance art discourse, rather than to permit the form, as she saw it, being ‘lost to art history.’<sup>24</sup>

However, in an essay on performance art which first appeared in *High Performance* in 1979, Burnham stated that:

There are no performance artists in Southern California. There are some 30 individuals consistently using live action in artworks, but in interviews with them, I’ve found that none of them wished to be categorized as a “performance artist.” Almost unanimously, they

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<sup>22</sup> Burnham, ‘Performance Art, and Me’, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

wish to be seen as “artists,” that is creators of visual images arising out of the context of art history.<sup>25</sup>

The anxiety to be known as ‘artists’ rather than ‘performance artists’ perhaps stems from a wish to be associated with visual art, or at least to be approached with the same considered critical response enjoyed by artists working in painting and sculpture. However, as performance scholar Meiling Cheng suggests, the main reason for artists eschewing the label of ‘performance artist’ was likely to be its apparent association with theatre.<sup>26</sup> For example, in his polemic ‘Art and Objecthood’, Michael Fried suggests that ‘*Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater*’, an example of the formalist criticism of performative works or art influenced by ‘theatrical’ elements.<sup>27</sup> Far from the notion that artists on the U.S. East Coast enjoy the undivided attention and respect of critics despite their form, Cheng sees the alignment with theatre as troubling to all who use performance in their art; ‘especially those who practice in New York City (because it is an active theater town) and in L.A. (because it is an active movie town without a strong experimental theater tradition).’<sup>28</sup> Too strong an affiliation with either visual art or theatre would perhaps compromise what Burnham sees as the uniqueness of the form. In her role as editor of a

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<sup>25</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, ‘Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview’, in *Performance Anthology: Source Book of California Performance Art*, ed. by Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Last Gasp Press and Contemporary Arts Press, 1989), pp. 390-438 (p. 390).

<sup>26</sup> Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’ in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148-72 (p. 164). Emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses*, p. 48.

magazine that explored the diversity of performance art, and elevated the authority of the visual artists who use it, Burnham attempted to mediate these tensions through *High Performance*. However, as I argue, Burnham's somewhat rigid initial characterisation of performance art created new tensions when artists developed their work across other modes of performance, including the re-assertion of the distance between visual art and theatre.

The influence of *High Performance* on the development of performance art has been well acknowledged. For example, Peggy Phelan suggests that '*High Performance*'s historical and curatorial value is enormous. [...] Much more than documenting the early days of performance, it helped produce the history of live art as we know it today.'<sup>29</sup> My contention is not to diminish the contribution of the magazine to the history of performance art but to suggest that it has also helped shape the disciplinary tensions about which history or mode of practice performance art belongs to.

Determined that *High Performance* stand out from contemporary art magazines by foregrounding the voices of artists and supporting the development and diversity of performance art, Burnham's aims would eventually be compromised, and the integrity of the magazine as a performance-only publication challenged. Later issues of the magazine (1986 onwards) focus on community-based performance projects and socially-engaged practice, rather than performance art as a distinct artistic

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<sup>29</sup> Peggy Phelan, 'Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral', in *Live Art in LA: Performance In Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. by Phelan (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1-38 (pp. 3, 7).

category. Although I do not discuss issues of *High Performance* between 1986 and 1997 since the coverage of McCarthy's work ceases after 1985, the shift in focus of the magazine highlights a significant move away from its initial aims. Initially, *High Performance* was set in direct opposition to established art magazines, such as *Art in America* and *Artforum*, and in later years this engagement with the art world disappeared altogether.<sup>30</sup> However, the early years of *High Performance* provided a unique context for the dissemination of work by artists who later became well known in the art world, including McCarthy.

In the first part of the chapter I provide a context for the publication of *High Performance* by briefly exploring a number of artists' magazines – including *Avalanche* (1970-76) and *Artforum* (1962-) – that preceded and directly influenced *High Performance*. This gives insight into the sustainability of the magazine format and how the changing context of the art world and of performance art might render it obsolete. I then discuss each of the initial aims of *High Performance* using case studies from the magazine and archival research, then broaden out to discuss the impact of *High Performance* on McCarthy's early career. Consulting back issues of *High Performance* at the Tate Library in London, and primary documents in the magazine archive at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, provided a wealth of material on McCarthy's early performance for my

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<sup>30</sup> This can be seen also in the *High Performance* anthology *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena*, ed. by Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland (New York: Critical Press, 1998). Although it covers the entire span of the magazine's publication, and includes essays and interviews under various headings 'The Art/Life Experiment', 'The Artist as Activist', 'The Artist as Citizen' the book contains little discussion of the 'Artist's Chronicle' and the early years, focusing instead on art concerned with community engagement.

thesis. In this chapter I reflect equally on the diversity of McCarthy's practice and the significance of *High Performance* as an invaluable resource for researching performance art history in Southern California.

### **Alternative Spaces of Representation: Artists' Magazines in the 1970s**

Writing on the New York-based magazine *Avalanche*, published between 1970 and 1976, curator Lisa LeFeuvre describes the significance of art magazines of the 1970s as timely responses to contemporary art practice, suggesting that they are both a document of the contemporary moment, and hold an historical significance beyond their period of publication. She writes:

Art magazines play a crucial part in the distribution of art: they are where we find out about art, see art represented, find opinions, are informed about what we can see and what we have missed and – most importantly – where we can develop a sense of the contemporary moment. In theory the magazine is not intended to have a life beyond each issue – it will be superseded by the next. Over time, though, magazines shift from the position of being a reflection on the present to historical documents that nonetheless,

due to their responsiveness, communicate a dynamic sense of a moment long after the cover date.<sup>31</sup>

In an exhibition curated by LeFeuvre entitled *Avalanche 1970-1976* at London's CHELSEA Space in 2005, the covers and inside pages of the 13 issues of *Avalanche* were displayed alongside artists' ephemera alongside other magazines from the period.<sup>32</sup> *Avalanche*'s founders, Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar, focused primarily on artist interviews and discussions of current projects, and sought to represent and extend modes of artistic production.

Although relatively short-lived, *Avalanche* had a significant impact on artists, editors and critics of the time, particularly for Burnham who sought to replicate the platform that *Avalanche* provided for artists in *High Performance*. For artists such as Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, and Bruce McLean, *Avalanche* provided their first major exposure in a U.S. publication, and often preceded solo exhibitions that broadened public knowledge of their work.<sup>33</sup> In many ways *High Performance* also provided grounding for artists such as McCarthy to expose their work to wider audiences – including in the art world – and develop successful art careers beyond performance.

The significance of *Avalanche* lay not only in the timing of its publication but also because it 'engaged critically with the relationship

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<sup>31</sup> Lisa LeFeuvre, 'Preface', in *The Early History of Avalanche* (London: CHELSEA Space, 2005), n. p.

<sup>32</sup> Anonymous, 'Press Release', *Avalanche 1970-1976*, CHELSEA Space, <<http://www.chelseaspace.org/archive/avalanche-pr.html>> [accessed 6 August 2011].

<sup>33</sup> Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar, 'The Early Years of *Avalanche*', in *The Early History of Avalanche* (London: CHELSEA Space, 2005), pp. 5-6.



between printed matter and artwork'.<sup>34</sup> This approach was foregrounded by the extensive visual cinematic-style coverage of artists' work and in-depth interviews. *Avalanche* was unique in devoting the majority of the publication to documentation of artists' works; '[a]part from an exhaustive 8-page news section, and listings of artist publications, *Avalanche* included only interviews with artists[,] texts the artists wrote or documents of their work, no writing about them'.<sup>35</sup> Although Sharp and Béar's focus on documentary coverage of artists' work was commendable, the financial impossibility of sustaining such a publication with little revenue from advertising became all too apparent; the front cover of the final issue of *Avalanche* illustrated the scale of costs of publication far outweighing income. Nevertheless, the magazine provided an important forum in which artists' work could be represented in detail and with sharp focus, in a format that complemented and even extended the works themselves.

*Avalanche* has also been credited for its focus on experimental art forms, including body art and performance, which contemporary magazines such as *Artforum* appeared at first to ignore.<sup>36</sup> For its first issue in 1970, Sharp wrote an article entitled 'Body Works', a survey of artists working with the body as artistic material, which were discussed under five main rubrics: 'Body as Tool', 'The Body As Place', 'The Body as Backdrop',

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<sup>34</sup> 'Press Release', *Avalanche 1970-1976*.

<sup>35</sup> Sharp and Béar, 'The Early Years', p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Burnham recalls the initial stages of her interest and research into performance art in the early 1970s: 'Art historians didn't seem to regard performance as important, and this caused me to withdraw from the established art world. It was only in *Avalanche*, the New York magazine by Willoughby Sharp and Liza B[é]ar, or in artist's books like *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* by Allan Kaprow that I could find anything written about it.' Burnham, 'Performance Art, and Me', pp. 23-24.

‘The Body As Object’, and ‘The Body in Normal Circumstances.’<sup>37</sup>

Subsequent issues included extended interviews with Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, and Yvonne Rainer, and opened up further discussions about performance as a significant and credible art form.

As Sharp and Béar elaborate, the visual layout of the magazine was designed to complement the experimental work it documented; ‘[t]he work was so new that the methods of presenting it had to be new as well.’<sup>38</sup> The ‘lavish photo spreads (sometimes 16 pages long)’ featured in *Avalanche* used ‘multiple angles, serial images, close-ups and photographic sequences, showing work in the making rather than a single still of the finished product’.<sup>39</sup> The reader’s engagement with these works in progress and ‘[t]he fact that [they were] holding a 3-dimensional object and moving through its pages in time was built into *Avalanche*’s design principles.’<sup>40</sup>

By highlighting its ‘design principles’, the editors suggest that the is not merely to be looked at, but to be used and handled as an object. However, to say that *Avalanche* provided an experience of handling a three-dimensional object is perhaps no different from the tactile experience of reading any other art magazine. The earlier publication *Aspen* (1965-71), edited by Phyllis Johnson, was perhaps more suited to this description. Commissioning artists to design and guest-edit issues of the magazine – for example Andy Warhol and David Dalton (The Pop Art Issue, No. 3 [1966]), and Brian O’Doherty (The Conceptual Issue, No. 5-6 [1967]) – Johnson avoided the flat magazine format by creating a box containing different

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<sup>37</sup> Sharp and Béar, ‘The Early Years’, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

items including booklets, postcards, flipbooks, and vinyl records. Johnson had created a ‘miniature traveling gallery’ containing ‘actual works of art! Exactly as the artist created them. In exactly the media he created them for.’<sup>41</sup> As Emily King has noted, the box format has often been compared to a time capsule and offers an interaction with the context of the art it represents unlike any other magazine; ‘[t]o open an issue of *Aspen* is to be immersed in the period of its publication’.<sup>42</sup>

Whilst *Aspen* took inspiration from the forms of art it represented, *Avalanche*, with a square page format, was influenced by *Artforum*. Ashley Belanger has noted that by appropriating the visual characteristics from *Artforum*, Sharp and Béar demonstrated an awareness of the machinations of the art market that was ‘both a ruse and [...] an important step toward pilfering some of the symbolic capital *Artforum* had already gained among its readership.’<sup>43</sup> In fact, *Avalanche* came to be seen as a threat to *Artforum*, particularly by the latter’s senior editor Robert Pincus-Witten. He conceded that *Avalanche* was ‘more interesting than *Artforum*,’ and could perhaps supersede *Artforum*, ‘[n]ot necessarily intellectually’ as it did not favour formalist art criticism, ‘but visually’.<sup>44</sup> *Avalanche* ‘provid[ed] a timely format for art’s movement away from galleries and museums and towards the printed page and emerging discourses surrounding Performance and

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<sup>41</sup> Advertisement for *Aspen*, published in the *Evergreen Review*, 76 (April 1970), cited in Gwen Allen, *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2011), p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> Emily King, ‘Aspen Magazine: 1965-1971’, *032c*, 2003 <<http://032c.com/2003/aspen-magazine-1965-1971/>> [accessed 26 August 2011].

<sup>43</sup> Ashley Belanger, ‘Avalanche and File: The Politics of Alternative Art Magazines in the Field of Cultural Production 1968-1976’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2009), p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten, ‘1971-1974: Isms’, in *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*, ed. by Amy Newman (New York: Soho Press, 2000), pp. 325-97 (pp. 396-97).

Land art,' and therefore engaged readers in a very different way to *Artforum*.<sup>45</sup>

Not only did the aesthetic qualities of *Avalanche* rival that of *Artforum*, but the extent and detail of artist interviews gave voice and credence to their work, and the inclusion of performance gave it relative exclusivity of coverage. In her book *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* Amy Newman notes that performance art was not recognised in *Artforum* until long after it had been acknowledged by more marginal press.<sup>46</sup> This lack of coverage also divided the opinion of *Artforum*'s editors, and the direction that the publication should pursue in light of contemporary forms that were developing. In 1974 Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss resigned as editors of *Artforum* and in 1976 founded *October*, a journal of art theory and criticism with a focus on academic analysis and discussion. One of the contributing factors to their departure was a disagreement between Michelson and John Coplans (a founding editor of *Artforum*) over the inclusion of performance art. Coplans rejected Michelson's suggestion of a special issue of *Artforum*, exploring performance and related practices, such as film and video, which were at the time underrepresented in this and other publications.<sup>47</sup> For Coplans performance merely 'didn't produce [the] ads' that were needed to keep the magazine financially afloat.<sup>48</sup> Whilst performance initially proved an obstacle for those in the business of buying and selling art objects, as galleries began to sponsor and showcase

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<sup>45</sup> Emily Pethick, 'Avalanche', *Frieze*, 94 (October 2005), <<http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/avalanche/>> [accessed 12 August 2011].

<sup>46</sup> Amy Newman, 'Introduction', in *Challenging Art*, pp. 1-16 (p. 7).

<sup>47</sup> Annette Michelson, '1971-1974: Isms', in *Challenging Art*, p. 396.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

performances, Michelson suggested that *Artforum* too could benefit from acknowledging performance, maintaining its image as a forum for discussing contemporary art practices.<sup>49</sup>

*October* might be seen as a direct response to the limitations of *Artforum*, representative as it is not merely of disagreements over content, but of a broader shift towards art criticism as a professional, academic pursuit. As Newman has noted, during the 1960s ‘both American mass culture and intellectual culture embraced contemporary art with an enthusiasm and respect not seen before.’<sup>50</sup> This meeting of worlds was reflected in *Artforum* by the juxtaposition of advertisements, critical articles and exhibition reviews, but not to the satisfaction of all. Whilst an editor for *Artforum*, Michelson found, with some disappointment, that readers (including artists featured in the magazine) tended to privilege brief exhibition reviews over longer critical articles on which contributors ‘spent enormous amounts of time and energy’.<sup>51</sup> *October* adopted an image very much opposed to that of *Artforum*. Consisting primarily of critical essays and only sparsely populated with black and white images, the journal provided ‘a framework for critical exchange, for intertextuality within the larger context of theoretical discussion’.<sup>52</sup> Its focus would extend not only to the visual arts, but to cinema, film, music, and literature. Despite Michelson’s suggestion that performance be included in *Artforum*, *October* also lacked any sustained focus on performance art, focusing primarily on

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Michelson cites the Paula Cooper and Sonnabend galleries among those which were starting to support artists working in performance in the early 1970s.

<sup>50</sup> Newman, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Michelson, ‘1971-1974 Isms’, p. 389.

<sup>52</sup> The Editors (Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson), ‘About *October*’, *October*, 1 (Spring 1976), 3-5 (p. 4).

video and film theory.<sup>53</sup> For readers seeking new developments in painting, sculpture and cinematic forms, *October*'s editors suggest looking to 'overspecialized reviews' such as *The Drama Review*, *Artforum*, and *Film Culture*, none of which apparently 'provide[d] forums for intensive critical discourse.'<sup>54</sup> As a contrast, *Avalanche*, and later on, *High Performance*, provided a focus for artists working in performance, emphasising the 'unmediated' documentation of their work. A crucial difference between *Avalanche* and *High Performance* was, as Sorkin suggests, that *High Performance* rejected 'outright the inclusion of dance, theater, and music, [and] delineated clear boundaries by determining what was *not* performance art.'<sup>55</sup>

By producing a format for documenting performance art that was attendant to the specificity of the form, magazines such as *High Performance* ran into another problem. By creating reproducible material objects that reference and represent performance, the magazine participates in an 'economy of reproduction', a process described by Peggy Phelan as a betrayal to the ephemeral nature of performance, which 'lessens the promise of its own ontology', and ultimately contributes to the commodification of performance.<sup>56</sup> One of the broader themes of this thesis is the complex relationship between performance as a live act, and the means by which

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<sup>53</sup> In the first issue of *October*, Rosalind Krauss published an article on video art; 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October*, 1 (Spring 1967), 50-64. Subsequent issues included articles on dance, film, music and theatre, such as: Yvonne Rainer, 'Film about a Woman Who...', a transcript of her film from 1972 (*October*, 2 [Summer 1976], 39-67); and Craig Owens' article on Robert Wilson and Philip Glass' collaboration *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) that appeared in 1977 ("Einstein on the Beach": The Primacy of Metaphor', *October*, 4 [Autumn 1977], 21-32).

<sup>54</sup> The Editors, 'About *October*', p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Sorkin, 'Envisioning High Performance', p. 40.

<sup>56</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

ephemeral gestures are made known to wider audiences and enter into histories of art. Documentation becomes a necessary part of this process, and the platform provided by *High Performance* is a significant historical example of the necessary compromise between ephemerality and documentation.

In his discussion of performance objects and documentation, Henry Sayre cites Burnham's editorial vision for *High Performance* in defence of the documentation of performance art. Burnham states that whilst '[i]t is almost a violation to request that [performances] be written down [or] photographed[.] [...] [A]s a journalist, I deplore the loss. [...] I am drawn to documentation as a form in itself.'<sup>57</sup> Burnham's justification for the primacy of documentation was that it was produced and submitted for publication by the artists themselves.<sup>58</sup> If 'the artists were the ones to describe what happened' she argues, then 'that would be the closest to accuracy.'<sup>59</sup> There is a certain contradiction however that readers receive such performances doubly-mediated – through texts and photographs, and via the magazine publication – as well as through the editor's selection and placement of works in each issue. Sorkin, among others, characterises the magazine as an important historical document of performance art in Southern California; I propose that *High Performance* also goes further than historical

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<sup>57</sup> Linda Burnham, 'Editor's Note', *High Performance*, 1.1 (February 1978), p. 1, cited in Henry M. Sayre, 'Introduction', *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 17.

<sup>58</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, email to the author, 24 February 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

representation, to address the relationship between art criticism, the visibility of artistic production and location of art capital.<sup>60</sup>

Belanger has suggested that for the study of ‘alternative’ periodicals, whilst it is imperative to identify the rejection of ‘established conventions of design and layout’, ‘equally important to consider are the differing ideologies that motivated alternative producers to take action.’<sup>61</sup> It is clear that *High Performance* sought to invert the form of previous art magazines, but the ideology with which it began was gradually compromised, as performance art developed and outgrew the benevolent sanctions imposed by *High Performance*. The importance of artists’ magazines of the 1970s lies not only in how they represent, as Gwen Allen suggests, ‘the role of the accidental, the happenstance, the unintended in what often gets passed down as inevitable’, but they can also open up discussions about ‘the contingency of history itself, stressing its conditional, fragmented, and subjective nature.’<sup>62</sup> *High Performance* is a valuable resource for researching performance in Southern California, but also highlights, in its very composition, systems of collaboration and working relationships among a community of artists. By insisting on a specific set of criteria for engaging with performance art, *High Performance* sought to present a cohesive narrative which also highlighted the diversity of the form.

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<sup>60</sup> Sorkin, ‘Envisioning High Performance’, p. 37. See also, Phelan, ‘Violence and Rupture’, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Belanger, ‘Avalanche and File’, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Allen, *Artists’ Magazines*, p. 11.



## Why Not L.A.? *High Performance* and the New York ‘art capital’

*High Performance* was founded in Los Angeles and is recognised as one of the major documents of performance art in Southern California. However, rather than documenting work by artists exclusively in this region, Burnham aimed more specifically ‘to publish work representative of areas outside the New York City “art capital.”’<sup>63</sup> The magazine did include the work of some New York artists, as well as those from across the U.S. and around the world, but by aiming to counter magazines that took New York as their primary focus *High Performance* earned itself a reputation as an anti-New York publication. Burnham describes such characterisations as an ‘uncomfortable bind’ in which it is impossible to satisfy those either side of the divide.<sup>64</sup> ‘So-called regional artists’ she states, ‘are defensive and they like to sneer at New York success’, whilst ‘New Yorkers when they sought to compliment [...] the magazine, would say, “too bad it’s not in New York.” They love to refer to *HP* [*High Performance*] as a magazine about California art and to its viewpoint as “oddly skewed.”’<sup>65</sup>

In Chapter Four I discuss in more detail the re-envisioning of Los Angeles art history (1945 to 1980) in *Pacific Standard Time (PST)*, an extensive programme of exhibitions and events, one of the aims of which was to counter narratives of post-war art focused on New York-based movements such as Abstract Expressionism. *High Performance* provided a generative model of ‘oddly skewed’ (or ‘West Coast-centric’) art history for

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<sup>63</sup> Burnham, ‘Performance Art, and Me’, p. 27.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

curators of *PST* and was used as source material for events including a series of re-performances entitled *Spirit Resurrection*, and an exhibition entitled *Los Angeles Goes Live: Performance Art in Southern California, 1970-1983*.<sup>66</sup> At the outset however, Burnham found herself vying between competing ideologies: creating a publication that gave space to artists marginalised by their chosen practice and geographic location, whilst retaining a democratic approach to representing a diverse range of artists.

*High Performance* has also been linked to the parallel development of alternative art spaces in Los Angeles, as evidenced in Sorkin's exhibition *High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978-1982* in 2003. Pages from the magazine were displayed in the gallery alongside artists' objects, documents, photographs, videos and props, presenting the history and legacy of the magazine to a wider public. The exhibition connected the early years of the magazine and the history of LACE (also founded in 1978), under the assertion that they both share the same fundamental principles: 'to provide a forum for new and innovative art that challenged artistic conventions.'<sup>67</sup> Whilst *High Performance* offered a space for documenting performance art, filling a void in art journalism, LACE countered the dominance of New York's galleries and art scene. LACE was also an important space for the presentation of McCarthy's work. In the 1980s, LACE exhibited several of McCarthy's works, including the sculptural piece *Human Object* (1982) (discussed in Chapter Three), and video works

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<sup>66</sup> *Spirit Resurrection* (January 2012) was organised by artist Liz Glynn, and comprised contemporary artists re-performing historical pieces from the *Public Spirit* performance festival (1980) – discussed in this chapter – documented exclusively in *High Performance*; and *Los Angeles Goes Live*, an exhibition, performance series and publication project was presented at LACE, 27 September 2011 – 29 January 2012.

<sup>67</sup> *High Performance: The First Five Years, 1978-1982*, LACE, <<http://www.welcometolace.org/archives/view/102245/>> [accessed 29 August 2011].

in the group exhibition *Tactical Positions* (1988). Both *High Performance* and LACE made a significant contribution to the development of performance art in Los Angeles, and facilitated the wider dissemination of artists' work.

Whilst it provided an opportunity for artists outside New York to disseminate their work, *High Performance* also raised questions about how artists in Southern California had previously been represented. A number of Los Angeles-based magazines preceding *High Performance* aimed to provide this much-needed representation. *Choke* (1976) was created by Barbara Burden and Jeffrey Gubbins to give West Coast artists space to represent their work and aimed to counter mainstream art magazines 'supported by a system of galleries and critics'.<sup>68</sup> Rejecting advertising altogether, the editors aimed for financial transparency, illustrating a realistic breakdown of the costs of publication. Funding ran out, however, before they could publish a second issue. The title of *Choke* referred to the poor air quality of Los Angeles, but was also 'a wry comment on the way West Coast artists felt suffocated by the East Coast art world'.<sup>69</sup> The methods put in place to address these issues however – for example, rejecting advertising – proved too stringent to sustain the publication. *Choke* was designed to counter the exclusivity of the New York art capital, and acted not only as a reaction against magazines that supported this system, but against the lack of support or cohesion within Los Angeles.

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<sup>68</sup> Barbara Burden and Jeffrey Gubbins, 'Editorial Statement', *Choke*, 1976, cited in Allen, *Artists' Magazines*, p. 249.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Other magazines published around the same time reference this frustration with the Los Angeles art scene more explicitly. The founders of *The Dumb Ox* (1976-80), James Hugunin and Theron Kelley, were ‘dissatisfied with the Los Angeles art/photography scene and wanted to put forth an alternative critical voice that would also provide exposure for many artists that [...] were being marginalized (especially conceptually oriented artists) by the art establishment in L.A.’<sup>70</sup> With contributors and guest editors including Allan Kaprow, McCarthy, Carolee Schneemann, Otto Muehl, and Burnham, the magazine included a wide range of interviews, reviews and artworks sent in by artists. In an effort to provide ‘an alternative critical voice’, editors of *The Dumb Ox* adopted a humorous and irreverent tone, in contrast to the undisguised anti-establishment approach of *Choke*.

Burnham’s aspirations for *High Performance* shared and to some extent continued the aims of these earlier magazines, but they also made reference to longer-established publications that presume to speak as a national or mainstream art press. Although *Artforum* was initially published as a ‘renegade alternative to the mainstream art press’, by 1978 and the publication of *High Performance*, it was an established art journal with a central ‘role in the spectacular consumption of art.’<sup>71</sup> The commercial success of *Artforum* may also be tied to the geography of the publication. *Artforum* was founded in San Francisco in 1962, described by Newman in her survey of the magazine as a city ‘with a loose community of maverick artists, an unfocused and provincial art establishment far from and antagonistic to the dominating influence of New York’s Museum of Modern

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<sup>70</sup> James Hugunin, cited in Allen, *Artists’ Magazines*, p. 256.

<sup>71</sup> Allen, *Artists’ Magazines*, p. 18.

Art and the East Coast galleries.’<sup>72</sup> One of the founding editors, Philip Leider, describes the magazine as existing first and foremost *for* artists; it was a visual resource which artists could use to develop connections with others through their own work.<sup>73</sup> However, Leider and his fellow editors appeared at first to have misjudged the role that their publication could fulfil, and were met with opposition from the artist community in San Francisco, which Leider described as ‘exclusive of everybody, including *Artforum*.’<sup>74</sup> Leider’s impression of the role of *Artforum* was to encourage an audience and facilitate sales of art, but this was antithetical to the ideology of San Francisco artists – ‘[a]n art magazine was corruption for them’ – and this was one of the reasons that *Artforum* relocated.<sup>75</sup>

In 1965 *Artforum* moved to Los Angeles, where it received a similarly unenthusiastic response. The attention Los Angeles artists received from *Artforum* was unique in comparison with other national art magazines at the time, but by taking an institutionally-centred approach to the representation of art – for example, focusing primarily on artists represented by Irving Blum’s Ferus Gallery (1957-66) – it fostered an atmosphere of nepotism and exclusivity. Artist John Baldessari notes that he ‘felt shut out as [...] many artists did because [the magazine had a] narrow point of view’, and sought to elevate certain artists within ‘an historical context of New York’ art.<sup>76</sup> After only two years in Los Angeles, *Artforum* moved again in 1967, this time to New York.

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<sup>72</sup> Newman, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Philip Leider, ‘1962-1967: Isms’, in *Challenging Art*, pp. 87-158 (p. 100).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 101.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> John Baldessari, *ibid.*, p. 119.

Once in New York, *Artforum* was not merely swept into the centripetal force of the art world; in many ways, the publication became the center of its orbit.<sup>77</sup> Failure to represent contemporary art on the West Coast adequately and in line with artists' interests was perhaps a result of both timing and approach. Although originally intended as an artists' magazine, with a large proportion of its pages devoted to visual material, *Artforum* was also initiated as a centre for critical discussion and exchange, which foregrounded critics' writing as much as artists' work. As a result, the development of *Artforum* – particularly over its first five years of publication – provides a useful comparison for *High Performance*, which also began by prioritising artists' work and visual material, but was compromised financially by lack of commercial success. As an alternative art publication that remained closed to the influence of the New York art world, *High Performance* may have survived longer in its initial form. However, the precedent set by New York magazines such as *Artforum* meant that if *High Performance* continued to reject calls for reviews and critical articles, it would potentially limit the career development of the artists it represented.

In an issue of *High Performance* from 1980, K. Anawalt's article 'Why not L.A.?' posed the question of geographical disadvantage that *High Performance* attempts to address. Anawalt suggested that the lack of support for and recognition of Los Angeles artists 'lies embarrassingly close to home', and was dependent upon the behaviour of both artists and

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<sup>77</sup> Allen, *Artists' Magazines*, p. 20.

collectors.<sup>78</sup> Criticism directed towards large galleries and public institutions – for example the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), which, as Anawalt suggests, was often unfavourably compared with New York museums – was also extended to smaller artists' spaces in Los Angeles. Organisations such as LACE, the Roger Wong Gallery, Space Bank, and the Highland Art Agents (HAA), were profiled alongside Anawalt's article, with details of their structure and objectives. The HAA in particular were committed 'to providing financial and technical support to art which is not sponsored by other institutions, and to extending access to the arts to populations not usually served.'<sup>79</sup> Two projects which were initiated in order to fulfil these aims were *Close Radio* (1976-79), and the *Public Spirit* performance festival (1980), to which 'artists were selected and invited to participate without the requirement of a proposal and without censure.'<sup>80</sup> Such organisations attempted to work within the gaps left by larger institutions by mobilising artist-led projects.

From the mid-1990s onwards Los Angeles would be recognised as an international art capital in itself, and its artists marketed as a profitable investment for collectors around the world. Exhibitions such as *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, [MOCA], 1992), explored in detail in Chapter Three, *Sunshine and Noir: Art in LA 1960-1997* (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen, 1997), and *Los Angeles 1955-1985: The Birth of an Art Capital* (Pompidou Centre, Paris, 2006) indicated an international recognition of creative

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<sup>78</sup> K. Anawalt, 'Why Not L.A.?', *High Performance*, 3. 3-4, (Fall/Winter 1980), 132 (p. 132).

<sup>79</sup> The Highland Art Agents, *ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>80</sup> Anawalt, *ibid.*

activity in Los Angeles. *PST* (2011-12), discussed in depth in Chapter Four, appeared to offer a broader and more detailed history of Los Angeles art (between 1945 and 1980) than previous exhibitions, in part acknowledging artists and groups previously marginalised in narratives of Los Angeles art history, for example the work of female artists, Chicano/a artists and African American artists. By contrast, of those whose work has been readily accepted by art institutions in Los Angeles such as Chris Burden, John Duncan, Kim Jones, Mike Kelley, and McCarthy, Burden, Kelley, and McCarthy in particular, as Martha Rosler has noted, ‘have gone on to become the anointed of West Coast performance art or just art, with no preceding adjective.’<sup>81</sup> Rosler suggests that the canonisation of these Los Angeles artists is due in part ‘to one energetic male LA museum director’, which likely refers to Paul Schimmel, chief curator at MOCA between 1992 and 2012.<sup>82</sup> In three of Schimmel’s group exhibitions during his tenure – *Helter Skelter* (1992), *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (1998), and *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981* (2011-12) – Burden, Kelley and McCarthy featured prominently. The development of McCarthy’s career and his success in the art world is perhaps connected with the rise of Los Angeles as an art capital, with shows like *Helter Skelter*, for example, opening up wider contexts for his work. I continue this discussion of McCarthy’s growing recognition in the art world in Chapter Three, and his centrality to histories of Los Angeles art in particular in Chapter Four.

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<sup>81</sup> Martha Rosler, ‘The Second Time as Farce’, *Idiom*, 21 February 2011, <<http://idiommag.com/2011/02/the-second-time-as-farce/>> [accessed 29 August 2011].

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*



As part of the *High Performance* editorial policy, Burnham insisted that male and female artists be represented in equal numbers, particularly since many women artists had been denied the opportunity of exposure elsewhere. In her book *The Amazing Decade* (produced by the publishing arm of *High Performance*, Astro Artz), Moira Roth suggests that performance art may in fact be the perfect medium for the translation of personal experience shared in consciousness-raising sessions. For example, in performance a live audience meant ‘immediate feedback [and] support for difficult and often painful exposures of experiences’; it ‘allowed for an extensive narrative [...] to reveal previously unexplored and often taboo subjects’; and ‘was also suited to the staging of characters and personae in real time and space’.<sup>83</sup> In *The Amazing Decade*, Roth profiles the work of U.S. women artists in the 1970s, many of whom – including Suzanne Lacy, Rachel Rosenthal, Barbara T. Smith and Lynn Hershman – were based in Southern California, and their work was also documented in *High Performance*.<sup>84</sup> The magazine aimed to provide a space where these practices could be represented in an equally celebratory way, and continue to support the work of female artists.

Striving for equal representation of male and female artists supported the democratic aims of *High Performance*, but it also revealed the careful editorial selection of artists. Work represented in the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ depended upon artists who were merely ‘organized enough to

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<sup>83</sup> Moira Roth, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980, A Source Book* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983), p. 18.

<sup>84</sup> Lacy, Rosenthal and Smith’s work appeared frequently in early issues of *High Performance* between 1978 and 1984, and Hershman’s work appeared in *High Performance* in 1985.

send [in] good black and white photographs and a clear description of what occurred'<sup>85</sup>; however, selection for the front cover of the magazine – to ensure equal representation of male and female artists – was tailored to uphold the democratic aspirations of the magazine, alongside ideological principles and aesthetic choices. Burnham was keen to ensure that *High Performance* reflected the diversity of Los Angeles performance in the 1970s, including the work of significant feminist groups such as *Womanhouse* and participants in the CalArts (California Institute of the Arts) Feminist Art Program, so that it might represent a united image of this seemingly decentred scene. Burnham cites in particular the various 'camps' of performance art she recognised, and as the 'publisher of a sampling of all the camps' she found herself mediating between them: 'between the formalists and the politicos, between the feminists and the boys' club, between the kids and the grown-ups.'<sup>86</sup>

Despite the apparent tensions or divergences in performance art practice, *High Performance* fostered an atmosphere of support and exchange by encouraging the trading of artistic and technical services already extant in the Los Angeles art community (for example, artists often recruited friends or colleagues to help document their work). Burnham describes *High Performance* as 'a room where performance art came together',<sup>87</sup> a meeting place for artists to explore different modes of performance, and to illustrate to international audiences Los Angeles' embrace of the significance and diversity of this form. Taking inspiration

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<sup>85</sup> Burnham, 'Performance Art, and Me', pp. 26-27.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>87</sup> Burnham, cited in Sorkin, 'Envisioning High Performance', p. 38.

from an exchange process already in place, but one which had not yet been documented or formalised, Burnham created a unique forum which drew its strength from its very opposition to the New York art world.

Whilst artists may have had individual preferences for the presentation of their work (the choice for some might have been to leave their performances undocumented), in the name of equal representation, Burnham chose a universal format for documentation in the 'Artists' Chronicle'. She took inspiration from Chris Burden, whose self-published documentation of his performances from the early 1970s (including *Shoot* [1971] and *Trans-fixed* [1974]) consisted of 'one full page picture and a straight description of what occurred', as well as the date and location of the performances.<sup>88</sup> By praising Burden's 'straight documentation' – plainly describing and visualising the performances in an apparently objective way – and adopting it for *High Performance*, Burnham highlighted what she saw as the most democratic way of documenting performance art. Kathy O'Dell has described Burden's textual descriptions as 'almost neutral in tone', characterised by a 'calm emphasis on technical details [which] reads more like a police report than an account of what for most people would be a shocking and traumatic event', for example being shot or nailed to a car.<sup>89</sup> Tracey Warr on the other hand suggests that in Burden's documentation 'there is a deliberate obfuscation through the cryptic nature of his texts and the explanatory gap between the text and the image, which allows the viewer to co-create an "excess of meaning."<sup>90</sup> In both cases the discrepancy

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<sup>88</sup> Burnham, 'Performance Art, and Me', p. 24.

<sup>89</sup> Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> Warr, 'Image as Icon', p. 36.

between the live action, often violent performances with the risk of harm to the body, and its documentation, which appears to reduce or distil the work's complexity, creates an opening for the audience to engage not only with the conditions in which the performance is created but also the means by which it is circulated and disseminated.

Burden's style of documentation became synonymous with *High Performance*, and explicitly linked to performance art in Southern California. By 1978 Burden's work had been disseminated through his self-published artists' books<sup>91</sup> and more widely in the art press.<sup>92</sup> By adopting his style of documentation *High Performance* also reclaimed Burden as a West Coast artist. The alignment of Burden's established mode of documentation with the DIY ethic of *High Performance* indicated to the wider art world that there was a community of performance artists in Los Angeles and Southern California whose work warranted serious consideration. Where previous publications had failed to provide the appropriate forum for representing performance art in Los Angeles, *High Performance* fulfilled this role with close attention to the specificity of the form and its geographic locale.

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<sup>91</sup> Chris Burden, *Deluxe Photo Book 1971-1973* (1974); and Chris Burden, *Chris Burden 74-77* (Los Angeles: Chris Burden, 1978).

<sup>92</sup> For example interviews with the artist were published in *Avalanche* (1973), *Arts Magazine* (1975), and *Artforum* (1976). Warr, 'Image as Icon', p. 36.

## **Diversity and Censorship in *High Performance***

*High Performance* presented a large number of performance works side by side that together formed a complex representative picture of performance art to public audiences. A key example of its representation of the Los Angeles performance art scene is the documentation of the *Public Spirit* performance festival in 1980, discussed below. For individual artists also, the magazine provided an opportunity to present work that had been censored for publication elsewhere. Here I look at examples of work documented in *High Performance* that tested the limits of its open submission policy, or found support in *High Performance* after being rejected elsewhere. Specifically, I return to the representation of McCarthy's work in *High Performance* – which received primarily positive support – alongside that of his contemporary and collaborator John Duncan. McCarthy and Duncan's work share several of the same themes – an emphasis on sexuality, masculinity and violence – and both artists worked in performance in Los Angeles at the same time, but have subsequently developed different artistic careers. Duncan remains a relatively little known artist – he currently lives and works in Bologna, and creates experimental sound installations – whilst McCarthy has risen to fame in the international art world, and continues on his trajectory of producing large multi-media installations and hyperrealistic life casts. A discussion of these artists' works of the 1970s and early 1980s, as they appeared in *High Performance*, indicates the importance of the magazine in bringing performance art to public visibility, and the impact it has had on their subsequent careers. For

McCarthy in particular, the sympathetic representation of his work in *High Performance* has been beneficial to subsequent scholarly engagements with his work.

One of the most extensive issues of the magazine (in terms of number of pages and artists' work covered) was a double issue that documented the work of 70 artists who contributed to *Public Spirit*, 'the first performance art festival of such scope ever to be held in Los Angeles'.<sup>93</sup> The festival took place in two parts, in May and October 1980, and was organised by the HAA, who initially invited artists to perform. Although no one from outside Los Angeles was invited to perform, several visiting artists who expressed an interest in participating, such as British artist Anne Bean, were also included in the programme. The involvement of artists from outside Los Angeles contributed to the diversity of the festival programme but also reinforced the democratic scope of the magazine that documented it. In her editorial to this double issue, Burnham states: '[a]s is our usual 'policy,' we drew no boundaries and prescribed no guidelines for the content or nature of the work.'<sup>94</sup> To compound the sense of community and support between artists as opposed to a scene of rivalry and division, '[t]he title [*Public Spirit*] also symbolized a joining of hands by all the performance artists of Los Angeles to support and showcase each other, to make our activities visible by linking them under a single banner.'<sup>95</sup> Documentation of performances took the same format as that of the 'Artists' Chronicle' – black and white photographs and short descriptions – which

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<sup>93</sup> Linda Burnham, 'What About Public Spirit?', *High Performance*, 3. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1980), 1, 164-65 (p. 1).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

supported the sense of uniformity across the magazine. If performance art in Los Angeles was to be considered a significant and credible form, then it would seemingly do so by conforming to a universal ‘public spirit’.

Initially the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ was open to any artist ‘organized enough’ to provide the requisite documentation of their work.<sup>96</sup> The open submissions policy came under threat however when, in 1983, the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ was discontinued due to an overwhelming number of submissions, most of which could not be published; the final issue included only 60 submissions selected out of 160.<sup>97</sup> As the magazine became more well-known, it ‘naturally became inundated with material from artists who, for one reason or another, [were] not recognized in other national magazines.’<sup>98</sup> Burnham even suspected that ‘some people were creating performances simply for the purpose of documenting them’ in *High Performance*.<sup>99</sup> The section was cancelled despite financial support from the U.S. government, including a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1983, and other contributors who felt strongly that the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ should continue.

In 1985 Burnham introduced a new section in the magazine called ‘Colloquium’, which offered readers a chance to discuss issues around performance art. It adopted a similarly open policy of contributions, giving readers and audiences of performance art a chance to express their opinions in print. The ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ – as it now exists in back issues of the

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<sup>96</sup> Burnham, ‘Performance Art, and Me’, p. 26.

<sup>97</sup> Linda Burnham, ‘Artist’s Chronicle, April 1, 1982-March 31, 1983,’ *High Performance*, 6.2 (1983), p. 27.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

magazine held in libraries and archives – acts as a visual record of performance art in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and in turn, the ‘Colloquium’ records the development of public opinion and reception of performance. Specifically, the discontinuation of the ‘Chronicle’ and the addition of the ‘Colloquium’ indicated a shift in the contextualisation of performance art: from documenting work as soon as possible in an objective and democratic way, to an emphasis on audience interpretation and critique.

This shift is discussed in more depth in the final section of this chapter, but its relevance here is to illustrate that the inclusion and selection of work in *High Performance* was more complicated than its submission policy suggested. In her time as editor, Burnham suggests that the only time that she was ‘guilty of censorship’ was during the *Public Spirit* festival, when documentation of a piece performed by artist John Duncan – *Blind Date* (1980) – was excluded from the magazine. *Blind Date* was comprised of several conceptual and performative elements that took place before *Public Spirit*: an audio recording and discussion of the work by the artist was presented for the festival audience. *Blind Date* went undocumented in *High Performance* and was replaced by a statement from Burnham explaining the reasons for its absence. *Blind Date* highlighted the limitations of documenting conceptual work in *High Performance* (an indication of the artist’s thinking through the different elements might have given a fuller picture of the piece), but also perhaps the limitations of the open submissions policy.

Duncan – like many artists in the programme – prepared two pieces for *Public Spirit*, a festival which, as a member of the HAA, he had helped



to organise. *If Only We Could Tell You (The Black Room)* was a sound piece installed in a locked cupboard in a building in downtown Los Angeles called The American Hotel. From within the cupboard came a ‘painfully loud rattling noise caused by something unseen (an electric sander mounted to the door inside)’, whilst typewritten text hung on the wall opposite.<sup>100</sup> The piece was documented in *High Performance* with a short description of the installation, two photographs – one of the locked door and one of the sander positioned on the other side – and a page of typewritten text, an extract of which is given below:

We hate you little boy. [...] We hate you hate you hate you hate you hate you [...] We saw you all covered with our blood. We saw you piss and shit all over yourself. We cleaned you up, put food in your fucked-up little mouth. We kept you alive, you ungrateful little bastard. [...] You’re a blight on our lives; we’re tired of putting up with you. Ugly little boy with the sex exposed. You’re utterly disgusting. How can you possibly live with yourself. [...] Why don’t you do everyone a favor and kill yourself. We love a man in uniform. [...] Wounded men are so romantic. Go out and blow your head off, prick, We are fed up. Just go out and die. DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE [...] <sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> John Duncan, ‘Interview with Boris Wlassoff’, trans. by Thierry Bokhobza, *revue & corrigée* 51 (March 2002) <<http://www.johnduncan.org/wlassoff.rc1.html>> [accessed 14 September 2011].

<sup>101</sup> John Duncan, *If Only We Could Tell You*, The Black Room at the American Hotel, October 1-31, 1980, *High Performance*, 3.3-4 (Fall/Winter 1980), p. 34.

For audiences reading this text, the experience is likely to have been made more disturbing by the constant rattling noise coming from inside the cupboard. The fact that the source of the noise remained unseen and the subject of the text unknown perhaps heightened the sense of witnessing a traumatic scene. McCarthy employs a similar approach to explorations of memory and trauma in his performances, particularly his solo works of the 1970s (discussed in Chapter Two) in which personal trauma and cultural memory becomes confused, to the point where both artist and audience are unable to distinguish between the two.<sup>102</sup> For *If Only We Could Tell You* the underlying cultural trauma is that of a distant war (for this generation of American artists, the war in Vietnam, 1955-73). The implication of Duncan's text is that it is preferable for young men to die heroically in war than to remain useless and parasitical to the 'American spirit'. The persecuted subject is constantly referred to as 'boy' whilst the idealised 'man', whose wound – physical or psychological – is not specified, is considered a paradigm of a somewhat vague and superficial concept of masculinity. As such, Duncan sought to represent the complexity of male experience and to convey the difficulty of articulating this in a culture where a mythologised version of masculinity persists. *Blind Date* also dealt with these themes, and as a pairing, these two pieces might be read in conversation with one another.

For *Blind Date*, Duncan presented the *Public Spirit* audience with another sound piece, a tape recording of himself having sex with a female corpse he had acquired in Mexico. As Duncan describes the piece:

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<sup>102</sup> Paul McCarthy, cited in Stiles, 'Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy', p. 14.

An audience was invited to a small warehouse space in downtown LA, an old triangular brick building with a tiny balcony at one end, no windows, no chairs, one exit. A microphone, cassette player, amp and speakers were set up on the balcony. When the exit door was closed and the lights were switched off, I described the process of finding the cadaver, receiving a vasectomy shortly afterward, and why I was making the action public, then played the audiotape recording of the session with the cadaver. When the tape ended, the door was opened and people could see to leave.<sup>103</sup>

Again, the impact of the piece is placed on the audience's ability to process the difficult personal material that the artist places before them, and navigate environmental restrictions that the artist imposes: in *If Only We Could Tell You* it was the constant, abrasive sound of the electric sander; in *Blind Date* it was complete darkness. The piece was described by Burnham as 'highly morally objectionable', and documentation of the event was not included in *High Performance*, as she did not 'wish to be responsible for publishing it.'<sup>104</sup> As Burnham states; '[t]his was rape, whether or not the woman was alive. I told the artist he had violated the spirit of a human being and if that had been my sister's body, I would have seen that he was punished.'<sup>105</sup> Rather than reiterate *Blind Date* through documentation, Burnham suggested that readers contact the artist if they wished to know

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<sup>103</sup> Duncan, 'Interview with Wlassoff'.

<sup>104</sup> Linda Burnham, 'Note', *High Performance*, 3. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1980), p. 140.

<sup>105</sup> Burnham, 'Performance Art, and Me', pp. 38-39.

more about the piece. Given that Duncan had included a discussion of why he felt the need to make ‘the action public’, an element that was not present for *If Only We Could Tell You*, it seems that he was aware of the issues of presenting this piece, and that his discussion might offer a context for presenting it.<sup>106</sup> ‘There is a point to all this’, Duncan had explained, ‘[d]eath is at the centre of myth about men.’<sup>107</sup> Nonetheless, Burnham felt that by documenting this piece she was condoning and thus participating in its content; even discussing the reasons for her disapproval was deemed to be ‘carrying it forward.’<sup>108</sup>

Burnham was not alone in this opinion. Reports in local press on audience reaction and the thoughts of fellow artists indicate that for most, Duncan had overstepped the boundaries of taste. Artist Barbara T. Smith described her experience of the piece: ‘Each person just sat there coping with John’s piece the best they could. I couldn’t deal with the story myself because it was so destructive to my life. I just sat there and turned it into pure sound’.<sup>109</sup> Smith was already a major figure in the performance community of Los Angeles of the 1970s and often showed her support for younger artists such as Duncan, McCarthy and Kim Jones, who each made challenging but important work.<sup>110</sup> In 1976 Kim Jones performed *Rat Piece* at the California State Fine Arts Gallery, which involved setting light to live rats. He subsequently was ordered to appear in court and was charged with

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<sup>106</sup> Duncan, ‘Interview with Wlassoff’.

<sup>107</sup> Patience Belly, ‘Death in Venice L.A. Performance Artist Makes Love to Corpse’, *Newstyle* (1980), p. 9, *High Performance Artists’ Files*, Box 14, Folder 10 (John Duncan), The Getty Research Institute, Special Collections and Visual Resources: *High Performance Magazine* archive.

<sup>108</sup> Burnham, ‘Performance Art, and Me’, p. 39.

<sup>109</sup> Barbara T. Smith, cited in Belly, ‘Death in Venice’, p. 9.

<sup>110</sup> Kim Jones and Barbara T. Smith in Conversation, unpublished artists’ talk, LA><ART, Los Angeles, 17 January 2012.

animal cruelty. During a sentence of two years probation, ‘Jones did not receive any invitations to perform or exhibit his work’, but Smith in particular was supportive of Jones and sympathetic to the context of his work.<sup>111</sup> McCarthy was also in the audience for Duncan’s *Blind Date*; he commented:

I felt obliged to appear but I felt the piece was socially self-destructive. It made John a pariah in the community. And I think there’s a danger in being rewarded for a self-destructive act. There’s no way back if you want to keep on getting that kind of attention.<sup>112</sup>

McCarthy’s reading indicates his concern that his friend was perhaps too personally invested in the piece, and instead of presenting a comment on a culture of ‘men who are trained to ignore the emotions’ (which Duncan indicated as his intention), he had participated in an act of self-annihilation.<sup>113</sup> In producing a piece that had, in McCarthy’s opinion, ‘passed over into life’, Duncan seemed to have overshot the mark of the *Public Spirit* philosophy and violated the ‘unwritten perimeters of society’.<sup>114</sup>

*Blind Date* was also received with hostility by the wider art world, ‘to a degree [that Duncan] was completely unprepared for.’<sup>115</sup> Some artists with whom he had had close working relationships threatened to boycott

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<sup>111</sup> Phelan, ‘Violence and Rupture’, p. 26.

<sup>112</sup> Paul McCarthy, cited in Belly, ‘Death in Venice’, p. 9.

<sup>113</sup> John Duncan, cited in *ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> McCarthy, cited in *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Duncan, ‘Interview with Wlassoff’.

anyone publishing his work and claimed that ‘the fact that the body was apparently Mexican meant that [his] action was racist, the fact that the body was female meant that the action was sexist’, to the extent that his work was effectively banned in the U.S. for several years.<sup>116</sup> Any effort to understand the piece, as Kristine Stiles has later noted, as an act ‘so pitiable and tragic [that it represents an] attempt to assert one’s life (manifested in eros) against the actual experience of one’s desperate numbness unto death (thanatos)’, is seemingly lost in the context of unification that *Public Spirit* represented.<sup>117</sup> What is later explored in *If Only We Could Tell You*, the romanticisation of ‘wounded men’, and the violence and repression of masculinity, is foregrounded here by the notion that such men would go to extreme lengths to reassert this lost power. ‘However contemptable Duncan’s desperate event’, suggests Stiles, ‘the artist presented his own excruciating lack, a psychic pain that is palpable.’<sup>118</sup>

The controversy surrounding the piece, Burnham suggests, meant that it eventually got to do ‘what art does’, to question and even expand social tolerance and understanding of issues affecting the experience of everyday life.<sup>119</sup> The fact that *Blind Date* was able to do this, Burnham suggests, is ‘because it fell on very fertile ground – a community primed by feminist vigilance against art that promotes violence against women.’<sup>120</sup> Duncan also concluded that *Blind Date* was successful because it illustrated what he calls the ‘psychic limit’ of audiences, which, when put under stress

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Kristine Stiles, ‘Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions,’ in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and The Object, 1949–1979*, ed. by Paul Schimmel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), pp. 227-329 (p. 241).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Burnham, ‘Performance Art, and Me’, p. 39.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

with ‘no apparent context to frame it’, is instinctively resisted.<sup>121</sup> In Chapter Two I discuss how McCarthy also tests audience’s tolerance of visceral performance by presenting a disorienting display of real bodily fluids and artificial substances. Particularly in his solo performances of the 1970s, the body at risk is nearly always his own. In *Blind Date*, Duncan enacted the violation of another body, a participant without agency and without context, but also an act of self-destruction which his colleagues perceived as irreversible.

Despite being cut from *High Performance*, the controversy surrounding *Blind Date* made it visible in a way that the artist had perhaps not intended, but this also drew attention to the limitations of documentation. In both *Blind Date* and *If Only We Could Tell You*, sound and audio, as opposed to visual work, is the main focus. In collaboration with McCarthy, who shared his interest in exposing and analysing everyday situations, Duncan created a project entitled *Close Radio* (1976-79), a performance and conceptual art radio programme based in Los Angeles, as part of non-commercial station KPFK Pacifica Radio. Contributions were made by a number of artists and were broadcast uncensored, primarily, as McCarthy suggests, because radio was more accessible and to a far wider audience than art magazines and galleries.<sup>122</sup> Duncan and McCarthy shared an aspiration to explore a range of audio concepts which challenged the conventions of radio programming and artistic processes. One of the programmes produced by McCarthy, *Paid Strangers* (1977), involved the artist paying strangers, some of whom apparently ‘even a “liberal” radio

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<sup>121</sup> Duncan, ‘Interview with Wlassoff’.

<sup>122</sup> Paul McCarthy, ‘Close Radio’, *High Performance*, 1.4 (December 1978), p. 12.

station wouldn't allow on the air', five dollars to appear on the radio for five minutes to talk about any subject of their choosing.<sup>123</sup> Initially supported in 1977 by a grant from the NEA, after participants began using language that was considered obscene, the show's contract at the station became more tenuous. *Close Radio* was discontinued after Chris Burden created a piece called *Send Me Your Money* (1979) in which he requested that the audience do exactly that. Burden justified the piece by explaining: 'I was not selling anything and that I was not part of any charitable or religious organization' but 'by working together they could make me rich.'<sup>124</sup> However, since KPFK's license was based on its non-commercial status, this programme compromised the station's founding principles, and *Close Radio* was subsequently cut.<sup>125</sup>

Continuing to explore performance art's crossover with music and audio, Duncan and McCarthy created an experimental performance group called *C.V. Massage* – which also included the artist Michael le Donne-Bhennet – and performed twice during the *Public Spirit* festival.<sup>126</sup> After a disastrous first performance where most of the audience left before the set had finished, the second performance, as Burnham reports, 'worked rather well', with 'John Duncan playing Sparklett's bottles, jackhammer and what looked like a bazooka shell casing; Michael le Donne-Bhennet playing tape recordings, and Paul McCarthy on vocals.'<sup>127</sup> Much like Duncan's

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>124</sup> Chris Burden, *Send Me Your Money* 1979, in *Chris Burden*, ed. by Fred Hoffmann (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 70.

<sup>125</sup> Burnham, 'The Evolution of a Performance Artist', p. 39.

<sup>126</sup> Michael Le Donne-Bhennet also performed another piece at *Public Spirit*, a sound piece for the organ called *Flowers de Luce*, which responded to the acoustics of the space in which it was performed at DTLA (Down Town Los Angeles performance space).

<sup>127</sup> Linda Burnham, 'C.V. Massage', *High Performance*, 3.3-4, (Fall/Winter 1980), p. 140.



presentation of *Blind Date*, the performance took place in the dark, ‘with only Duncan visible in the light that leaks into LACE’s gallery from the street [whilst] McCarthy and Bhennet hid themselves behind a wall.’<sup>128</sup> For McCarthy, creating a visual experience for the audience was not a priority, ‘there [was] no strutting, mike waving or costuming involved’.<sup>129</sup> He was more interested in creating new sounds by manipulating the human body and utilising creative sound-making methods. In one instance McCarthy demonstrated his technique by ‘jamming his fingers down his throat’, and whilst ‘this didn’t make him throw up, it did make a sound somewhere between animal strangulation and sado-masochistic orgasm in staccato.’<sup>130</sup>

Whilst *C.V. Massage*, *Blind Date* and *If Only We Could Tell You* experiment with various modes of audio communication, which they share with *Close Radio*, each are also linked through their documentation in *High Performance*. In *If Only We Could Tell You* Duncan connects the abrasive words of the text with the rasping of the electric sander, an experience he designs to be uniquely traumatic for individuals at the moment of experiencing it. However, *Blind Date* is known primarily by an absence of documentation; the act of necrophilia is deemed a universal taboo, the thought of which is so traumatic as to be unrepeatable. A photograph of Duncan being vasectomised is, however, quite well known, and was reproduced in the exhibition catalogue for *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (MOCA, 1998), alongside Stiles’ essay that discusses the piece in some depth.<sup>131</sup> Finally, in *C.V. Massage*

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Stiles, ‘Uncorrupted Joy’, p. 240.

Duncan and McCarthy eradicate visual and textual communication altogether by replacing any recognisable human vocalisation with a primal gurgling and gagging, which initially succeeds in driving away most of the audience. The performance is deemed more successful, however, when the band are hidden from view, as if the appearance of the bodies from which such monstrous noises come would only compound the terror they emit.

Relative to the controversy around *Blind Date*, the two solo pieces that McCarthy performed at *Public Spirit – Monkey Man* and *A Penis Painting Appreciated* – were well received. Both were documented with a photograph and short text, a succinctness of form with which Burnham characterises McCarthy’s work more generally.<sup>132</sup> The text for *Monkey Man* in particular consists merely of a few key words and phrases which, strung together, convey the substance of the piece, compared to works such as *The Man Who Could Eat Glass* by Richard Newton and *Think About It Susan* by Barry Markowitz, both of which claim a whole page of written material in the same issue. In a review of *Monkey Man* (a performance that I explore in depth in Chapter Three), artist Nancy Buchanan describes McCarthy’s contribution to the festival as providing ‘an unexpected dose of humor’, which seemed to turn away from his earlier ‘obsessive ritual-like works [such as *Hot Dog* (1974), *Sailor’s Meat* (1975) and *Meat Cake* (1975)] which explored physical and psychological limitation – both of artist and audience.’<sup>133</sup> The use of hot dogs and ketchup reappear in *Monkey Man*, acting as signifiers of consistency across McCarthy’s broad-ranging work.

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<sup>132</sup> ‘Whenever Paul had anything in the Artist’s Chronicle, he was very circumspect in his text, much more so than others.’ Burnham, email to the author, 24 February 2011.

<sup>133</sup> Buchanan, ‘Paul McCarthy’, p. 149.

In another review of *Monkey Man*, critic Richard Hertz indicates that McCarthy's 'reputation for outrageous behaviour' was already established in the Los Angeles performance scene, 'and added to the anticipation of the audience waiting outside DTLA for the doors to open.'<sup>134</sup> Hertz describes McCarthy's performances as 'like watching someone go through primal scream therapy. Audiences expect some sort of climax to the increasingly bizarre set of occurrences', which 'creates a sense of direction and anticipation.'<sup>135</sup> It is McCarthy's ability, Buchanan suggests, to balance audience anticipation and expectations of riotous, messy performances, which, 'in less skilled hands, could have been merely chaotic or egocentric', with subtlety and profound creativity, that places him within such high regard in *High Performance*.<sup>136</sup> Whilst the text that McCarthy uses to document his work is sparse yet concise, the extended reviews and analyses of his performances played a large part in disseminating his work to wider audiences. In reviews such as Buchanan's and Hertz's, McCarthy's work is received positively, with writers emphasising his ability to 'plumb the depths' of his 'internal psyche' as one of the most constructive elements of his performances.<sup>137</sup>

In a seven-page feature in the second issue of *High Performance*, entitled 'Performance Interrupts', dedicated to exploring his performances of the mid-1970s, McCarthy receives similar praise. Much of the text is given over to an interview with the artist, discussing the material conditions in which his live performances *Political Disturbance* and *Class Fool* were

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<sup>134</sup> Hertz, 'L.A. Flesh Art', p. 136.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Buchanan, 'Paul McCarthy', p. 149.

<sup>137</sup> Hertz, 'L.A. Flesh Art', p. 136.

performed, and his perception of audience reactions. Both took place in non-art spaces – a room at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, and a maths classroom at the University of California, San Diego – as ‘a way of getting a live performance to people who would not otherwise have gone to it.’<sup>138</sup> These pieces brought live performance to non-art audiences, but they also ran the risk of alienating them. *Class Fool* ended rather awkwardly with most of the audience leaving before the performance was over and *Political Disturbance* ended when McCarthy was asked to leave the hotel as his performance was disturbing the guests and speakers at the American National Theater Conference, which was also taking place in the building.<sup>139</sup>

‘Performance Interrupts’ also explores the censorship of McCarthy’s video performance *Sailor’s Meat*, or more specifically a text related to the video, which was featured in the *Southland Video Anthology* exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1976. Artists included in the exhibition were asked to submit a piece of writing relating to their work for the exhibition catalogue. McCarthy submitted two short paragraphs: one, dated 1971, describes a dream which informs his later performance; the other was a preliminary proposal for a performance entitled *Sweet Meat*.

I had gotten into a shower with a woman. I knew her. I tried to shove a broom handle into her vagina. She groaned. I pushed harder. She collapsed. I was standing. I looked down and I shoved the broom handle into my own stomach. I had pushed it through my stomach into my penis. I had pushed the contents of my penis onto the

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<sup>138</sup> McCarthy, cited in Burnham, ‘Performance Interrupts’, p. 8.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

shower floor. I had pushed down tearing the organ away. The skin of the penis fit the handle of the broom like a glove. I felt no pain.

Dream 1971

Sweet Meat. March 1975. A performance for a small audience. As with the other performances of the same period, there are the nightmares that follow and the physical changes I experience before sleep itself. I briefly become other people – frequently an old woman. My legs drop off. My head sinks into my stomach. I look out of my stomach. I have no sensation of my upper torso or neck. My arms increase in size and become gray in color. They are laying on my chest. They seem to sink into my chest. I cannot lift them. I cannot move my fingers.

For Long Beach Catalog, November 1976

Southland Video Anthology.<sup>140</sup>

The video performance of *Sailor's Meat* (discussed in Chapter Two), was included in the *Southland* exhibition without question. In the video, McCarthy, dressed in a black negligee, fucks a half-empty mayonnaise jar with a hot dog strapped to his penis in a hotel bedroom, urinates on and then eats a raw sausage, and simulates oral sex with a pile of raw meat. The texts however proved more troublesome for the museum director, who initially rejected them outright. In a letter to the artist, David Ross, the curator of the

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<sup>140</sup> Paul McCarthy, 'unpublished statements about *Sailor's Meat*', 1976, *High Performance*, 1.2 (1978), p. 44.

exhibition, suggested that McCarthy's work 'in some ways flirts with the edge of what people can and will tolerate'.<sup>141</sup> Ross, however, laments the reticence of this art institution to document challenging work in print, and emphasises his powerlessness to influence institutional thinking.<sup>142</sup> In response, McCarthy offered Ross three choices: to publish the original texts; to print the letters of exchange between Ross and himself discussing the unsuitability of the texts; or to exclude him from the catalogue altogether. The director rejected the suggestion of printing the letter exchange, but McCarthy was determined to 'make the situation visible'.<sup>143</sup> As an alternative, Ross suggested publishing a short statement in the catalogue, explaining the reasons for the absence of the artist's text, for example; 'Due to the nature of Paul McCarthy's work it cannot be adequately reproduced in this catalog.'<sup>144</sup> McCarthy rejected this option, claiming that it was misleading and 'made it sound like there was something wrong with the technical quality [of the video] and not the situation.'<sup>145</sup> Eventually the letter exchange was published, and as consolation Ross suggested to McCarthy that he had in some way been successful in his work by forcing 'another institution to declare [...] what its limits really are', an act he states that 'is praiseworthy in and of itself.'<sup>146</sup>

Burnham's rejection of *Blind Date* in *High Performance* was primarily the result of a subjective and moral disagreement with the work, whilst the rejection of McCarthy's text from the Long Beach exhibition

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<sup>141</sup> David Ross, Extract from a letter to Paul McCarthy, February 24, 1977, *High Performance*, 1.2 (1978), p. 45.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> McCarthy, cited in Burnham, 'Performance Interrupts', p. 45.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ross, 'Extract from a letter', p. 45

catalogue Ross deferred to institutional policy. There are, however, similarities with Burnham's rejection of Duncan's *Blind Date*, notably, that the performance was eventually deemed successful because it revealed the limitations of society's tolerance for performance art, and the limitations of institutions that present art to public audiences. Following an account of his exchange with Ross in 'Performance Interrupts', McCarthy indicates that he is aware of the potentially shocking content of his work, but clearly states that shocking audiences is not his 'ultimate intent', and hopes that audiences can move past the apparent extremity of his performances, and follow the images or narrative of what he creates.<sup>147</sup> In Chapter Two I address the elements of McCarthy's performance practice which are difficult to watch, difficult to stomach, and difficult to integrate into a coherent narrative of artistic practice. Ultimately, however, the challenge of McCarthy's work, for example his seemingly nonchalant yet disturbing representations of violence, might be seen as the most critical elements of his practice.

In an extended feature entitled 'Paul McCarthy, The Evolution of a Performance Artist' in 1985, Burnham suggests that the difficulty for audiences to get past the 'disgusting parts' in McCarthy's performances is related to the confusion about whether their content is personal to the artist or characteristic of a collective unconscious.<sup>148</sup> This confusion between personal content and collective consciousness is seen as a productive force in McCarthy's work. However, Duncan's presentation of personal material to a public audience was rejected from *High Performance* as a preventative measure, to stop it being disseminated any further. For Burnham,

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<sup>147</sup> McCarthy, cited in Burnham, 'Performance Interrupts', p. 45.

<sup>148</sup> Burnham, 'The Evolution of a Performance Artist', p. 38.

McCarthy's performances glimpse at societal progression and contribute to a questioning of collective consciousness; in *Blind Date*, Duncan's presentation of highly personal and masculinised material merely damages the broader social consciousness.

The distinction between McCarthy's presence in *High Performance* and Duncan's censorship means that the difficulty with which audiences perceive McCarthy's work is visibly 'worked through' in print, and with the support of *High Performance*. This is illustrated not only by the magazine's willingness to publish documentation of his work, but also through the sense of responsibility to publish work that has been censored elsewhere. As well as acting as a visual archive of McCarthy's performances of the late 1970s and early 1980s, *High Performance* established a site for the critical discussion of his work beyond the pages of the magazine. The complexity of the works presented seemed to demand a more in-depth, critical analysis of the conditions in which they were made and received, rather than merely how they were documented. McCarthy and Duncan's work likely contributed to the shift in critical response to the performances documented in *High Performance*, and in turn helped foster a more complex discourse around performance art.



## **What Happened to Art Criticism? Critical Writing and *High Performance***

In his book *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, James Elkins identifies seven different categories of art criticism: the catalogue essay; the academic treatise; cultural criticism; the conservative harangue; the philosopher's essay; descriptive art criticism; and poetic art criticism.<sup>149</sup> Elkins gives a frank account of the different roles that art criticism can play in the discussion and dissemination of artistic practices, for example: catalogue essays 'are not taken seriously because it is widely known that they are commissioned by the galleries'; the conservative harangue illustrates the author's claims about what 'art ought to be'; and in poetic criticism it is 'the writing itself [as opposed to the art being written about that] counts.'<sup>150</sup> The widest and perhaps most complicated category is that of descriptive art criticism, or '[a]rt-writing that attempts *not* to judge, and yet presents itself as criticism.'<sup>151</sup> One of the main aims of *High Performance* when it was first published was to 'bring art to the non-art-educated reading public', which, Burnham proposed, could be achieved by avoiding 'academic writing, art jargon and writing that leaned too heavily on art history'.<sup>152</sup> In an effort to absent Los Angeles performance art from the 'subliminal attitude [adopted] by some critics that art from Los Angeles is not as serious as art from New York', Burnham rejected the academicised East Coast

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<sup>149</sup> James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 17.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35.

<sup>152</sup> Burnham, 'Performance Art, and Me', p. 27.

criticism prevalent in journals like *October* and, by this point, *Artforum*.<sup>153</sup> The style of criticism to be avoided most vehemently, however, was what Elkins describes as the ‘conservative harangue’. This type of writing offers ‘not simply coverage but criticism’, and by criticism, is meant “‘discrimination,” that is, informed by judgments of value’.<sup>154</sup> Criticism was however variously introduced into *High Performance*, primarily to assuage featured artists who requested more structured feedback and contextual discussion of their work; it became clear that ‘documentation was not enough.’<sup>155</sup> Not only did this change the tone of the magazine, but helped to develop a critical framework for performance art more widely.

The two main changes that Burnham made during her time as editor were the inclusion of criticism, and broadening the scope of performance activity that the magazine covered. ‘It was a contradiction’, she suggests, ‘to draw boundaries around the art form, even though [the] original intent was to provide print space for those who could find it nowhere else’.<sup>156</sup> Criticism would therefore be used not to narrow the focus of performance art, or to do as ‘those who criticize a work of performance art [...] by proving that it violates a definition’, but to extend the discussion of works not recognised elsewhere.<sup>157</sup> Writers would discuss not only the documented performances, but explore the processes and concepts used by artists, and their connection to each other and wider social and political contexts. Furthermore, this

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<sup>153</sup> Fortney Carter, ‘Artists on Criticism’, *LAICA Journal*, 21 (January-February 1979), 42-44 (p. 43). *High Performance Artists’ Files*, Box 36, Folder 8 (Paul McCarthy), The Getty Research Institute, Special Collections and Visual Resources: *High Performance Magazine* archive.

<sup>154</sup> Unsigned editorial, *The New Criterion*, 2001, cited in Elkins, *What Happened To Art Criticism?*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>155</sup> Burnham, ‘Performance Art, and Me’, p. 29.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

would enable the publication of an array of critical and informed voices, apart from those of the editorial team.

Reviews and critical articles were included in the *Public Spirit* edition of *High Performance*, but primarily those reprinted from other publications, and Burnham was the only person to write expressly for *High Performance*.<sup>158</sup> There was little coverage of the festival in the art press, but local papers such as *LA Weekly*, *Valley News* and the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* responded to *Public Spirit* ‘with vigor’.<sup>159</sup> The inclusion of festival reviews from external publications gave the impression of the critical landscape in which performance art was being received; however, it also indicated that *High Performance* generally distanced itself from this criticism and acted merely as a showcase for outside opinion. Arguably, however, it was Burnham’s exclusion of *Blind Date* that represented the harshest critical response to the festival; not only was it a personal and professional value judgment on Burnham’s part, but the act of censorship compromised the balance Burnham mediated between critic and editor.

In an issue of *High Performance* from 1982, an essay by artist and writer Michael Peppe entitled ‘Why Performance Art is so Boring’ was published in a new section called ‘Performance Criticism’. Peppe examines what he sees as the nepotistic and unstimulating world of performance art, and suggests that ‘[a]s with poetry, foot surgery and taxidermy-criticism’, audiences of performance art are ‘already almost wholly composed of practitioners’, rather than artists making efforts to expand their art beyond

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<sup>158</sup> The Sponsors of *Public Spirit*, ‘Deadline for material from October performers: October 31’, *Spirit Resurrection*, <<http://www.spiritresurrection.org/archive>> [accessed 10 October 2011].

<sup>159</sup> Burnham, ‘What about Public Spirit?’, p. 164.

their circle of colleagues and friends.<sup>160</sup> This article is followed by another in 1983 entitled, ‘Why Our Art is So Bad: Another Scathing Attack on Contemporary Attitudes.’<sup>161</sup> Drawing on many of the same critical points of K. Anawalt’s 1980 article ‘Why Not L.A.?’ discussed earlier – namely, that an attitude of complacency or defensiveness of both artists and art organisations in Los Angeles contributed in part to the stagnation of creative activity – Pepe suggests that ‘the democratic attitudes of the alternative art world of the Seventies has had a damaging effect on good taste and discrimination.’<sup>162</sup> Pepe’s tirade against making excuses for bad performance is pointed at the artists who make it, but also platforms like *High Performance* that support it. He does not name any artists in his article, but apparently ‘leaves the accusation open to anyone who reads it’, (presumably since the only people who read the magazine are performance artists).<sup>163</sup> Despite the attack on *High Performance*, Burnham welcomes Pepe’s criticism of the magazine which she had been so central in developing. In her editorial for the issue Burnham includes an extended discussion of Pepe’s essay, and supporting its publication in the magazine: ‘Pepe is a ferocious and entertaining writer and he hits home with the truth. [...] Besides, artists have been crowing for years that there is no tough criticism about performance. Well, you asked for it.’<sup>164</sup>

By showing her support to Pepe, Burnham helps to create a very particular kind of criticism for *High Performance*, which is self-deprecating

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<sup>160</sup> Michael Pepe, ‘Why Performance Art is so Boring,’ *High Performance*, 5.1 (1982), p. 3.

<sup>161</sup> Michael Pepe, ‘Why Our Art is So Bad,’ *High Performance*, 6.2 (1983), 9-15.

<sup>162</sup> Linda Burnham, Editor’s Notes, *High Performance*, 6.2 (1983), p. 1.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

in nature and offers an honest and even comical evaluation of performance art. Although unwilling at first to include criticism in *High Performance*, Burnham introduced a brand of criticism which somehow worked *with* the development of the magazine, rather than directly against its foundations. Although in some respects Peppe's articles are more closely related to the 'conservative harangue' than the self-deprecatory tone that I suggest, each represents Burnham's refusal to allow the magazine to become a site of conflict to quarrel abstractly about the cultural value of performance art.<sup>165</sup>

Burnham acknowledges that the inclusion of criticism served not only for *High Performance* to survive by satisfying and diversifying its readership, but also to help develop the professional careers of featured artists. Not only did 'reviews serve auxiliary purposes that have to do with resumes, jobs, and grant applications', but the artists themselves 'needed to know if their ideas were being received'.<sup>166</sup> However, Burnham was keen to emphasise to audiences that 'reading about an event is entirely different from taking part in it'.<sup>167</sup> She observed that audiences who read about performances and subsequently sought them out to experience them for themselves found the reality of witnessing them rather more difficult to comprehend.<sup>168</sup> Many for example 'were not prepared for sitting in one place all night long or being in the presence of a sexual action or being privy to personal secrets, or enduring a work that commented on something they held sacred.'<sup>169</sup> Perhaps an unforeseen outcome of including reviews and

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<sup>165</sup> Elkins, *What Happened To Art Criticism?*, p. 17.

<sup>166</sup> Burnham, 'Performance Art, and Me,' p. 29.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

criticism in *High Performance* was that audiences might valorise it over the performances themselves. Although as Burnham suggests, performance art was a form ‘literally open to anybody’, which, when ‘reported in a magazine, took on a ring of something “real”’, it is possible that some readers were stimulated more by the writing that accompanied performances, finding that it spoke with more clarity and could be translated to readers more readily than the ‘peculiar nature’ of performance art.<sup>170</sup>

In an introduction to the final edition of the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ in 1983, Burnham reflects candidly on the editorial choices she made and the scope of performance art made visible through *High Performance*:

As editor, I am the one who chooses the work you see in these pages. Reflected here you see my personal tastes as a writer and viewer in our culture. What you see is not performance art, but literature and photographs. My standard for selection of work has been, first of all, ideas that appealed to me. [...] (I actually “enjoy” only about ten percent of the live performances that I see.

Sometimes I feel angry that I have wasted precious time and money attending a piece. But reading is a different matter.)<sup>171</sup>

To say that *High Performance* had moved away from its initial aims is to identify, as with any periodical, that necessary developments were made in order that it remain a sustainable and worthwhile investment for both

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Linda Burnham, ‘Artist’s Chronicle, April 1, 1982-March 31, 1983’, *High Performance*, 6.2 (1983), p. 27.

contributors and readers. However, Burnham makes an important distinction between performance – and in particular those which she is now loathe to pay for – and documentation, which she is in the business of circulating. Documenting performance art therefore added another layer of complexity to the work, and raised the ‘interesting question of how the very appearance of a review or documentation changes the nature of an event, codifies it in some way.’<sup>172</sup>

In this chapter I have focused on how *High Performance*, as a platform for the visibility of performance art, has influenced the development and codification of McCarthy’s performance practice, and disseminated his work to a wider audience. It was also a central concern of *High Performance* to reflect upon and raise questions about the documentation of performance art more generally, and in particular, how it is framed and disseminated by the popular art press. It is with some disappointment that Burnham reiterates the distinction between live events and documentation, and that in reality all she can hope to relay to audiences is critical literature and photographs.

In 1983, the final edition of the ‘Artists’ Chronicle’ was followed by a call for writers’ submissions, echoing the call for artists’ submissions five years earlier, stating: ‘we are looking for submissions from writers everywhere – 500 word limit.’<sup>173</sup> On one hand this made *High Performance* a richer and more critically diverse space for the representation for performance artists, opening up discussions of their work beyond that of its editorial policy. On the other, this development changed the face of *High*

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

*Performance* altogether, overwriting several of its founding principles in the process. By 1985 criticism was firmly integrated into the magazine in a new section called ‘Colloquium’, and was published alongside the regular letters column.

In my comparison of the different reactions to Duncan and McCarthy’s work earlier, it became clear that an initially sympathetic and extended engagement with McCarthy’s performances fostered by support from his peers provided a supportive environment in which to make work. By contrast, in deciding not to include documentation of Duncan’s piece *Blind Date* in 1980, Burnham acknowledged that by documenting and thus extending the piece, she was also partaking in its politics. The piece, as McCarthy suggested, had ‘passed over into life’, meaning perhaps that Duncan had failed to acknowledge the role of representation in performance art.<sup>174</sup> As critical writing and reviews came into focus for the magazine, the idea of extending and participating in the politics of a performance was carried on through writing in two distinct and identifiable ways. One, illustrated by the ‘Colloquium’, is left as an open forum for readers to exchange ideas honestly and publically. The other might be categorised, using Elkins’ term, as the ‘philosopher’s essay’, in which ‘the author demonstrates the art’s allegiance to or deviation from selected philosophic concepts.’<sup>175</sup> It is through this second phase of writing that Duncan’s piece eventually received due critical attention – in Stiles’ catalogue essay for *Out of Actions: Between Performance and The Object*.<sup>176</sup> Notably, Stiles’ essay

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<sup>174</sup> McCarthy, cited in Belly, ‘Death in Venice’, p. 9.

<sup>175</sup> Elkins, *What Happened To Art Criticism?*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>176</sup> Stiles, ‘Uncorrupted Joy’.



deals with the psychological implications of *Blind Date* – for both the artist and the audience – but also with the issue of documentation and its role in the controversy around the piece.<sup>177</sup>

In an earlier essay, ‘Imploring Silence, Words and Performance Essence: A Polemic’, Stiles addresses the critical value of McCarthy’s performance work, cementing his status as a performance artist, even after he had stopped making live work (in 1983). In her essay, Stiles explores the language of the body with which performance artists so eloquently engage, and laments clumsy textualisations of performance which present ‘either superficial content in the guise of complicated rhetoric and dramatic hyperbole or language that is used to camouflage anxiety through jesting, teasing and ironical posturing.’<sup>178</sup> Mirroring Burnham’s concerns about preserving the history that contemporary performance artists have inherited, Stiles suggests that ‘[i]f performance artists honor their heritage they must deeply explore the languages of the ontological “act” through movement, gestures, grunts and groans, grand and commonplace rituals.’<sup>179</sup> A short post-script written three days later identifies McCarthy’s performance, *O, O, Inside* (1983) (also known as *Inside Out Olive Oil*) as an exemplary instance of using ‘the performance medium to bring to life the very principles about which [she] had just been writing.’<sup>180</sup> After an extended and detailed description of her subjective experience of the piece, Stiles concludes that in McCarthy’s work, ‘[t]he body remained with its most fundamental urges while something of the mind groped for memory, an origin, an explanation,

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>178</sup> Stiles, ‘Imploring Silence’, p. 34.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

a direction and a purpose to emerge.’<sup>181</sup> Stiles’ article offers an insight not only into her early career research interests and an articulation of her concerns about the move away from writing about performance history to the application of theory, but also illustrates a moment when her attention was turned towards McCarthy’s work.<sup>182</sup> Subsequently, this in-depth account of what turned out to be one of McCarthy’s last live performances before he retired in 1983 has proved a valuable source material for scholars writing on his work.<sup>183</sup>

Whilst McCarthy generates sparse yet concise textual accompaniments to his work, his presence within *High Performance* as a regular contributor, featured artist and subject of survey essays and interviews allowed his work a broad visibility and privileged place within its pages. *High Performance* was significant in establishing a context for the documentation and dissemination of performance art in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and for McCarthy in particular, the magazine provided a platform for the national and international visibility of his work. *High Performance* has proved an invaluable resource for documentation of live performances, including my archival research on McCarthy and the means by which performance art was documented and circulated. The *High Performance* magazine archive at the Getty Research Institute continues to be mined for knowledge and new interventions and engagements with performance art history, for example, in the performance platform *Spirit*

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Kristine Stiles, email to the author, 23 August 2011.

<sup>183</sup> For example, Amelia Jones uses Stiles’ essay as source material for her essay ‘Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity’ in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Dan Cameron and Lisa Phillips (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 125-31.

*Resurrection* (2012), and the exhibition *Los Angeles Goes Live: Performance Art in Southern California 1970-1983* (2011) as part of the PST programme (discussed in Chapter Four).

In Chapter Two I discuss McCarthy's performances of the 1970s, and explore how his work moved away from the framework of *High Performance*, and began to enter into the discourse of art history via the work of art historians and performance scholars, such as Stiles. I engage closely with McCarthy's performances, focusing on some of the more challenging elements of his work, and explicitly address themes such as trauma and violence, concepts that were touched on only briefly in coverage of his work in *High Performance*.

## Chapter Two

### **The Construct of Reality and Absurdity: Violence, Vomit and Disgust in Paul McCarthy's Performances of the 1970s**

In his performances of the 1970s, McCarthy presents a mediated version of personal and cultural trauma, which is processed and represented by the body (in performance) and spat out the other side (towards the audience). The disgust experienced by audiences of McCarthy's work is perhaps in recognition of a duality or duplicity in his art; that all we are really seeing is another version or representation of trauma, the specificity or ownership of which is left unclear. This duplicity extends to the use of visceral materials in his work, which become familiar not merely because of their placement in consumer culture, but by McCarthy's consistent and familiar use of them in his work. The performances I discuss in this chapter – *Sailor's Meat/Sailor's Delight* (1975), *Tubbing* (1975), and more briefly, *Hot Dog* (1974) – established McCarthy's mode of working in live performance and video, which would carry forward into other elements of his artistic practice. In Chapter Three I discuss McCarthy's retirement from live performance and movement towards object-based practices, which, I argue, extend and complicate rather than preclude the body of performance work he established in the 1970s.

*Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing* were performed and recorded on the same day in the same building – a vacant hotel, in Pasadena, California – in

the bedroom and bathroom respectively.<sup>1</sup> The rooms were separated by a corridor in which a few invited friends watched as McCarthy crossed the hall from one room (and one performance) to the next. These video performances are often paired curatorially, for example in the group exhibition *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981* (discussed in Chapter Four), *Tubbing* was played on a television monitor and *Sailor's Meat* was projected onto the wall next to it.<sup>2</sup> These performances also share many of the same themes and images. In *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, McCarthy explores, among other things, gender, sexuality, violence, and consumer culture, and the signifiers of each as they are written on the body in performance. McCarthy poses questions about how the body, the gender of which is often ambiguous or shifting, figures in an environment where image is all: an inherently violent consumer culture in which images and ideas are force-fed and prescribed.

These two performances are themselves difficult to stomach, literally and metaphorically, for both the artist and the audience, and as such are exemplary of McCarthy's performance work of the 1970s in a crude, visceral sense. However, McCarthy's performances of the 1970s, whilst produced in an environment of performance-making that engaged identity-related political concerns, do not appear to have any personal or pre-established political objectives. Although McCarthy tends to present his work as somewhat apolitical, or at least coincidentally read as a political statement by subjective reviewers (as discussed in Chapter Three), Cary

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrike Groos, 'Introduction', in *Paul McCarthy, Videos 1970-1997*, ed. by Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), pp. 18-24 (p. 19).

<sup>2</sup> *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, MOCA, Los Angeles, 1 October 2011-13 February 2012.

Levine has highlighted the firm connections between McCarthy's work and that produced by feminist artists in Los Angeles in the 1970s, notably, 'his broad focus on power structures and social conditioning'.<sup>3</sup> The development of these themes and critiques can be seen clearly in *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*.

In this introductory section, after a formal description of each of the works, I set up a number of concepts for approaching *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, which are then expanded upon and delineated throughout the chapter. Firstly, I outline Slavoj Žižek's concept of objective and subjective forms of violence, and suggest that they offer a useful framing for the different modes of violence McCarthy presents in his work. I argue that the most disturbing aspect of McCarthy's work in this respect is the muddling of different categories of violence. McCarthy similarly disorientates his audience by confusing the semiotic functions of bodily fluids and household condiments, which I take up in the subsection entitled 'Ketchup = Blood' below. Secondly, I outline concepts of the unconscious and trauma as articulated by Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – namely, traumatic neuroses through which the subject is repeatedly brought back to the affecting incident – and Cathy Caruth on the circulation of texts and narratives on trauma as an otherwise unknowable event. I expand on latent references to psychoanalysis in McCarthy's descriptions of his own works, and in work by scholars such as Kristine Stiles and Amelia Jones, whose established psychoanalytic angle on McCarthy's work I extend and complicate. In a later section on the

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<sup>3</sup> Cary Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures: Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 25.

significance of architecture in McCarthy's performances, it becomes apparent that the architecture of the body and the structures in which McCarthy performs draw together the potential personal traumas of the artist and his audience's traumatic experience of witnessing his works. Finally, towards the end of the chapter, I employ elements of Mary Douglas' concepts of pollution and taboo, and Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, as key contexts to explore the transgressive and potentially political implications of McCarthy's performances. Each of these approaches set up a context for the concluding section of the chapter in which I offer a comparison of subjective readings of McCarthy's work: Barbara T. Smith's eyewitness account of the live work *Hot Dog*; and my close reading of the video of *Tubbing*.

I suggest that McCarthy's performances evoke complex systems of seeing and feeling, and seem to demand a close analysis of the psychical and physiological experience of witnessing them. Therefore, in contrast to Chapter One, in which I looked at the context of reception and dissemination of McCarthy's performances, in this chapter I focus closely on a number of pieces that demonstrate the intricacy of his work.

### ***Sailor's Meat* (1975) and *Tubbing* (1975): Representations of Trauma and Violence**

In *Sailor's Meat*, McCarthy performs nude wearing a platinum blonde wig and bright blue eye shadow, and lounges lasciviously on a bed in the middle

of a darkened room. After awkwardly putting on black lingerie, he applies red paint to his penis and buttocks, and spills ketchup and raw meat over his body and the mattress. He massages and licks the fleshy mass on the bed and penetrates it using an artificial penis attached to his own using adhesive dressing. He thrusts the artificial penis into a half-full mayonnaise jar and after it becomes detached he lies on his back and puts it into his mouth, forcing it further into his throat until he gags. Moving off the bed, he puts on a transparent black negligee and climbs onto a small white table. He urinates on an uncooked sausage placed at the centre and then bends down to lick it. Finally he drops and smashes the ketchup bottle and mayonnaise jar onto the floor next to the bed and walks barefoot over the broken glass.<sup>4</sup>

In *Tubbing*, McCarthy performs again nude and wears the same blonde wig and gaudy makeup, which is re-applied at the start of the video by a female assistant. The artist performs in a bathtub half-filled with water, playfully splashing and slathering himself with cold cream. Holding a sausage in one hand, McCarthy pours the contents of an open bottle of ketchup over the sausage and himself. He applies more cold cream to his torso, backside, and legs, still brandishing the sausage, which is now dripping with ketchup. He reaches out of the bathtub and takes a handful of minced meat from a package resting on the edge of the toilet seat, and kneads and rolls it on the side of the bath. Drawing the flowered shower curtain across halfway, he takes a bite of the ground meat, retches and gags, takes another bite, and retches, this time with his mouth hanging open and

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<sup>4</sup> These descriptions of *Sailor's Meat* and of *Tubbing* are from my own transcription whilst viewing the videos, access to which was provided by McCarthy's representing gallery, Hauser & Wirth. *Sailor's Meat/ Sailor's Delight*, edit #1 (long version) (82:00 min); *Tubbing* (27:00 min).



dripping with saliva. He takes another bite and chews with eyes closed in concentration, and finally swallows. He drinks ketchup directly from the bottle and applies it liberally to his groin area before sucking the meat out of the sausage he has been holding all along. He wraps a bandage around his groin, tying it around his waist and legs and begins the process of washing himself in the now filthy bathwater.

As Ralph Rugoff has noted, '[f]rom early on in his career, [McCarthy's] focus on sex and violence has been framed within an abiding thematic context: the symbolic violence of our social conditioning by the family and the mass media'.<sup>5</sup> Whilst McCarthy's work focuses on sex and violence and in the process 'assaults our nice etiquette and systematic euphemisms', he is perhaps not intrinsically concerned with breaking taboos but, rather, exposing and exploring individual experience of symbolic violence.<sup>6</sup> I argue for both *exposing* and *exploring* because McCarthy's work often does not clearly delineate between a critique of violence in the mass media, and a continuation of such violence in mediated forms (in video performance for example). In *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, both solo performances, this exploration is conducted through the violence McCarthy performs towards himself. In these works, viewers witness McCarthy simultaneously inflicting his body with pain or discomfort – treading repeatedly on broken glass, ingesting raw meat – and resisting otherwise protective or cathartic bodily gestures that might relieve this (desisting the painful treading or vomiting to expel the food). The result is both a struggle

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<sup>5</sup> Ralph Rugoff, 'Survey: Mr McCarthy's Neighbourhood', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Ralph Rugoff (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 30-87 (p. 32).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

within the body to receive and contain this violence, and a symbolic struggle between the individual and the invisible objective or ‘systemic violence’ that Slavoj Žižek attributes to ‘the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems’.<sup>7</sup> I read McCarthy’s display of inflicting and resisting violence in these performances in part as a protest against the smooth functioning of economic and political systems, evidenced in everyday life in the mass manufacture and consumption of commodities.

Another type of objective violence that Žižek identifies, ‘symbolic violence’, is embodied in language, whilst a further form, the ‘directly visible “subjective violence”’ is the most recognisable in daily life.<sup>8</sup> The movement between these different types of violence is represented in McCarthy’s performances by utilising the body as the vehicle for its display. Direct and symbolic violence are represented by mixing bodily fluids – blood, urine, saliva – and materials such as ketchup, hot dogs, raw meat and mayonnaise, which represent bodily organs and fluids to abstract the body. Systemic violence might be represented in the way that the performances are conveyed to audiences as video works, the audience apparently desensitised and at a remove from any real violence or trauma depicted.

Rugoff’s description of McCarthy’s performances as a response to the symbolic violence of social conditioning and the mass media appears only to take into account a formal reading of the work and misses the potential to explore the direct and systemic violence of the pieces. I aim to complicate readings of these performances, which have in retrospect

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<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

become milestones in McCarthy's performance practice. *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing* might be read as engendering the questions and issues that he explores throughout his career under three broad themes: the vocabulary of images and materials established in these performances, which become symbolic of his wider practice; the implication of performance architectures that become containers of trauma; and the artist's relationship to audience and resistance to cultures of control.

In McCarthy's performances the instability of reality and artificiality acts as a kind of violence towards the viewer. Violence, which is merely suggested or proposed but never fully realised, is 'latent violence' as Stiles suggests, which remains 'unclear as to what it will become.'<sup>9</sup> McCarthy describes his relationship with his audience as inherently tied to representations of violence:

My work is not a manifestation of violence. I always work with false violence. There is no element of actual 'risk'. The motive power behind the act is psychological. For just one brief moment the public feels afraid. [...] The spectators find themselves torn between laughter and terror at the brutality of the act. They laugh at the joke. But at the same time I know that the moment takes on a brutal aspect, which makes them uncomfortable. My work is about virtual brutality, false brutality. It's one of many forms of violence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kristine Stiles, 'Interview: Kristine Stiles in Conversation with Paul McCarthy', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Ralph Rugoff (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 8-29 (p. 13).

<sup>10</sup> Paul McCarthy, cited in Virginie Luc, 'The Lonely Ranger, Paul McCarthy', *Janus*, 12 (Winter 2002), 137-39 (p. 139).

McCarthy identifies the violence in his work as ever present but rarely manifest, and the false representation of violence as a slapstick routine is used as a kind of joke, which serves to disturb the audience further. His reference to the possibility of ‘many forms of violence’, reflects the different levels of violence identified using Žižek’s model of subjective and objective violence.<sup>11</sup>

For McCarthy, the ‘concrete reality’ of performance, ‘where you don’t *represent* getting shot, you actually *get* shot’, suggests the physical wounding of the body, or direct violence.<sup>12</sup> McCarthy suggests that this kind of performance, employed by artists such as Chris Burden in the early 1970s, was ‘less interesting’ to him than ‘mimicking, appropriation, fiction, representation and questioning meaning.’<sup>13</sup> McCarthy’s performances, certainly from the mid-1970s onwards, focus on representations of reality, mimesis, fantasy and abstract perception. However, by seeking to distance his work from artists who engage with direct violence, McCarthy does not distance himself from concrete reality, but rather, performs a traumatic or symbolic re-experiencing of it.

As discussed in the thesis Introduction, in McCarthy’s work, the penis is often represented as a detachable limb, and as Amelia Jones suggests, McCarthy enacts ‘an extended castration narrative’.<sup>14</sup> That is, McCarthy repeatedly enacts a symbolic castration, the threat of which, according to Freud, is ever present (except for the fetishist, whose fetish

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.; Žižek, *Violence*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Paul McCarthy, cited in Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Amelia Jones, ‘Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity’, in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Dan Cameron and Lisa Phillips (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art/Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 125-31 (p. 129).

‘remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it’).<sup>15</sup> I discuss the fetish in relation to McCarthy’s work in Chapter Three, but here I am concerned not with the repeated representation of the object, but with the repeated representation and confusion of trauma. In McCarthy’s work, the repeated recoding of contemporary experience is traumatic potentially for both for the artist and the audience, as McCarthy admits, what he performs in his work are ‘forgotten memories – my traumas or possibly someone else’s traumas.’<sup>16</sup>

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud discusses the content and function of dreams, and how they might be interpreted as symbolic representations of unconscious desires and forgotten memories. He argues that ‘[a]ll the material making up the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience’ – whether or not we recognise it consciously, on waking – ‘that is to say, has been reproduced or *remembered* in the dream’.<sup>17</sup> The connection between the material in dreams and our conscious life, however, must be mediated through interpretation, as Freud cautions; ‘psychical reality’ – represented in dreams and unconscious wishes – ‘is a particular form of existence not to be confused with *material* reality.’<sup>18</sup> McCarthy’s refusal or ambivalence to recognise the material that he represents in his work as belonging to him or relating to others, might be read through Freud’s understanding of the significance of dreams.

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<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Fetishism’ (1927), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931) The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), XXI, pp. 152-57 (p. 154).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1976] 1991), The Penguin Freud Library, 15 vols, VI, p. 69. Emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 782. Emphasis in original.

Particularly in the use of ketchup and other condiments to symbolise bodily fluids – but also to represent themselves – McCarthy attempts to destabilise firm distinctions between psychical and material reality. In many ways – as we shall see – McCarthy’s performances might be described as depicting a dream-like state; for example, they are excessively visual (Freud argues that dreams ‘think predominantly in visual images’<sup>19</sup>), and the symbols represented across his oeuvre – most significantly, the adage that ketchup is the visual equivalent of blood – are consistently asserted across his work. Furthermore, Freud contends, ‘[d]reams yield no more than *fragments* of reproductions’, and only in exceptional cases will a dream represent an experience ‘with as much completeness as is attainable by our waking memory.’<sup>20</sup> The seemingly disconnected references in McCarthy’s performances – sexualised behaviour, consumer products, a distinct lack of comprehensible verbal language – compounded by a general absence of narrative in his work, gives the effect that his audience are witnessing a collection of unconscious desires, private memories, violent urges, or fragments of a forgotten trauma. As Freud suggests, indeed, ‘[d]reams are disconnected, they accept the most violent contradictions without the least objection [and] admit impossibilities’.<sup>21</sup> Freud’s study of the unconscious in *The Interpretation of Dreams* can be used to explicate the role of the unconscious in McCarthy’s performances, and to substantiate the seemingly disorientating, even alienating effects of his work for audiences.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 80. Emphasis in original.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

Freud develops his ideas on dreams further, and particularly in relation to trauma, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a key text for my articulations of trauma in McCarthy's work. Freud argues that in 'normal' subjects, what he calls the 'reality principle' works in the unconscious in balance with the pleasure principle – 'the method of working employed by the sexual instincts'<sup>22</sup> – for the purposes of self-preservation. The reality principle does not 'abandon' the pursuit or possibility of pleasure, but enacts a 'postponement of satisfaction, [...] the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure.'<sup>23</sup> Freud is concerned here with the processes by which we experience '*perceptual* unpleasure', that is, instances of perceived threat – either external or internal – to the subject, which trigger the reality principle to modify the pleasure principle accordingly, such that pleasure can eventually be obtained.<sup>24</sup> This process occurs when the threat of danger is perceived and acknowledged *as* dangerous. However, in instances where there is no perceived threat – the subject is surprised, for example, in a car accident – this can result in what Freud calls 'traumatic neurosis'.<sup>25</sup> For the purposes of self-preservation, the traumatic event is repressed, and as Freud suggests, the subject suffering from traumatic neurosis are generally not be concerned 'in their waking lives with memories of their accident'; more likely, 'they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it.'<sup>26</sup> Dreams, however, have a significant

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<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVIII (1920-1922), Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), XVIII, pp. 7-66 (p. 10).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11. Emphasis in original.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13. Emphasis in original.

role in the experiences of traumatic neurotics in that they ‘repeatedly bring [...] the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright.’<sup>27</sup> Whilst the event itself is repressed – the subject wishes to forget it – the unconscious reasserts or repeats it, such that it is only recognised as traumatic through this repetition. The compulsion to repeat the trauma may also occur in conscious life, although the subject ‘cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him’ – the trauma may recur as fragments of event – ‘and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it.’<sup>28</sup>

McCarthy’s comments on his own work, and his seeming inability to identify and distinguish his own subjective experiences from wider culture, might be explored in relation to trauma. McCarthy repeatedly uses ketchup in his performances which, as has been established, might represent blood; a connection perhaps to excessive horror film gore. He repeats various images and materials from contemporary culture – for example, the seemingly harmless viscous red condiment – and recodes them as threatening and potentially dangerous. Moreover, he returns in a number of works – such as *Hot Dog*, *Sailor’s Meat*, and *Tubbing*, as will be discussed – to the visually traumatic scene of force-feeding, in which the artist guzzles raw meat, margarine, and other sticky foodstuffs, to the point of choking and vomiting. Again, he recodes the productive and pleasurable – the process of eating and consuming – into something distinctly unpleasurable, compulsive, and for his audiences, difficult to watch. In my analyses of McCarthy’s performances, I do not seek to identify the traumas or memories that he is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 18.



representing – this might be an uninteresting and futile exercise, although I do point to his potential sources of inspiration – but suggest precisely that the inability to identify these traumas is one of the most affecting elements of McCarthy’s work. Particularly in the latter part of the chapter I am interested in how the visibly and viscerally uncomfortable experience of witnessing the artist’s retching and gagging in performance gets relayed to and repeated by audiences.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* Cathy Caruth argues that there are two meanings of trauma: the physical wounding of the body (signified by the visibility of blood or bodily fluids that have broken through the barrier of the skin); and trauma – in Freudian terms – as a wound upon the mind.<sup>29</sup> In McCarthy’s performances I describe in this chapter, aspects of both are presented. For Freud, as paraphrased by Caruth, the wound of the mind ‘is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.’<sup>30</sup> Caruth, in turn, seeks to question ‘what it means to transmit and to theorize [through literary and theoretical texts] around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness.’<sup>31</sup> My claim is that McCarthy also poses questions about what it means to narrate or re-perform a trauma, particularly in a context in which the distinctions between

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<sup>29</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

inside/outside, artist/audience, and psychic/physical trauma are blurred. McCarthy's work refuses these distinctions, and indicates the importance of reading the body in his work as both a vehicle for representation and always already itself.

Before moving to a discussion of the use of architecture in McCarthy's work, and expanding on characterisations of trauma, I will outline McCarthy's use of symbolic and representative bodily fluids in his work. Raw meat, ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise and other consumables form a vocabulary of materials that McCarthy uses throughout his work, and it is in his performances of the 1970s that these recurring components are established.

### **Ketchup = Blood: The Vocabulary of Images in Materials and McCarthy's Performances of the 1970s**

In a series of short, experimental videos from the early 1970s, collectively known as the *Black and White Tapes* (1970-75), and including works such as *Pissing, Microphone* (1972), *Spitting on the Camera Lens* (1974) and *Shit Face Painting* (1974), McCarthy uses a range of bodily fluids – urine, saliva, faeces and semen – to perform short Fluxus-style actions to camera. McCarthy experimented in combining bodily fluids with creative actions such as painting in a move to critique what Levine has called the 'overly gendered art techniques and styles, specifically the presumed machismo of

abstract expressionism' or action painting.<sup>32</sup> For example, in the video piece *Shit Face Painting*, we see the McCarthy shit onto a piece of white paper, and then spread the excrement over his chest, groin, neck and face. The artist drags his body over the soiled paper on the floor, and the camera closes in on his face.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps in a gesture that mimics Jackson Pollock's painting style of dripping paint onto a canvas on the floor, McCarthy overemphasises the messiness of action painting to the extreme. For McCarthy, perhaps the logical conclusion or extension of action painting to body art is to roll around the floor in his own faeces. *Shit Face Painting* extends and critiques the concept of the artist-genius, as McCarthy only concerns himself with his own existence, and indeed, only deals with materials of his own making.

Also in the 1970s, McCarthy started using a number of other fluids and materials in his performances, primarily ketchup, cold cream, mayonnaise, hot dogs and raw meat. In *Hot Dog*, McCarthy shaved his body and smeared himself with mustard, drank ketchup from the bottle and stuffed hot dog sausages into his mouth to the point of gagging. Although these materials began to appear frequently in his performances of the 1970s, they recur in later works, such as *Bossy Burger* (1992), a video performance in which McCarthy plays a crazed chef mixing and spreading ketchup and mayonnaise around the surfaces of the purpose-built set, which is then left to harden and putrefy. These materials have subsequently become part of the vocabulary with which his work is discussed. Even when considering

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<sup>32</sup> Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> Kristin Schmidt, 'Shit Face Painting', in *Paul McCarthy, Videos 1970-1997*, ed. by Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), pp. 78-79.

McCarthy's large inflatable sculptural works later in his career, such as *Daddies Tomato Ketchup Inflatable* (2007) – a giant inflatable replica of a branded ketchup bottle – the use of these messy materials in performance can be used as both an historical and aesthetic counterpoint to his later cleaned up object-based works (as discussed in Chapter Three).

The move from using unsimulated bodily fluids – saliva, blood, urine and faeces – to everyday consumables and foodstuffs marks a shift in McCarthy's practice towards an abstraction of the body and the use of representative materials as metaphors. As Dan Cameron has noted, since the mid-1970s, 'McCarthy moved steadily away from the objectified inclusion of his physical self to embrace the spectacle of the body as a repository of society's most closely guarded mores and taboos.'<sup>34</sup> In this reading, ketchup represents blood, mayonnaise represents semen, hot dogs represent the penis, and ground meat stands in for an uncategorisable fleshy mass. In *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, McCarthy uses his own body and bodily fluids alongside these representative materials, so that metaphors are mixed in with the concrete presence of the body. Here, the food products represent bodily fluids and, in the presence of a real body, always also represent themselves. On one hand, *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing* might be read as exemplary performances which reflect the complex vocabulary of images and materials used in McCarthy's work; they also set up one of his overarching interests, of complicating perceptions of illusion and reality. They also anticipate bolder statements of cultural critique in later works such as *Bossy Burger* and *Daddies Tomato Ketchup Inflatable* in which

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<sup>34</sup> Dan Cameron, 'The Mirror Stage', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Cameron and Lisa Phillips (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 57-63 (p. 60).

consumer products are placed centre stage, as if in an extended yet subversive advertising campaign. On the other hand, they position McCarthy's performance practice somewhere between the artifice of theatre (for example, ketchup is used as a stand-in for blood), and the concrete reality of much performance art (for example, walking bare foot over broken glass until blood appears). McCarthy also attempts to unsettle and challenge these binary oppositions by combining bodily fluids and representative surrogates.

Performance studies scholar Philip Auslander has suggested that in performance, the body 'is the locus at which the workings of ideological codes are perhaps the most insidious and also the most difficult to analyze, for the performing body is always both a vehicle for representation and, simply, itself'.<sup>35</sup> Just as the body in performance occupies multiple semiotic functions, so do the fluids and materials McCarthy uses in *Tubbing* and *Sailor's Meat*. McCarthy uses recognisable materials and subverts them, defamiliarising them from their status as consumer products, and yet never quite convincing his audience that they are bodily fluids. Similar to his oscillation between categories of direct, symbolic and systemic violence, the vocabulary of images and materials in McCarthy's performances appear to move fluidly between artifice and concrete reality. And yet, the knowledge that the thick, red fluid is only ketchup and not blood is little comfort. In a commonsensical awareness of the obvious artificiality of the performances, 'conscious of some underlying significance but utterly confused, viewers are pressed to reflect upon the entrenched values that determine why they

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<sup>35</sup> Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 90.

react the way they do – the standards of decorum that sustain not only the art world but civilization at large.<sup>36</sup> Whilst McCarthy's use and subversion of these materials establishes a visual vocabulary for his work, they also indicate the slippages between what is believably realistic and what is clearly fake, and the complications of perceiving these with any certainty.

In Chapter Three I discuss McCarthy's ambivalence to taking personal ownership of the objects he selects to use in performance. Similarly, as noted, McCarthy takes an irreverent stance to 'gendered art techniques' in his early performances in the *Black and White Tapes* by utilising and then subverting the 'machismo' of Abstract Expressionism by combining painting with bodily fluids.<sup>37</sup> In complicating the ownership of the ideas and images he uses, McCarthy both seizes authorship of them, incorporating them violently into his practice, and subverts them, turning them outwards towards the audience. The result is that in performances such as *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing* it is difficult to locate the sincerity with which McCarthy declares often violent or traumatic memories as his own as distinct from those that he locates elsewhere in contemporary culture. Alongside the often overwhelming physical revulsion induced by these performances, the particular indecipherability of the violent images McCarthy presents constitutes some of the more difficult aspects of his work.

The critical and scholarly reception of McCarthy's performances of the 1970s including *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing* that have, in retrospect, become touchstone pieces in the longer narrative of his career, has been

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<sup>36</sup> Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

significant in my research in highlighting connections between his performance work and later object-based practices. Kristine Stiles' analysis and foregrounding of *Inside Out Olive Oil* (1983) in 'Imploring Silence, Words and Performance Essence: A Polemic', as exemplary of McCarthy's oeuvre which, having gone critically unnoticed for some time, opened up a space for renegotiating earlier performances such as *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*.<sup>38</sup> Stiles' article proposes two readings of McCarthy's work. One is that McCarthy's performances are perhaps resistant to academic theorisations; as Levine concurs, 'McCarthy's performances were decidedly anti-intellectual, seemingly haphazard, boorish, and even insane,' and as such his 'blatant idiocy soiled the philosophical integrity of many of his predecessors' – namely, Allan Kaprow, Vito Acconci, and Bruce Nauman – 'who even when embracing the irrational were engaged in profound ethical – if not metaphysical – undertakings.'<sup>39</sup> However, as Stiles' essay begins to show, McCarthy's work also lends itself well to discussions of the unconscious, of abjection, trauma, and memory, and provides a useful case study for looking at these concepts in relation to performance. Similarly, the role of the audience, of space, the body, artificiality and risk become integral to discussions of his work.

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<sup>38</sup> Kristine Stiles, 'Imploring Silence, Words and Performance Essence: A Polemic', *High Performance*, 8.1 (1985), 33-36.

<sup>39</sup> Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 26.

## **Architecture of the Body/The Body as Architecture**

In an interview with Stiles published in 1996, McCarthy coined the term ‘architecture of the body’ to describe both the body *as* architecture, a container of fleshy mass and fluids, and the architectures McCarthy constructs in which to perform.<sup>40</sup> *Olive Oil* offers an example of both; the structure in which McCarthy performed is shaped like a body, and the surrogate bodily fluids – ketchup and mustard – represent the otherwise contained bodily mess. In early sculptural works inspired by 1960s Minimalism, such as *Dead H* (1968) and *Skull with a Tail* (1978), McCarthy makes reference to the dimensions and containment of the human body. *Dead H*, a hollow sculpture in the shape of a capital H, has open ends on each of the legs so that spectators might peer into the sculpture but not physically access it (the legs were purposefully too narrow for a human body to fit inside). In installation, *Dead H* lies flat on the ground, prostrate ‘like a human being with two legs and two arms.’<sup>41</sup> *Skull with a Tail*, another large, hollow structure consists of a steel cube with a protruding tail or limb, referencing both animal and human bodies. Perhaps more sculptural than architectural in emphasis, since neither artist nor audience could move within these pieces but rather moved around them, they highlight McCarthy’s interest in creating forms which concern the movement or containment of the human body. And yet these pieces are void of the visceral messiness of McCarthy’s performances, usually indicative of fluids

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<sup>40</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.



that have been released from the body, or structures put in place to contain them.

McCarthy uses masks as lenses or frames onto the outside world but also as borders for the body to transgress and spill over. For McCarthy, masks are inherently performative; when worn and used in performance they are activated as extensions or containers of the body. McCarthy characterises these as constructed architectures or spaces in which to perform. In 1968 he created *Looking Out, Skull Card*, a simple mask-like object made from a sheet of card with two round eyeholes, dangling from a piece of string. McCarthy has said that '[t]he eye hole of the mask is similar to the lens hole of the camera or the frame of the picture. You can't see beyond the frame of the hole.'<sup>42</sup> *Olive Oil* also includes this third layer of architecture, in the latex mask McCarthy wears throughout. Although this is by no means the only performance in which McCarthy wears a mask – others include *Basement Clown* (1975), *Rocky* (1976), and *Monkey Man* (1980) – it is unique in that it utilises all three versions of the 'architecture of the body'. The mask in this instance both conceals the face of the wearer, creating an external barrier between the artist and audience, restricting the view from the outside in, and controls what can be seen through the lens or frame of the hole from the inside out.

As well as wearing masks to assume a persona in performance, McCarthy stretches the definition of the mask as a container of the human body, which he perceives as the architectural quality of masks. In *Halloween* (1978), documented in five photographs and published in *High*

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

*Performance*, McCarthy wears a bald full-head mask with thick liquid oozing from a wound on the top. He bends forward to pull the wound apart further with both hands, then gripping the mouth, eye-holes, and sides of the mask with his hands he pulls and contorts the face while the head wound gapes further still. In the final image the thick, slimy substance from the wound covers the face and hands which McCarthy holds up with fingers spread at each side of the face.<sup>43</sup> In a series of performances known collectively as *Meat Cake* (1974), McCarthy constructs a mask during the performances by layering ground meat, margarine, and bandages onto his face, holding it in place with adhesive tape.<sup>44</sup> He also stuffs some of the margarine-meat mixture into his mouth, securing it in place with tape. In *Contemporary Cure All* (1978) – a collaboration with John Duncan – in which McCarthy employs a small cast of performers to work alongside him, a figure (performing as ‘the patient’) lies on a table draped in white cloth to look like a hospital bed. He wears a rubber mask which is filled with meat, such that the image of flesh is threefold: a rubber mask, beneath which is ground meat, and then finally the living flesh of the human body.

This layering of structures that are bound to the body or that contain the body, is a theme that runs throughout McCarthy’s work. In later video performances such as *Bossy Burger* and *Pinocchio Pipenose* *Householddilemma* (1994) McCarthy creates film set-like structures in which to perform – mostly flimsy wooden sets, built with little effort to

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<sup>43</sup> Paul McCarthy, *Halloween*, 31 October 1978, Pasadena, California, *High Performance*, 1.4 (1978), 41-43.

<sup>44</sup> The performances in the *Meat Cake* series are titled: *Meat Cake #1, Flowered Dress; Meat Cake #2, White Slip; Meat Cake #3, Blond Wig; Meat Cake #4, Prelude; and Meat Cake #5.*

conceal the artificiality of their construction. The characters McCarthy performs in these pieces do not leave the architectures but are trapped within them; the only pathways they can follow are those which have been laid out for them within the restricted space.<sup>45</sup> When exhibited as an installation the *Bossy Burger* set is displayed along with accumulated leftovers from the performance – bottles, decaying meat, milk, mayonnaise and ketchup – and the video-taped performance displayed on monitors.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in *Pinocchio* the characters never leave the house in which they perform: the house becomes a place where ‘[p]aranoia and psychosis breed’; McCarthy describes them as ‘very much associated with the reality within a house as absurdity. The construct of reality and absurdity.’<sup>47</sup>

With these later performances extending and expanding McCarthy’s interest in the body as architecture, scholars began to look back to his earlier performances to determine models of interpretation that could be applied across his wide-ranging career. In a catalogue essay for a major retrospective exhibition of McCarthy’s work 2000, Amelia Jones takes *Olive Oil* as a starting point for thinking about McCarthy’s uses of ‘conceptual and material space (the architectural and the embodied) which intersect the social (sublimation/architecture) with the individual (repression/body).’<sup>48</sup> Jones suggests that:

If architectural spaces represent the civilizing influence – the weight of the law and the structuring force of institutions (versus the chaos

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<sup>45</sup> Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 18, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Johannes Lothar Schröder, ‘Bossy Burger’, in *Paul McCarthy, Videos 1970-1997*, ed. by Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), pp. 118-25 (p. 125).

<sup>47</sup> Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 19.

<sup>48</sup> Jones, ‘Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body’, p. 126.

of open space outside the walls of buildings and rooms), that which, like the mask/hole of the camera, *contains* – then bodies, too, can be seen – like the ego itself – as containers for the chaos of subjective interiority (associated with femininity or some other dimension of otherness).<sup>49</sup>

For Jones, the body is a restrictive container for an otherwise chaotic and messy subjectivity as much as the physical architecture in which McCarthy performs. Though this is not a neat container by any means; the boundaries of the body in McCarthy's performances are presented primarily for the purpose of being transgressed. Even the audience may find that in watching McCarthy's works their own bodily limits are reached (as discussed later in this chapter).

The psychoanalytic lens Jones uses to approach McCarthy's work 'explores, and ultimately reverses, the dual and interlinked processes of sublimation and repression', and is taken up in 2011 by Anna-Lena Werner, who characterises McCarthy's videos and installations as frames for trauma.<sup>50</sup> In performances of the 1980s and 1990s such as *Olive Oil*, *Bossy Burger* and *Pinnocchio*, Werner writes, McCarthy 'invites his audience to witness and experience trauma via a restrictive and claustrophobic architecture, while also he imprisons his protagonists in such.'<sup>51</sup> Subsequently, 'the artist increases an awareness of the traumatic potential

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Anna-Lena Werner, 'Architecture as Frame for Trauma Video Installations by Paul McCarthy', *Performance Research*, 16.1 (2011), 153-63 (p. 153).

therein, and [...] underlines architecture's performativity.<sup>52</sup> For Werner, the restrictive and often claustrophobic architectures that contain McCarthy's performances are experienced by audiences as inherently traumatic, which returns to an important question which McCarthy explores throughout his work: to whom do these traumas belong?<sup>53</sup> In video performances such as *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, McCarthy performs solitary acts of simulated violence on his own body, using a mixed vocabulary of bodily fluids and other substances. Whilst for the audience the video might in itself be unsettling to watch (traumatic in that they appear to be watching the obsessive, repetitive actions of a trauma survivor or in Freud's terms, a 'traumatic neurotic'<sup>54</sup>), the risk of physical harm for an audience member is low. In live performances such as *Hot Dog*, or pieces that employ large-scale external architectures in performance and installation, the experience of trauma is expanded outwards to contain the entire performance-audience space.

Taking Freud's characterisation of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the 'unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind', Caruth theorises trauma as 'much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche', but 'always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available'.<sup>55</sup> Trauma is not located in the initial, violent event, 'but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature [...] returns

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Stiles, 'Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy', p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4.

to haunt the survivor later on'.<sup>56</sup> In McCarthy's performances there is some confusion about whether the artist is re-enacting a personally traumatic experience, an imagined one, or whether the disturbing repetition of certain gestures and movements (force-feeding, retching and vomiting, for example) act as an indexing of wider cultural traumas. Such traumas might range from the Vietnam War (an instance of direct, objective violence in Žižek's terms) to the systemic violence of capitalism in which, as Levine points out, the alignment of sex and food consumption (which McCarthy explicitly portrays in *Tubbing* and *Sailor's Meat*) is prevalent in U.S. advertising of the 1970s, but at the same time profoundly taboo.<sup>57</sup> The architectures in which the performances are presented as structures of containment; audience members who feel uneasy at watching the performances retain this experience of witnessing and potentially repeat the gestures of trauma *ad nauseam*.

The use of various structures which frame or contain the body, such as masks, sets, or the camera lens, indicate that the 'architecture of the body' is a consistent theme in McCarthy's work. In his humanoid sculptures and kinetic installations of the 1980s and 1990s (discussed in Chapter Three), McCarthy creates structures to perform as surrogates for the human body, which have their own relationship to trauma. For example, the objects used in performance and packed away in *The Trunks* (1983) are recognised, in their battered state, as detritus having survived acts of violence in performance. Similarly, the mechanical figures in *The Garden* (1992) are repaired and eventually replaced, worn out from the repetitive and

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 121.

continuous labour of performance. In *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, McCarthy employs various means of layering reality and artificiality, although, as ever in McCarthy's work, the boundary between the two is thinly veiled though no less unsettling. Whilst Werner relates McCarthy's performances to trauma and memory – personal, cultural, or otherwise – McCarthy also takes inspiration from dreams, for example in the video performance *Karen Ketchup Dream* (1975) and in short poetic texts written for *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing* (discussed in Chapter One).<sup>58</sup> The 'architecture of the body' in the context of McCarthy's performances can be defined in terms of framing devices imposed on the body which McCarthy consistently stretches and punctures, traversing the boundary between reality and the imaginary. As an architectural concept, the body, too, is both restrictive and permeable, which 'needs to be theatrically broken and opened.'<sup>59</sup>

### **Paul McCarthy's Theatre of Regression**

In his analysis of McCarthy's performances of the 1970s, Rugoff suggests that:

Carrying out one-man orgies with condiments that substituted for excrement, sperm and blood, McCarthy enacted a *theatre of regression*: smearing his body parts, choking on hot dog penises,

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<sup>58</sup> Short writings entitled 'Dream 1971' and 'Sweet Meat. March 1975' were published in *High Performance*, 1.2 (1978), p. 45.

<sup>59</sup> Werner, 'Architecture as Frame for Trauma', p. 153.

vomiting, fucking mayonnaise jars, he pictured a body whose borders were collapsing, whose insides seemed to be gushing out as though its thin bag of skin had ruptured, unleashing a landscape of garbage in which the self's boundaries dissolved.<sup>60</sup>

Rugoff refers specifically to solo performances in which McCarthy employs the variety of materials and substances described, evoking an orgy of mass-produced food stuffs and the ingestions, expulsions and collapsing borders of the body in performance. Carolee Schneemann's piece *Meat Joy* (1964), in which a group of performers – eight men and women – roll around on the floor, embracing each other and writhing around amongst raw chicken, fish, sausages, paint, sheets of plastic and scraps of paper, provides a valuable context for McCarthy's works, in the use of food, naked bodies and wild, chaotic abandon. In Schneemann's piece, the performers' bodies, raw meat and dead fish become interlinked, and the multiple bodies – human and non-human – on display become interchangeable. In McCarthy's works from the 1970s, more often than not he performs alone, his body acting as a site of exchange between concrete reality (flesh and blood), and the symbols of consumerism (meat and ketchup). Levine writes of the disparity between the two artists' works: '*Meat Joy* was meant to be visceral, communal, celebratory, and authentic', whereas *Sailor's Meat* 'is private (masturbatory), deranged, and detached, this last effect enhanced by the use of video instead of live performance', meaning that the live audience's

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<sup>60</sup> Rugoff, 'Survey', p. 33. Emphasis added.



viewing is technologically mediated.<sup>61</sup> The celebratory air of liberation in Schneemann's work is almost completely lacking in McCarthy's; his performances point towards a society of containment and repression, hence the violent, obsessive, and sadistic behaviour depicted in his performances. As discussed above, Jones describes the architectures in which McCarthy performs as having a 'civilizing influence', as they contain the chaos of the body, and the body itself acts as a container for the 'chaos of subjective interiority'.<sup>62</sup> In his theatre of regression, as Rugoff terms it, McCarthy's selected icons of American consumer culture no longer refer to themselves but also to the bodies that produce and consume them, and are moulded so as to resemble or act in communication with the human body. At the same time, the structure of the body collapses and merges with the representative materials, thus disturbingly muddling, as Levine points out, the suggestion of food consumption with sex/body consumption.<sup>63</sup>

In Rugoff's characterisation, regression might be read as the deterioration of the body as an image, a theatrical, staged construct, or cultural and aesthetic icon. In McCarthy's performances the use of ketchup to represent blood, mayonnaise to represent semen, raw meat to represent excrement or flesh (but also as themselves), indicate the bodily spillages and collapsing borders that Rugoff suggests. However, because of their proximity to the live, performing body of the artist, these metaphors exist in tension with the possibility that they will in turn induce actual bodily spillages, retching, choking or vomiting. This happens to the artist at several

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<sup>61</sup> Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 120.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, 'Paul McCarthy's Inside Out Body', p. 126.

<sup>63</sup> Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 120.

points throughout *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, and in *Hot Dog*; McCarthy similarly explores the limits of the body by force-feeding or dangerously restricting the means by which food can leave his body, which also has a nauseating effect on his audience. In these works, McCarthy continually destabilises the boundaries between the visual and the affective, between performer and audience, and more broadly between concrete reality and tricks of perception.

Rugoff has noted that in McCarthy's work there is 'an intense, almost unbearably personal quality to the symbolic acts of mutilation and debasement', however, '[w]hat is missing is any sense that this work articulates a confessional, or specifically personal, psychology.'<sup>64</sup> Rugoff points to one of the contradictions inherent in McCarthy's solo performances, but which might also be applied to his work more broadly. As described later in this chapter, the intensely visceral and often alienating experience of watching McCarthy's performances is matched by a sense of intimacy, supportiveness or duty of care for the artist as he endures physical or psychological discomfort. The missing 'confessional, or specifically personal, psychology' Rugoff writes about is potentially more distressing for audiences, given that his 'symbolic acts of mutilation and debasement' are just that; *symbolic*, perhaps even gratuitous, in the face of the physical wounding of the body (or bodies, as in war), or the socio-political violence of oppression or inequality.

Schneemann's *Meat Joy* was, as Levine states, 'directly linked to the sexual politics of the 1960s', with the 'explicit goal [of achieving] freedom

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<sup>64</sup> Rugoff, 'Survey', p. 35.

from repression'.<sup>65</sup> McCarthy's work seemingly 'stands in direct confrontation' with this sentiment, and rather than inviting viewers to 'participate in a collective liberation [...] McCarthy baits his viewer into a situation of psychological, perceptual, and moral ambiguity.'<sup>66</sup> In this case, where the presence of an explicit personal element to the work might be cause for concern (heightening perhaps the audience's sense of care for the artist), the lack or rejection of any deeper meaning becomes in itself a point of frustration. Perhaps the most useful description here is Levine's concept of McCarthy baiting his audience by seeming to reinforce one set of assumptions (the content and psychological impact of the work is derived from a disturbed mind or traumatic experience), whilst lurching towards the opposite conclusion (that the body is merely a vehicle for representing symbolic and societal ills).

It is surprising then that Rugoff suggests that '[i]n McCarthy's work the human body is pre-eminently a social body, a metaphor for systems and conventions that define our world.'<sup>67</sup> It is perhaps convenient to politicise McCarthy's work by abstracting his body in performance, since it shuts down potentially more difficult modes of producing meaning, such as the possibility of reading his works as confessional. In the Conclusion to the thesis, I unpack some of the processes behind McCarthy's more recent installations, such as *WS* (2013) at the Park Avenue Armory in New York. In particular, the structure in which the artists' team perform is a replica of McCarthy's childhood home, albeit, McCarthy suggests, a decision initially

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<sup>65</sup> Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 120.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Rugoff, 'Survey', p. 35.

made unconsciously.<sup>68</sup> In his account of building the installation, McCarthy unearths a realisation, or memory, that his parents both died in his childhood home. Although the installation itself – an orgiastic re-reading of Disney’s character Snow White – might be seen as a vehicle for cultural critique, the emergence of the painful personal elements of the piece indicates McCarthy’s refusal to offer stable categories of producing meaning. Personal trauma is mixed in with the fallout from wider cultural issues (the sexualisation of children, for example), thus destabilising the sincerity and sensitivity with which McCarthy deals with this material. Central to the critical messiness of McCarthy’s performances is precisely this destabilisation of reality and fantasy. This is played out in his performances of the 1970s in the muddling of real bodily fluids with foodstuffs and condiments, and the performing body as both a confessional body and a vehicle for the expression of social conventions. This muddling disorientates somewhat formalistic readings which ‘tidy’ McCarthy’s work into set categories of art. As I argue, McCarthy’s wide-ranging artistic practice is often difficult to pin down to a linear, chronological development, or to a singular and coherent political critique.

By characterising his performances as a theatre of regression Rugoff implies that McCarthy uses theatrical approaches to performance, and McCarthy himself describes his work as ‘a kind of theatre’, by which he means ‘the use of representation.’<sup>69</sup> McCarthy sets up a dichotomy in his work, as noted earlier, between performance ‘as concrete reality’, and

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<sup>68</sup> Paul McCarthy, ‘In Conversation: Paul McCarthy’s *WS* at the Armory’, *YouTube*, Park Avenue Armory, 24 June 2013 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWQ8JISP1sk>> [accessed 25 February 2014].

<sup>69</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 14.

performance as a process of ‘mimicking, appropriation, fiction, representation and questioning meaning’.<sup>70</sup> With this in mind, McCarthy developed a unique performance style that combined elements of both ‘concrete reality’ and theatrical artifice. *Sailor’s Meat* and *Tubbing* might be read as pivotal performances in which McCarthy uses elements of concrete reality and clarity at the fringes of the work – for example at the beginning and at the end where he exposes the structures of pretence by employing bodily fluids and processes; vomiting, urinating, bleeding – which frame the performances as dream-like sequences, a series of interlinked images and movements to create a narrative between them.

For example, in *Tubbing* we see an assistant applying makeup to the artist’s face and the camera zooms in to capture a close-up of the artist before the main action of the performance. In this quiet moment, McCarthy alternates between looking directly at the camera and looking shyly away as if unable to hold the viewer’s gaze. In *Sailor’s Meat*, McCarthy begins the performance sitting on the bed facing away from the camera, looking coyly at it over his shoulder. In the opening sequence he puts on women’s lingerie and pulls at the skin around his nipples as if trying to force his body into a more desirous female shape. By contrast, the performances end with more violent actions which puncture the imagery of the dream-like sequences that precede it. In *Tubbing*, McCarthy begins to wash himself in the dirty bathwater, cleaning off the cream and ketchup that were so integral to the development of the piece. The cameraperson slowly backs away, as if separating this cleansing ritual (the return to normality, sanitised culture,

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

and to Žižek's concept of systemic violence) from the action of the performance. In *Sailor's Meat*, McCarthy urinates on and then licks a sausage that he 'finds' on a bedside table, and then walks barefoot over the broken glass that he has smashed on the floor in a gesture of direct violence. These two instances of using or evoking bodily fluids (urine and blood) and employing sensorial actions (taste and pain) in performance are set apart from his use of representational fluids. The pieces develop through a series of images as a play on visuality, beginning with artifice and moving through to concrete reality.

Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) – in which the artist had a friend shoot him in the arm with a gun in a gallery space – is particularly useful for highlighting the difference between implied or represented violence and direct, physical violence which punctures or opens the skin. McCarthy constantly destabilises these categories by using theatrical representations of violence in a chaotic, slapstick manner, or with slow deliberate movements – which are quite clearly excluded from Burden's performances – and engaging with the risk of violence, for example, the risk that he might vomit, choke, fall, or cut himself during performance. Burden's seemingly deadpan style of documenting his works by offering concise written summaries and a few documentary photographs (as noted in Chapter One) led curator Paul Schimmel to describe his performances as 'viscerally reductive actions' that 'preclude subsequent distortions by viewers'.<sup>71</sup> The violence of McCarthy's performance is more complex. John C. Welchman

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<sup>71</sup> Paul Schimmel, 'Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object', in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, ed. by Paul Schimmel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), pp. 17-119 (p. 97).

has said of McCarthy's performances; '[w]e know [the violence is] fake, but we enter [into the act of viewing] with the fakery. On the other hand there are moments when our consciousness of the simulation and incessant set-up is put into suspension.'<sup>72</sup> The threat of violence lies not in McCarthy's actions (his brand of violence is almost always a simulation, however convincing the special effects) but in his ability to make his audience question their perception of and ability to distinguish between reality and simulation.

McCarthy destabilises perceptions of reality not only through images, but also through sound, adding to the disorientating, visceral nature of his works. His often non-linguistic mutterings and characteristic whining sounds create a disconcerting narrative of his journey through the performances; it is often difficult to tell if he is in pain, enjoying himself or indifferent to the presence of an audience or video camera. Where snatches of identifiable words and phrases can be heard, there is a temptation to seize on these moments of clarity as anchored in reality in an otherwise disorienting environment. For example, at the end of *Sailor's Meat*, when the artist walks over broken glass he says (among other indecipherable sounds), 'ooh crazy, Jesus, eating each other?' 'I don't like you', and 'oh, I don't think so.'<sup>73</sup> Rather than reading these phrases as somehow narrating, giving evidence or an explanation for the painful actions of walking over broken glass, they might be paired as identifiable and seemingly 'readable' moments that the artist gifts his audience with.

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<sup>72</sup> John C. Welchman, 'Paul McCarthy in Conversation with John C. Welchman – Risks Between: Trauma and Studio, Tape and World', in *The Aesthetics of Risk*, ed. by John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), pp. 314-46 (p. 321).

<sup>73</sup> These phrases are transcribed from my own viewing of the video.

The implicit ‘problem’ of falsehood, fakery, pretence and simulation belongs – it seems – to theatre. In my analysis of McCarthy’s work alongside characterisations of theatricality, I suggest a need to look beyond visual culture in order to implicate critical apparatuses to deal with fakery and simulation. In her article ‘Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art’, Beth Hoffmann explores the terminology used to describe and separate theatrical performance from experimental performance practices such as live art, and highlights the implications of their longstanding ‘opposition’.<sup>74</sup> She suggests ‘suspending the language of rupture and break’ whereby theatre represents established, authoritarian modes of performance making, and performance art and live art represent a radical divergence from this, and other ‘normative’ modes of cultural expression, such as visual art.<sup>75</sup> In this way, Hoffmann’s article helps to make a case for reconnecting McCarthy with legacies or terminologies of theatre. Whilst Hoffmann looks primarily at the roots of live art in the UK relative to theatre, ‘to activate different avenues of historical remembering and networks of aesthetic kinship and solidarity’, a discussion of visual art also feeds into this, particularly since ‘live art has generally preferred a fine art to a theatre genealogy’.<sup>76</sup> Citing RoseLee Goldberg’s definition of performance art as ‘live art by artists’ – mirroring Linda Frye Burnham’s definition of ‘live performance created by visual artists’<sup>77</sup> – Hoffmann suggests that live artists in the UK share the idea of ‘breaking free of [...] dominant media like

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<sup>74</sup> Beth Hoffmann, ‘Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art’, *Performance Research*, 14.1 (2010), 95-105.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>77</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, ‘High Performance, Performance Art, and Me’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 30. 1 (Spring 1986), 15-51 (p. 15).



painting and sculpture [and] acting against the constraints of the museum and gallery systems'.<sup>78</sup> However, the term 'performance art', such as it had come to mean live performance by visual artists, became untenable, as I argued in Chapter One within the parameters of *High Performance* magazine and the unwieldiness of performance art's influence from other disciplines. Similarly, Hoffmann illustrates this with the example of the National Review of Live Art (UK) which originally began in the late 1970s as the Midland Groups' Performance Art Platform.<sup>79</sup> The change in title, Hoffmann suggests, was to indicate that the 'initially generative concept of "performance art" [...] itself had become a rigid category to be resisted.'<sup>80</sup> As such, live art has come to mean 'a rejection of single art form practice',<sup>81</sup> and therefore was 'not a form at all but a reserved site of interdisciplinarity [...] that eschews institutionalized recognizability.'<sup>82</sup>

Hoffmann's discussion of these terms can be used to complicate definitions of theatrical or experimental performance in McCarthy's work, and more specifically the applicability of methods drawn from theatre and performance studies in my own analysis. Trained as a painter, McCarthy became interested in using performance to extend his artistic practice in the 1960s, and in the 1970s it provided a viable way to communicate his ideas. Early action-based works, such as a series of black paintings he created using his hands and then burned and destroyed in 1966, and his first public performance in 1967, where he destroyed furniture on stage with a friend at

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<sup>78</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, cited in Hoffmann, 'Radicalism and the Theatre', p. 100.

<sup>79</sup> Hoffmann, 'Radicalism in the Theatre', p. 100.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Lois Keidan, cited in *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>82</sup> Hoffmann, 'Radicalism and the Theatre', p. 101.

the University of Utah,<sup>83</sup> indicate McCarthy's interest in destruction as a creative force. In some ways this illustrates Goldberg's suggestion that performance might be used as 'a weapon against the conventions of established art'.<sup>84</sup> However, given the trajectory of McCarthy's use of performance throughout his career – as I discuss, encompassing live work, video, objects and sculpture, kinetic installations, and large multimedia projects – his employment of performance seems not to indicate a radical break or divergence from other modes of visual art practice, but as a context-specific engagement with the form as it changes over time.

McCarthy's multi-disciplinary practice might be said to evade definition, and at times it seems inadequate to describe him as a performance artist when he no longer makes live works or videos – although as I will argue, his strategy of performance-making informs and influences his wider art practice. However, I am wary of associating McCarthy's work formally with UK live art, which, as Hoffmann reiterates, 'emerges not from a model of positive affinity and formal resemblance among works but from a principle of non-identity', and perhaps has a 'lack of definition outside the negation, subversion or transgression of a received practice or set of practices'.<sup>85</sup> McCarthy does work across forms and genres of art, returning to practices as and when they become viable, but rather than work in between or at the margins of more traditional art forms as live artists do, McCarthy works *within* categories of received practice, and complicates

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<sup>83</sup> Paul McCarthy, 'Paul McCarthy', in *California Video: Artists and Histories*, ed. by Glenn Phillips (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008), pp. 170-73 (p. 170).

<sup>84</sup> Goldberg, cited in Hoffmann, 'Radicalism and the Theatre', p. 100.

<sup>85</sup> Hoffmann, 'Radicalism and the Theatre', pp. 101-02.

how they relate to and inform each other. For example, in his performance objects and kinetic installations discussed in Chapter Three, McCarthy blurs the boundaries of object and subject, such that an object with seemingly ‘human’ qualities (movement, facial features, sexual urges), might also be conceived of as a performing subject and stand-in for the artist. Through Hoffmann’s argument therefore, it is perhaps possible to reclaim – rather than disavow – the relevance of theatre in experimental performance, and in McCarthy’s work in particular.

Nonetheless, the consideration of McCarthy’s practice relative to live art in the UK as a strategy of transgressing categories of performance is not altogether fruitless. UK live art’s relationship with theatre and visual art histories, anxiousness over terminology and resistance to assumed ideologies informs my analysis of McCarthy’s use of both ‘theatrical’ and ‘experimental’ performance strategies in the 1970s. Specifically, it troubles the assumptions of what these terms mean in theory and in practice. Citing Jon McKenzie in *Perform or Else*, Hoffmann points to the fact that the continued ‘valorization of liminal transgression’, or that which guards the definition of live art has become normative.<sup>86</sup> This certainly has implications for the practice and development of UK live art, but also for my analysis and categorisation of McCarthy’s work. It destabilises any conclusion that McCarthy’s multi-disciplinary practice – and in relation to performance more specifically, the mixing of theatrical and experimental factors – is a radical act. In Chapter Three I argue that in his object-based art and installations McCarthy seems to be exercising and developing his skills

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<sup>86</sup> Jon McKenzie, cited in *ibid.*, p. 103.

of evasion, seemingly refusing to acknowledge the social and political implications of his work. In this way he takes on a position of non-identity, of in-betweenness, even indecision in terms of allegiance to theatre or visual art, but often with a distinct lack of sincerity. McCarthy refuses easy conclusions to be drawn about his work, and yet a conclusion of irresolution is perhaps similarly unsatisfactory because of the normativity of 'liminality'.

Working within and across the binary of theatricality as artificial and experimental performance as somehow more radical or 'real', Hoffmann points out that both '[n]ew wave playwrights like John Osborne *and* underground performance artists like Jeff Nuttall of The People Show have all vied for the status of being "more real" than the older, "more fake" literary theatre tradition from which they were breaking away'.<sup>87</sup> Hoffmann emphasises the presumed opposition in terms of fixity and liveness of 'literary/dramatic' performance and "'alternative" traditions of performance', whereby forms such as live art are thought to be somehow more 'live' than the fixed, frozen or petrified conditions of traditional theatre. 'Perhaps ultimately', Hoffmann suggests, 'this leads to a troubling fetishizing of tradition-as-form rather than a critique of the kind of cultural authority that validates and authenticates what counts as "traditional"'.<sup>88</sup>

In *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, McCarthy mixes elements of the fixed, stable, and the traditional – for example, the donning of costume and make up to indicate the assumption of a more or less 'theatrical' role, and pausing at points during the performance to assume dramatised poses or to

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<sup>87</sup> Hoffmann, 'Radicalism and the Theatre', p. 104.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

emphasise certain movements or moments (just in case the audience failed to ‘get it’) – with more ‘realistic’ live actions that indicate the vulnerability of the body and the potential of actual risk, such as walking over broken glass, and ingesting raw meat to the point of vomiting. This approach to making performance complicates the notion of tradition versus experimentation, and theatre versus performance art, as McCarthy refuses to work solely within one category, or within the limiting vocabulary of either. As he states:

the definition of performance as only being real or performance as reality is limiting; psychologically or perceptually I found myself giving it a new reality. [...] I suspect that that suspension of belief does exist within viewers, even though they cling to the conscious interpretation that ketchup is ketchup. I suspect that they’re disturbed when ketchup is blood.’<sup>89</sup>

Rugoff’s characterisation of McCarthy’s performance style as a ‘theatre of regression’ suggests an affinity with the semiotics of the theatre, but also perhaps a failure to commit to the form.<sup>90</sup> McCarthy insists that the actuality of the performance lies within the perceptions and the bodily experience of both the artist and the audience, but he offers no resolution or structure to the experience such that there might be a stable alliance between them.

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<sup>89</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 14.

<sup>90</sup> Rugoff, ‘Survey’, p. 33.

## Ritual and Performance

In 1983, McCarthy's performances of the 1970s became more widely recognised as part of what Thomas McEvilley characterised as 'a modernized shamanic style'.<sup>91</sup> McEvilley's article 'Art in the Dark' was published in *Artforum* and explored performance art as a series of abject, body-oriented works and ritual actions, which often used the naked body in close proximity with earthly or animal materials. McEvilley connected the work of McCarthy, among others, including Linda Montano, Chris Burden, Kim Jones, and Mary Beth Edelson, to Dionysian myth and ritual representing 'the unconscious, in which all things flow into and through one another', and its realisation in Greek tragic theatre.<sup>92</sup> He also connected these artists' work to performance art practices of the previous two decades, such as the ritual actions of the Vienna Actionists, Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, working primarily in the 1960s and early 1970s, and Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964). As well as identifying the appropriation of myth and ritual, secular and religious forms, as a link between classical theatre and performance art, McEvilley divides this body of work into two broad categories: 'those that select from the neolithic sensibility of fertility and blood sacrifice, and those that select from the paleolithic sensibility of shamanic magic and ordeal.'<sup>93</sup> Often, he suggests, the two strains mix, but both 'may be seen as expressions of the desire, so widespread in the '60s and early '70s, to reconstitute within

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<sup>91</sup> McEvilley, 'Art in the Dark', p. 66.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

Modern civilization something like an ancient or primitive sensibility of oneness with nature.<sup>94</sup> Retrospectively this characterisation appeals to ideas of a countercultural utopia of achieving ‘oneness with nature’, but the performances to which McEvelley refers, including McCarthy’s, indicate instead an eternal struggle to return to this utopian state, and perhaps the impossibility of doing so.<sup>95</sup>

An alternate characterisation of this ‘return’ to an earlier context or form of art is offered by Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real*, not in celebration of the utopian possibilities of the return, but the critical possibilities of abject art as employed by successive generations of artists.<sup>96</sup> Invoking the opposition of Surrealist artist André Breton, the so-called “‘juvenile victim’”<sup>97</sup> involved in an Oedipal game’, and the ‘excrement-philosopher’<sup>98</sup> Georges Bataille, Foster offers an oppositional stance on what ‘the artifice of abjection offers us’: to ‘act like juvenile victims [...] provok[ing] the paternal law *as if to ensure that it [is] still there*’ (in other words, ‘[t]o act dirty with the secret wish to be spanked’); or ‘to wallow in shit with the secret faith that the most defiled might reverse into the most sacred, the most perverse into the most potent’.<sup>99</sup> McCarthy’s performances of the 1970s might be described as the latter in this instance. Foster refers to McCarthy explicitly as an ‘obscene clown’ who ‘mock[s] the paternal law’.<sup>100</sup> In *Sailor’s Meat and Tubbing*, McCarthy does indeed ‘wallow’ in

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>97</sup> Georges Bataille, cited in *ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>98</sup> The phrase is André Breton’s, as cited in Foster, *Return of the Real*, p. 157.

<sup>99</sup> Foster, *Return of the Real*, p. 159. Emphasis in original.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 159.

filth, perhaps in an effort to reach out to some of the most human feelings of his audience: feelings of disgust and revulsion. Interestingly, in his later object-based works, McCarthy's focus seemingly switches to the former. He provokes or seemingly tests the boundaries of taste within art institutions (as seen in his installation pieces *The Garden* [1992], discussed in Chapter Three, and *WS* [2013], discussed in the Conclusion), not necessarily to disrupt the social order, but to 'ensure that it [is] still there'.<sup>101</sup> Whilst switching between two different critical registers might account in part for the non-linear development of McCarthy's artistic practice, a consistent factor throughout his work, I argue, is what Foster calls '[t]he mimesis of regression', the '[i]nfantilist personae' or 'anarchic child'.<sup>102</sup> McCarthy's consistent and yet varied portrayal of this 'regression' is not a condition to which he has been resigned, but an active critical stance that affords him the impression of indifferent or buffoonish behaviour. This may, in fact, represent McCarthy's perceptive critique of contemporary culture.

In *Sailor's Meat and Tubbing*, McCarthy performs primarily in the nude, an aspect of ritual-inspired performance art which might be identified as an attempt at a return to nature. However McCarthy's work also refers to the nude in histories of Western art, or more specifically the female nude, an irony which is not lost in *Sailor's Meat and Tubbing*, in which he variously performs a feminised, infantilised, or castrated male body. McCarthy also refers to blood, albeit superficially, in his use of ketchup and to human flesh in raw ground meat, referencing both American consumer culture and the Christian Eucharist in which the body and blood of Christ is represented by

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.



wine and bread. If McCarthy enacts or references rituals in performance, then it is an essentially postmodern ritual that mixes the religious and the secular, and the ancient and the contemporary. Patrice Pavis has said of the survival of ritual that theatre ‘barely disengaged itself from rite and ceremony’ as it maintains the separation of performers and spectators and takes place within a symbolic space or institution; as a result, for Pavis theatre ‘seek[s] desperately to return to them’, as if its connection to ‘sacred theatre [...] were its only chance of surviving its contact with the mass arts of the industrialized age’.<sup>103</sup> McCarthy’s performances of the 1970s might be read, as McEvilley characterises them, as related to ancient ritual and contemporary artistic practices, but also as Pavis defines the condition of late-twentieth-century theatre, to a liminal space between ritual and modernised technologies of performance.

The spaces in which McCarthy performs *Sailor’s Meat* and *Tubbing*, a bedroom and bathroom respectively, are private spaces in which the rituals of everyday life take place, usually locked away from public view. The architectures in which McCarthy performs and his exploration of the body itself as architecture elevates and sanctifies the everyday, and he simultaneously presents the body as abject, a chaotic or polluting force that defiles an otherwise sanitised cultural environment. In her book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas discusses the concepts of pollution and taboo, and the way in which, since the nineteenth century, social fears of dirt and disorder shape and influence modes of controlling transgressive subjects and

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<sup>103</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. by Christine Shantz (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 317.

behaviour.<sup>104</sup> Much like Žižek's notion of systemic violence, the 'catastrophic consequences' of which are the elimination of agency and potentially productive transgressions from societal norms,<sup>105</sup> Douglas' conceptualisation of dirt as disorder – 'the old definition of dirt as matter out of place' – has a similarly totalitarian theme.<sup>106</sup> Not only are ideas and beliefs about pollution used to try and influence social behaviour such that:

the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors', but even 'the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code: this kind of disease is caused by adultery, that by incest; this meteorological disaster is the effect of political disloyalty, that the effect of impiety. The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship.'<sup>107</sup>

In *Sailor's Meat and Tubbing*, McCarthy performs away from external society in the private spaces of the bedroom and bathroom – the video audience are witness to his intimate rituals that have been confined to these discrete locations. This suggests that McCarthy's performances somehow conform to the containment and surveillance of transgressive behaviour to private spaces (behind closed doors and yet available via the somewhat voyeuristic video camera). The framing of the video camera and the close-

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<sup>104</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, [1966] 1995), p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 37.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

up shots of the artist – for example, at the beginning of *Tubbing* a shot of the artist’s face fills the screen whilst an assistant applies his make-up – create an intimate feeling, but also such moments act as points of alienation from which the audience recoils, as the artist moves towards a transgression of social order (for example by vomiting, or appearing to).

McCarthy’s performances also address further categories of pollution – notably, sexual and bodily pollution – that are used, as Douglas suggests, ‘as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order.’<sup>108</sup> Douglas uses the example of sexual danger, whereby ‘one sex is endangered [polluted or contaminated] by contact with the other, usually males from females’.<sup>109</sup> ‘[S]uch patterns of sexual danger’, Douglas suggests, ‘can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy’ within the larger social system.<sup>110</sup> In *Sailor’s Meat* and *Tubbing*, both primarily solo performances, McCarthy oscillates between hetero-normative male and female roles, enacting anal penetration and oral sex with a variety of ‘stand-in’ objects, and variously performing coyness and aggressive sexuality. The pattern of sexual danger here seems to express a kind of temporary hierarchy (a normative structure of stability) which is then diminished as McCarthy returns to chaos and fluidity.

More generally, Douglas suggests, ‘[w]hat goes for sexual pollution also goes for bodily pollution’, meaning that ‘[t]he two sexes can serve as a model for the collaboration and distinctiveness of social units.’<sup>111</sup> Just as ‘bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units’,

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

which McCarthy explores by performing both the penetrator and the penetrated, ingestion or consumption can ‘portray political absorption’.<sup>112</sup> In the final section of this chapter I discuss *Hot Dog* and *Tubbing* – in which the artist manipulates, ingests, and at times expels foodstuffs – as acts of resistance against consumer culture, a potentially political reading which characterises the body as a site of struggle to contain or navigate chaos and disorder. In his solo works of the 1970s, McCarthy performs the self (the body) and the other (the alien, the abject), and the tension or struggle between the two – the familiar and the uncategorisable – results in chaotic and often messy performances.

Douglas admits, however, that her conceptualisation of pollution, with its ‘pressures on boundaries and margins’ has the effect of ‘having made society sound more systematic than it really is.’<sup>113</sup> In fact, processing ideas about ‘separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions’ seems to necessitate such over-systematisation, since ‘their main function [is] to impose system[s] on an inherently untidy experience.’<sup>114</sup> One of the main functions of McCarthy’s performance is to valorise this ‘inherently untidy experience’ – to reintroduce or ‘desublimatise’<sup>115</sup> to use Jones’ terms, ‘the chaos of subjective interiority’.<sup>116</sup> His performances seek to destabilise and disorientate his audience, but he fails or refuses to offer a viable alternative vision of the world. McCarthy’s performances are slippery in content – the repertoire of condiments and

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Jones, ‘Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body’, p. 128.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 126.

foodstuffs he establishes in these works continue throughout his career in his distinctly visceral practice – and in their refusal to conform to systems of order. Then again, the summative characterisation of McCarthy’s work as uncategorisable and untidy somewhat trivialises their complexity. In the next section I explore in more detail how McCarthy’s performances affect his audience, and I unpack the process of inter-subjectivity in which his work is invested.

In *Sailor’s Meat and Tubbing*, McCarthy explores the body as image and as a repository of societal taboos, the containment of which is essential for the stability of contemporary culture. Significantly, however, he also explores the potential for the defilement or alienation of the body as a creative force in the world, as did a number of his contemporaries. In particular, the juxtaposition of McCarthy’s work with that of the artist Kim Jones makes for an interesting comparison of the artists’ tactics to alienate themselves from contemporary culture. In his walking sculpture pieces such as *Wilshire Boulevard Walk* (1976), *Fag Drag* (1980) and *Pacific Landing* (1980), Jones created lattice-like structures using foam, wire, sticks and nylon stockings which he wore on his back, pulled a stocking over his head and covered his body in mud to create the persona ‘Mudman’. In his long walks, which took anywhere up to 12 hours (for example, to walk the entire 18 miles of Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles), wearing this guise, Jones enacted a separation from society: as McCarthy himself states, ‘the sticks, much like a barrier; the camouflage; the stocking over his head; and the mud

[...]. It was as if he was a pariah, an outcast walking through the streets.’<sup>117</sup>

In his performances, Jones engaged with the public environment in a unique way (for example walking rather than driving along Wilshire) but also used the body as a contained vehicle for expression. McCarthy’s performances, although similarly exploring the spectacle of the body, were presented within relatively private or confined spaces, which created a frame as if to characterise all that occurs within the space as representation.

In readings of Jones’ work, his service as a U.S. Marine in Vietnam between 1967 and 1968 is often cited as an influence on his art.<sup>118</sup> Particularly his most notorious performance, *Rat Piece* (1976) – described in Chapter One – is read explicitly as a comment on the Vietnam War. Jones said of the piece ‘[w]e all kill in some way. I was interested in how it feels, the implications of killing something.’<sup>119</sup> Stiles has also read McCarthy’s work as a reference to the Vietnam War, not as a result of direct experience but as a representation of a specific historical moment, ‘a site in which the body was threatened [...] and denigrated, unable to find its way into the knowledge of its condition.’<sup>120</sup> McCarthy avoided the draft after being classed as a conscientious objector in 1969, and worked instead as a volunteer for a non-profit organisation called Tie Line teaching videotaping

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<sup>117</sup> Paul McCarthy, cited in Julie Joyce, ‘*Sunset to Sunrise: Kim Jones in Los Angeles*’, in *Mudman: The Odyssey of Kim Jones*, ed. by Sandra Q. Firmin and Julie Joyce (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 17-37 (p. 34).

<sup>118</sup> For example: Peggy Phelan ‘Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral’, in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. by Peggy Phelan (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1-38 (pp. 22-27); and Kristine Stiles, ‘*Teaching a Dead Hand to Draw: Kim Jones, War, and Art*’, in *Mudman: The Odyssey of Kim Jones*, pp. 45-76 (p. 51).

<sup>119</sup> Kim Jones, cited in Joyce, ‘*Sunset to Sunrise*’, p. 29.

<sup>120</sup> Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 26.

at community organisations.<sup>121</sup> McCarthy describes his memories of the Vietnam War as ‘full of confusion’, consisting primarily of ‘images from television, magazines and newspapers; images of death.’<sup>122</sup> Whilst Jones’ and McCarthy’s work might be comparable aesthetically or in their feeling of alienation from mainstream culture, there is a clear difference between Jones’ interest in exploring the act and implications of the representation of direct violence, and McCarthy’s in exploring a different order of representations of violence, as mediated by a camera or screen.

McCarthy’s performances seem to suggest, as Auslander has defined the postmodern political artist, that he ‘has no choice but to operate within the culture whose representations he or she must both recycle and critique.’<sup>123</sup> But, as Auslander continues, ‘[a] postmodern political art cannot rely simply on the (re)presentation of a program, a critique, a desired utopia or perceived dystopia – it must interrogate the means of representation themselves as structures of authority’.<sup>124</sup> McCarthy frames his performances as representations or interpretations of reality as it is mediated and packaged for consumer culture. But is it really enough to represent systems of signification in art and culture without interrogating its borders?

McCarthy’s work, as I read it here, both sets up and transgresses the boundaries of characterisations applied to or explored in his work which interrogate the means of representing the body in performance, for example:

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<sup>121</sup> McCarthy, ‘Paul McCarthy’, in *California Video*, p. 171.

<sup>122</sup> Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 25.

<sup>123</sup> Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 89.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

the architecture and borders of the body; the border between theatre and performance, artifice and reality; and his connection to ritual, both ancient and modern. As Kerstin Mey has suggested, while McCarthy's work, among other things, 'spells out art's complicity in social conditioning and repression', he also 'does not openly propose a political or social alternative.'<sup>125</sup> Through close readings of *Hot Dog* and *Tubbing* below, which look at the specific affective and intersubjective experience of viewing McCarthy's performances, I highlight and complicate the ways in which McCarthy works to both re-present and critique contemporary culture.

### **Vomit and Disgust as Political Affect in *Hot Dog* (1974) and *Tubbing* (1975)**

In video performances such as *Press* (1973), *Glass* (1974) and *Spitting on the Camera Lens* (1974), McCarthy tests the limits of the video camera as a frame or container of the human body by pressing his body against the screen of the camera or another screen placed in front of it. As Amelia Jones has noted, in an analysis of *Press* – in which the artist presses his face and upper torso against a glass screen, using saliva to lubricate his movement – the video screen represents two surfaces (skin and screen) and both delivers McCarthy's body to the viewer and imprisons him.<sup>126</sup> McCarthy's body is

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<sup>125</sup> Kerstin Mey, *Art and Obscenity* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 64.

<sup>126</sup> Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 135.



conveyed to audiences through a screen, and thus he announces and performs his embodiment as resolutely technological.<sup>127</sup> In *Spitting on the Camera Lens*, McCarthy makes further attempts to address or assault his audience through the screen by spitting on it repeatedly until the lens of the camera becomes smudged and cloudy. As Ulrike Groos suggests, '[t]he feeling of being spit upon becomes almost a physical sensation for the viewer.'<sup>128</sup> The influence of these short video pieces in which McCarthy experiments with testing the boundary between performer and audience can be seen in longer performances of the mid-1970s. For example, in *Sailor's Meat*, McCarthy works primarily on the gaze of the viewer rather than the gut, and enacts both aggressor and victim, male and female characters in this performance which narrates a kind of violent sexual encounter with the self. It is simultaneously funny (he strikes seemingly seductive poses which look rather awkward, and when the artist slowly puts on women's lingerie at the start of the performance an assistant laughs off-camera), and disturbing (in an attempt to lose his maleness McCarthy enacts his own castration, and as we have seen, he ends the performance by walking barefoot over broken glass). Consistent throughout his performances of the 1970s, McCarthy simultaneously courts the audience's attention and resists or rejects it by assaulting audiences visually and appealing to or provoking a bodily response.

Focusing closely on two performances – *Hot Dog* and *Tubbing* – I suggest that the urge to vomit and the will to prevent it are techniques used

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>128</sup> Ulrike Groos, 'Spitting on the Camera Lens', in *Paul McCarthy: Videos, 1970-1997*, ed. by Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), p. 65.

by McCarthy as a way of both alienating audiences and becoming more intimate or familiar with them. Artist Barbara T. Smith recalls her experience of watching the live performance *Hot Dog*, and the nausea she felt when McCarthy stuffs numerous hot dogs into his mouth. She considered it kinder to leave the room to vomit than to do so in front of the artist, for fear that he would do the same and risk choking. In my own reflections on *Tubbing*, I read McCarthy's struggle to chew and digest raw meat not only as a struggle with his own body, but as indicative of his career-long interest in the politics of cultural critique: breaking it up, destroying it, or reconfiguring it into something less palatable. For these pieces in particular, McCarthy's politics involve not just a critique of consumerism, but he also asks questions of intersubjectivity, and evokes a politics of communion and care. The discussion is in part a reflection on my own practice of studying McCarthy's performances, and on what it means to watch difficult, potentially nauseating performances repeatedly. By contrasting my own reading, and my own feelings of watching a piece, with those of Smith's as a live observer, I am interested in how feelings of disgust influence subjective and critical engagement with the work. McCarthy engineers moments that bring his audience to the brink or limits of their disgust, but does not offer a way out. He leaves his audiences lingering, compelled to keep watching or watch repeatedly. Perhaps out of genuine concern, morbid fascination, or bravado.

My thinking around these performances is informed by recent scholarship about the influence of affect and emotion on critics of

contemporary art and performance.<sup>129</sup> As Jennifer Doyle has suggested, rather than defining emotion, or in this case disgust, as ‘something that rises up from inside [...], or as something that “sinks in” from the outside’, ‘[e]motions are profoundly *intersubjective*. They do not happen inside the individual but in relation to others.’<sup>130</sup> Citing Sara Ahmed, Doyle agrees that ‘[e]motion does more than mark the boundary between the self and the other. Emotion brings those boundaries into being’.<sup>131</sup> In this case the feeling of disgust does more than mark the boundary between being able to ‘cope’ (or hold it together) for one performance, and not another. It is through this response that such boundaries are constructed between audience members and the artist, and in this case troubled. Here I discuss how McCarthy engineers potentially difficult situations in his performances, by focusing on particular moments from *Hot Dog* and *Tubbing*. These moments, for me, mark the borders of intimacy, alienation and disgust as they come into being. I choose to analyse *Tubbing* in particular because I have unrivalled access to full documentation of the piece (via Hauser & Wirth’s digital recording), and can therefore enact critical viewings of the work repeatedly. Furthermore, Smith’s in-depth account of the live work *Hot Dog*, demonstrates the unrivalled personal experience that she had in viewing the piece. Her authoritative account – in the sense of expanded, in depth, and substantially worked through – is cited by Rugoff and Levine as a productive platform for their own studies of McCarthy’s work.

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<sup>129</sup> For example, as discussed in the Introduction: Amelia Jones, ‘How Ron Makes Me Feel: The Political Potential of Upsetting Art’, in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. by Dominic Johnson (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2013), pp. 152-78; and expanded on here, Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>130</sup> Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, p. 109. Emphasis in original.

<sup>131</sup> Sarah Ahmed, cited in *ibid.*

In 1974, McCarthy performed *Hot Dog* in a basement studio in Los Angeles for an audience of invited friends. It was an ‘intimate affair’ to which ‘[t]he artist invited only as many people as could fit at a couple of small round tables’.<sup>132</sup> The performance begins with the artist stripping to his underwear and shaving his body. He stuffs his penis into a hot dog bun, securing it in place with tape, and then smears himself with mustard.<sup>133</sup> McCarthy drinks ketchup from a bottle and stuffs hot dogs into his mouth. He binds his head with gauze, adding yet more hot dogs, and ‘tapes his bulging mouth closed so that the protruding mouth looks like a snout’ (see Image 1).<sup>134</sup> McCarthy appears to perform only to himself; with his eyes, nose, ears and mouth obscured by the gauze, he is seemingly oblivious to the audience’s presence. He performs this opening routine without acknowledging his guests, which, as Levine suggests, serves ‘to assert the privacy of his performance and its locale, leaving the audience in the awkward position of having gathered to watch a character consumed by his own personal habits.’<sup>135</sup> Alone, but also in the company of his audience, McCarthy creates an intimate atmosphere – the performance is only for those few he has invited, fellow artists and friends – but there is also an element of potential physical risk as well as awkwardness and isolation.

One of the audience members was McCarthy’s friend and fellow artist, Barbara T. Smith, whose pioneering work in feminist performance and body art since the 1960s had been influential for McCarthy’s work and

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<sup>132</sup> Barbara Smith, ‘Paul McCarthy’, *Journal: Southern California Art Magazine* 21 (January-February 1979), p. 45, cited in Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 29.

<sup>133</sup> Rugoff, ‘Survey’, p. 43.

<sup>134</sup> Smith, ‘Paul McCarthy’, p. 45, cited in *ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 29.

others of his generation, such as Kim Jones, John Duncan, and Nancy Buchanan. Describing *Hot Dog* in an article published in 1979, Smith's account is both formally descriptive and personally affective, exploring the emotional and physical forces at work. Describing the moments directly after McCarthy has stuffed his mouth with hot dogs and bound his head with gauze, Smith writes:

We [the audience] are agog with a wincing, dumb pain. [...] I struggle inwardly to control the impulse to gag. He [McCarthy] stands alone struggling with himself, trying to prevent his own retching. It is apparent that he is about to vomit. I look around desperately to see if I would ruin the performance and our sense of stamina by simply leaving. Should he vomit he might choke to death, since the vomit would have no place to go. And should any one of us vomit, we might trigger him to do likewise. The terrible moment passes, and the piece continues. I don't seem to recall how it ended, but this discomfort that we all felt is the essential audience response to McCarthy's work.<sup>136</sup>

Smith is both physically disgusted (she feels like she wants to vomit) and considerate; she does not want to prompt McCarthy to do the same, which, with his mouth obstructed, would have much more dangerous consequences. It is telling that Smith describes the artist as 'alone' and 'struggling with

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<sup>136</sup> Smith, 'Paul McCarthy', pp. 45-46, cited in Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 29.

himself, trying to prevent his own retching.<sup>137</sup> Although surrounded by friends and colleagues, McCarthy performs an isolated struggle to overcome the responses of his own body to the violence of being force-fed. In turn, the audience are also struggling to repress their urge to retch, but collectively display an outward expression of what Smith characterises as a ‘sense of stamina’, by sitting patiently through the performance.<sup>138</sup> Smith highlights the threat to the body, both the performer’s and the audience’s, when its protective urges are not just resisted but forcibly repressed.

Whilst McCarthy is performing for an audience, he does not seem to acknowledge it. Any social communion – in the sense of empathy, or collective experience – is registered through an audience member’s reading. In my reading of *Tubbing*, I also see the artist struggling in isolation, this time without a live audience. I observe his struggle in attempting to overcome the symbolic process of consuming oneself, as well as the physical violence of vomiting and thus rejecting this process. The threat of vomiting is never actually realised, the violence only ever latent. Lingering on the border between expulsion and ingestion, McCarthy’s performance of consumerism evokes what Julia Kristeva has termed ‘the most elementary and [...] archaic form of abjection’, namely food loathing.<sup>139</sup>

Halfway through *Tubbing*, McCarthy draws a blue flowery curtain across the side of the bath, partially obscuring the camera’s view. He turns his back to the camera so that all that can be seen is the movement of one arm as he fondles something on the side of the bath. With a swish of his hair

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

he turns to reveal a fistful of raw ground meat in one hand; he has been steadily moulding and remoulding it into a ball which he then positions in full view of the camera. Taking a smaller handful from the pile, he puts it into his mouth, and chews. He retches. Emitting guttural choking sounds he closes his eyes and lets his mouth hang wide open, its contents clearly visible but being neither ingested nor expelled; it remains on the border, a glistening, sticky, flesh-coloured mass (see Image 2). Having overcome his nausea the artist sits back on his heels in the stagnant water, seemingly at ease. He bites off another chunk, and chewing determinedly retches again; this time he has even more flesh to overcome. Slowly, and with eyes closed in concentration, McCarthy chews and chews, gradually diminishing the ball of meat. The camera focuses in on his mouth, which he opens and closes like a fish as his body decides which way this will go – in or out. Indeed, it goes out and violently shoots from his mouth and into the bath as he coughs loudly. He recovers quickly and glides playfully around the bath. Squeaking his knees against the bottom of the tub he stuffs yet another fistful of meat into his mouth. He stands up suddenly, swishing his hair back and forth, retching and swaying. This time he swallows the remaining meat; a relief but also a concern for his subsequent actions, as he lurches around disorientated, seemingly in some discomfort, unsure of what to do next.

Whilst the rest of the performance is similarly visceral, the temptation to skip over this sequence whilst watching the video documentation is particularly strong for me, not least because the artist's actions are so laboured, painfully determined and deliberately resistant to his body's urge to vomit. Key to the significance of this moment is the

tension between McCarthy's conscious and continual action of consuming raw ground hamburger meat, the raw material of an otherwise popular fast food, and his body's strenuous efforts to reject it. McCarthy presents the struggle between the image of the body, the artist consuming the raw materials of American popular culture, and the body's protective urge to vomit. During this sequence, McCarthy loses and then gains control over his body's rejection to that which it is force fed; perhaps a reflection of the bravado of the viewer who forces themselves to watch, seemingly gaining a victory over their own feelings of nausea, induced and evoked by McCarthy's.

The uncanniness of this performance stems in part from the familiarity of these everyday consumables, which are then subverted. McCarthy's ingestion of raw meat in particular violates the convention of civilised eating, both in the consumption of uncooked, processed meat, and by mimicking the process of consumption. McCarthy chews his food not for sustenance or for pleasure but as a gesture of resistance against his own body as he overcomes its various attempts to reject it. It looks instead like an empty gesture, as if he is complacently chewing a ball of gum rather than a fistful of meat. Mastication is in this case also a submissive action, one repeated often enough so as to be indiscriminate as to the acceptance of force-fed images. The ketchup and cold cream act as lubricants not merely for the objects interacting with and penetrating the body but for the slipperiness of the images that play out in his work.

McCarthy's use of food in performances as 'force-fed' images of American popular culture has lent itself well to readings of his work as an



exploration of abjection, of that which simultaneously sustains and repels us. Describing the physical responses of ‘food loathing’, Kristeva articulates an experience very much like that of observing one of McCarthy’s performances:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail pairing – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up [*sic*] the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.<sup>140</sup>

In *Tubbing* it is McCarthy’s lips that touch the milk skin, in this case the raw meat, ketchup, hotdog-penis, but it is the audience who witnesses. The spasms and vomiting, as Kristeva suggests, are protective gestures, ‘my safeguards’, she says, ‘[t]he primers of my culture.’<sup>141</sup> In *Tubbing* McCarthy resists this protective gesture and eventually overcomes it. The image of the artist struggling to overcome his body’s response to this food loathing is also transferred to the viewer. In turn the viewer is nauseated, not by the experience of consuming food, but of consuming images.

However, as Kristeva goes on to suggest, this food, whilst ‘other’ to the self, is also part of the selfsame system of nurturing and sustenance that the body needs to survive.<sup>142</sup> Therefore in rejecting or abjecting this food,

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<sup>140</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

we also abject ourselves.<sup>143</sup> In McCarthy's performances, the images and culture he claims to reject both destroy and sustain him. A theme that runs throughout his work is the simultaneous co-optation and critique of the cultural systems (both popular culture and the art world) in which he participates. In my reading of *Tubbing*, McCarthy enacts precisely this tension between the performing body, the 'I', and the image-body, 'the jettisoned object' which is consumed and expelled through the process of acculturation.<sup>144</sup> The result is a performance which draws the artist, and his viewer, 'toward the place where meaning collapses.'<sup>145</sup>

As Rugoff has described McCarthy's work, '[t]here is no single "truth" to this material, only an *ad hoc* emotional resonance that derives not only from the inherent qualities of condiments, but from changing contexts and, ultimately, our susceptibility to symbolic manipulation.'<sup>146</sup> In both *Hot Dog* and *Tubbing*, McCarthy induces an affective response in the viewer that somewhat mimics the bodily responses of the artist. The feeling of disgust may result from an inability to cope with a difficult or potentially emotional situation, and provides a way of turning against or turning away from the thing itself, deferring the pain, discomfort or nausea to a different form. Writers have variously described McCarthy's work as inducing fear, laughter, and disgust, sometimes all at once; critic Dan Cameron suggests that 'McCarthy eliminates the possibility of psychologically distancing oneself from what is taking place, [and] the viewer laughs and recoils at the

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<sup>143</sup> 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, [even] within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*.' Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Rugoff, 'Survey', p. 46. Emphasis in original.

same time.’<sup>147</sup> Without actually seeing the performances this seems like quite a lot of ground to cover – to induce both laughter and disgust – but polarisation and challenging of responses to potentially difficult art is, I think, one of the most effective critical elements of McCarthy’s work.

In this chapter I have expanded upon readings of McCarthy’s performances of the 1970s that focus on the psychological and physiological effects of his work on viewers. I argued that McCarthy’s tactics of destabilising discrete categories of art and performance, and of the distinction between subjective experience and external reality, are the most critically effective elements of his practice. Whilst his performances of the 1970s established the vocabulary of visual and visceral materials he uses in his work, McCarthy only became wider known in the art world when he retired from performance and turned to object-based art. I explore this pivotal moment in the next chapter, where I discuss how performance shapes and influences McCarthy’s sculptures and installations.

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<sup>147</sup> Cameron, ‘The Mirror Stage’, p. 61.

### Chapter Three

#### **Performing Objects: Objects and Sculpture in Paul McCarthy's**

#### **Post-performance Years, 1983-92**

In 1983, McCarthy retired from making live performances and turned to object-based artworks, which in many cases were influenced by his performances from the preceding decade. By way of announcing his retirement McCarthy created *The Trunks* (1983), a sculptural piece consisting of several large trunks and suitcases containing objects he used in performances between 1972 and 1983. *The Trunks*, containing masks, dolls, stuffed animals, bottles, pans, cans of food, uniforms and kitchen utensils, remained locked until 1991, when McCarthy opened them and individually photographed each of the objects, creating the photographic series *PROPO* (1991). In *PROPO*, the grimy objects are soiled with residue from use in performances and mould from the intervening years in storage. The objects are set against vivid blue, yellow, and pink backgrounds and presented as ornaments of wonder, trophies, or relics of performance. Eventually *The Trunks* formed part of an installation entitled *Assortment* (1972-83), featuring the trunks stacked onto a table and exhibited alongside a figurative sculpture entitled *Human Object* (1982), crudely constructed from a rectangular wooden box coated in rubber. *Human Object* was built with what Ralph Rugoff describes as ‘a shapeless gaping “mouth”, an attached penis and vagina and interior plumbing that led to a type of anus, which

could be plugged up or left unplugged'.<sup>1</sup> When *Human Object* was exhibited at LACE, visitors were asked to 'feed' it through the mouth, and when necessary, dispose of its evacuations.<sup>2</sup> These 'caring procedures' allowed visitors 'to become more intimate' with the object during its time in the gallery.<sup>3</sup> In its final iteration, the full *Assortment* installation (see Image 3) was joined by the *PROPO* photographs, blown up to create a wall of gaudy images around the central table on which *The Trunks* and *Human Object* sit.<sup>4</sup>

Each element of *Assortment* represents in part the complex relationship between objects and performance in McCarthy's work. The surviving performance objects stored away in 1983 reflect the moment in which McCarthy retires from using live performance as his primary mode of artistic expression. 'Retirement' is phrased tentatively here since McCarthy resumed his performance work to camera in the 1990s, creating longer, more complex solo pieces with fully developed characters – for example *Bossy Burger* (1992) and *Painter* (1995) – and latterly with larger casts of performers in works such as *Caribbean Pirates* (2001-05) (discussed in Chapter Four) and *WS* (2013) (discussed in the Conclusion). The objects themselves, most likely too tired or delicate to be re-used in performance, are packed away like a box of toys that have been outgrown (and in many cases the objects are indeed children's toys), stored now for their

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Rugoff, 'Survey: Mr McCarthy's Neighbourhood', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Ralph Rugoff (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 30-87 (pp. 54, 59).

<sup>2</sup> Press Release, *Paul McCarthy/Humanoid*, 6-24 January 1982, LACE, LACE Exhibition Archive, online catalogue [accessed 23 January 2012]. The piece was originally called *Humanoid* for the exhibition at LACE but was later given the title *Human Object*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Assortment* appeared in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, MOCA, 1998; and *Art Unlimited*, Basel, Switzerland, 2003.

sentimental or nostalgic value. If McCarthy's performances from the 1970s were to be read through the objects that remain, at a glance it might seem like merely child's play. On closer inspection however, the dirtied objects, for example *Dirty Dotty, Yellow* (1991) (see Image 4), a doll dressed in tattered clothes with a plastic penis protruding from under her dress, and *Green Dog* (1991), a soft toy with one ear and a face almost entirely obscured by dirt, suggest that the objects have undergone some kind of violent episode, and exist in this battered state as evidence of violent actions. McCarthy's anthropomorphised objects are left to rot; settling into their newly found identities as artworks or relics, they are potentially more valuable – in commercial terms – than the performances in which they were used.

I aim not to read McCarthy's performances through the objects that are left behind, nor to impose a reading on these objects that validates them as art works only in relation to performance. Although some live performances such as *Hot Dog* (1974) and *Monkey Man* (1980) were not videotaped and cannot be revisited repeatedly and read fully in the same way as *Sailor's Meat* (1975) and *Tubbing* (1975) – as indicated in Chapter Two – a reading of these performances through residual objects might falsely suggest that the latter represent or encapsulate the performances in which they were used. In her article 'Object Lessons and Performative Relations', Jessica Wyman contests the notion that residual objects 'speak so straightforwardly for themselves' as self-sufficient indices of

performance.<sup>5</sup> Instead she suggests that the objects, now separate from the performances in which they were used or produced, ‘present a new locus that can serve as a starting point for further investigation of the performative possibilities of object relations’.<sup>6</sup> I look to objects not as representatives of performance, or performance as the means of object-production, but construct a two-way relationship where objects and performances influence and inform one another. Furthermore, I focus on the relationship between performance and objects at the particular point in McCarthy’s career where the movement between making performances and making or selling objects intersects with the wider recognition of his work.

The fact that *The Trunks* remained closed – the items inside unknown except for their previous roles as objects in performance – allowed them not only to accumulate mould, but also to accumulate cultural value as performance remains. This accumulation of cultural capital may have been a strategic exercise on McCarthy’s part to garner financial wealth from an art form where previously little could be made (notably, in the necessarily anti-commercial pursuit of performance). Alternatively, it might be an incidental effect of his growing presence in the art world whereby both older works – such as *The Trunks* – and contemporary pieces were displayed in international exhibitions and sold at auction. In either case, McCarthy’s move from performance to objects seems to be an indictment of the relationship between performance and the art world; despite the institutional

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<sup>5</sup> Jessica Wyman, ‘Object Lessons and Performative Relations: Residue, Reliability and Self-Sufficiency’, *Performance Research*, 12.4 (2007), 30-36 (p. 30).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

and commercial interest in his work, he could not survive on performance alone.

On one hand, the objects in *The Trunks* are imbued with the actions of performance; they bear the markings of human interaction and are covered in viscous materials which have since congealed. They are in a continual process of transition, and adopt the ‘slow ephemerality’ that Peggy Phelan has attributed to ‘performative’ sculptures (such as the latex works of Eva Hesse), which mimics the slow depreciation of the performer’s body.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, by the relics being photographed in *PROPO* the performance is doubly objectified and circulates not only as an object (as mass-manufactured items having survived or borne the traces of a unique and violent performance), but as an image of an object (the photograph) which circulates more widely than the event or the object. As they enter into the art world and are displayed in galleries and museums, the life of these objects is extended, perhaps far beyond the possibilities of their use in performance years earlier.

Specifically, McCarthy’s performances from the 1970s, reconfigured and re-developed as objects, sculptures and photographs, have produced pieces that can be sold at auction. In 2002 *The Trunks* were sold as part of the *Assortment* collection at Sotheby’s in New York for \$222,500 to the Luhring Augustine Gallery.<sup>8</sup> As Colin Gleadell reported, with the threat of recession on the horizon, and in order to encourage sales of contemporary art in an otherwise hostile marketplace, half of the lots sold at auction (all

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<sup>7</sup> Peggy Phelan, ‘Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral’, in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. by Peggy Phelan (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1-38 (p. 13).

<sup>8</sup> Colin Gleadell, ‘Hollywood to the Rescue’, *Art Monthly*, 253 (February 2002), 55-56.



but eight of the 45 offered) were sold below their published estimates.<sup>9</sup> The sale of McCarthy's *Assortment* was framed as a relative success, despite suggestions that it could have been sold at a higher price.<sup>10</sup> But, as Gleadell points out, 'the satirical way in which McCarthy treats popular objects, questioning the values of U.S. consumer culture, made the work "too tough" for today's market.'<sup>11</sup> Suggesting that McCarthy's work lacks the requisite patriotism that would have made for a bigger sale and that *Assortment* seeks to undermine the system of buying and selling objects as art works by equating it with consumer culture, Gleadell highlights the contradictions in McCarthy's practice, by which he critiques consumer culture whilst clearly participating in it. As Fredric Jameson suggests in *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 'every position on Postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatization – is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today', a claim that would certainly fit with McCarthy's work here.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst this reading might also be applied to McCarthy's work more generally – particularly his more recent ostentatious installations such as *WS* (2013), which appears to critique the art market as a fantasy world in which exploitation and perversity are rife, even as it participates in the extension and continuation of this system – *Assortment* brings the particular relationship between performance and objects into question. Not just a

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<sup>9</sup> Colin Gleadell, 'Art Sales: Packed with Patriotism', *Telegraph*, 19 November 2001, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4726636/Art-sales-packed-with-patriotism.html>> [accessed 24 October 2013].

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 3. Emphasis in original.

collection of art objects, *Assortments* offers a pre-history of McCarthy's work to those unfamiliar with his performance practice. They are objects of performance that act as re-iterations of live actions and circulate more easily in the art market and art history. In this case the deterioration and decay of performance objects defines their movement within art's histories; their value grows through inaction.

Other examples of McCarthy's work from 1983 to 1992 indicate a development of subject-object relations, the roots of which can be seen in McCarthy's earlier performance work, but are expanded here to focus more explicitly on interactions with the audience. *Human Object* (1982) is an experiment in generating a more intimate relationship between visitors and objects in the gallery. It might be seen as a transitional piece between McCarthy's encounters with audiences in performance, and the substitution of the performing body in later work by humanoid objects. Humanoid objects in this sense are objects which resemble a human body by possessing recognisable features, limbs or functions, and in some cases are able to move in a way which reference human behaviour, although does not wholly mimic it.

The transition here between performance as an interaction between subjects (performer and audience) and subject-object relations, in which the object comes to replace the body, is comparable to British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's discussion of transitional objects and transitional phenomena. Winnicott uses these terms 'for designation of the immediate area of experience' between the body and the external world, for example, 'between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral erotism [*sic*] and

the true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected'.<sup>13</sup> The presentation of transitional phenomena such as 'an infant's babbling' or 'the way in which an older child goes over a repertory of songs and tunes while preparing for sleep' are common in McCarthy's performances. In a video piece entitled *Ma Bell* (1971) we hear the artist babbling and screeching as he turns the pages of a telephone book whilst dripping oil over the pages. McCarthy indicates that this piece was the first of his videos to contain a 'persona', although viewers only encounter this character via the sounds he makes off-screen; bodily he is almost entirely absent (apart from his hands).<sup>14</sup>

*Ma Bell* also provides an early example in McCarthy's work of objects standing in for the performer. Kristine Stiles reads the piece, and specifically the telephone book, as a representation of 'words for bodies, multiple bodies' that are otherwise absent from the performance, 'a kind of corporeal existence *in absentia*'.<sup>15</sup> Much like performance documentation, photographs, videos, and notations that reference live bodies in performances, the telephone book names more than those listed in its pages, and points directly to the absence, and as Stiles argues, the obliteration, of the body of the artist. 'The action of defacing [the telephone book] also obliterated the performance, a kind of self-obliteration', Stiles writes.<sup>16</sup> This 'relationship between naming (or language) and the body', Stiles observes, is central to one of the performative qualities of McCarthy's work, 'which is

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<sup>13</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge, [1971] 1992), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Paul McCarthy, cited in Kristine Stiles, 'Interview: Kristine Stiles in conversation with Paul McCarthy', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Ralph Rugoff (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 6-29 (p. 8).

<sup>15</sup> Stiles, *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

to destroy the performer in name and body.’<sup>17</sup> In his employment of language and naming – in the telephone book – combined with non-verbal communication and obliteration of the body, McCarthy creates a performance that is more about the instability of language, objects, and bodies than one necessarily being used to replace another.

In a later video work entitled *Family Tyranny (Modeling and Molding)* (1987), a collaboration with Mike Kelley in which the pair enact a perverse familial structure, McCarthy repeats the phrase ‘the father begat the son, the son begat the father...’. Here the obliteration of the performers’ bodies occurs through the repetition of a cycle of creation and destruction. The father begets and thus produces the son, and in so doing destroys himself; the son, begat by the father, continues this cycle. As well as merely producing an heir, the father figure (McCarthy) teaches the son (Kelley) a number of violent lessons; how to abuse, discipline and bully one’s offspring (McCarthy chants while molesting a small doll: ‘My father did this to me. You can do it to your son’) thus the tyrannical and violent structure of the family endures and is re-inscribed. Whilst the patriarchal structure remains intact, there is an attempt to diminish the language through which it is communicated; in the constant repetition and inversion of the maxim ‘the father begat the son...’ there is hope perhaps that its performative qualities will diminish. For the performers however, the phrase seems to bring comfort and routine, an ultimately hopeless gesture which suggests that there is little chance of change.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Between *Ma Bell* and *Family Tyranny*, the development in transitional phenomena moves from babbling and nonsensical sounds to more coherent phrases articulated repeatedly to provide comforting reassurance and yet by being repeated become almost meaningless. This indicates a development of McCarthy's practice from early experimental work exploring the inner experiences of the (solo) subject, to later, more elaborate works exploring the relations between subjects in the wider world. This is also true of McCarthy's employment of objects in performance. Making the transition 'between fantasy and fact, between inner objects and external objects, between primary creativity and perception', to cite Winnicott, is necessitated by transitional phenomena coupled with transitional objects.<sup>18</sup> Winnicott defines transitional objects as 'made objects that are not part of the infant's body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality'.<sup>19</sup> In McCarthy's practice these objects are not only in transition between object and subject – as in *Human Object* – but objects that McCarthy interacts with in performance, which are primarily mass-produced. Winnicott describes the transitional object as a soft object or toy that has been 'found by the infant', and 'goes on being important' to them.<sup>20</sup> The significance of this object is relayed to and acknowledged by the parents, who 'get to know its value and carry it round when travelling.'<sup>21</sup> 'The mother [then] lets [the object] get dirty and even smelly, knowing that by washing it she introduces a break in continuity in the infant's experience,

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<sup>18</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant.’<sup>22</sup> In *The Trunks*, McCarthy’s transitional objects are stored in what may be used as travel trunks and suitcases – vehicles for transporting belongings and objects. By being stored they are preserved in their own filth; washing or cleaning them, removing the evidence of them having been used in performance would perhaps destroy their meaning or value as performance objects. Unlike artefacts in a museum that may be preserved in controlled conditions to slow the process of decay, McCarthy creates volatile conditions in which decay is actively encouraged.

Whilst *The Trunks* and *PROPO* seem to preserve and distil the subject-object interactions enacted in performance, *Human Object* (see Image 5) engages in continuous human contact with gallery audiences. The object itself is crudely made, with just the ‘necessary’ functions inbuilt to enable it to be operated and maintained. It is a cleaned-up, pared down version of the bodily excesses, fluids, ingestion and excretions that McCarthy presents in performances from the 1970s. McCarthy invites gallery visitors to clean up after the *Human Object*, to remove its excretions and prevent it from otherwise defiling the space. Objects in *The Trunks* and *PROPO* become unclean and decay through McCarthy’s human contact, and this is why they are valuable. *Human Object* works in the opposite direction, as it gets cleaned up through human interaction.

By replacing the artist’s performing body, which labours physically to perform, with a body-shaped object which performs only when acted upon (*Human Object*), McCarthy absolves himself of the physical

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

exhaustion of performing. *Human Object* also highlights McCarthy's trademark humour. Like an arcade slot machine, the piece promises that when you put something in, you get something out. With this piece however, the promise is only of more waste products, 'the same old shit', a comment perhaps on those hoping for something more revelatory in McCarthy's practice than was served up in his 1970s performances. In *Human Object*, McCarthy is inviting his audience to interact with the object, the performativity of which is dependent on the audience's willingness to participate. By creating an object that mimics the porosity of the body, McCarthy creates what appears to be a discrete sculptural piece, but which also produces messy waste products or remains.

In a discussion of performance photographs and their necessity for the ongoing engagement with historical performances, Amelia Jones suggests that there is a parasitic relationship between the event and the document: 'The body art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological "anchor" of its indexicality.'<sup>23</sup> This relationship between the material remains of performance and the body, more specifically the performing body and the objects that stand in for it is similarly obsessive and parasitical. The transition in the deployment of objects from *The Trunks*, containing items used in performance, not themselves representative of performance but indexical references to events now passed, and *Human Object*, which replaces the artist-audience interaction of live performance, might be compared to the object as fetish.

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<sup>23</sup> Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation', *Art Journal*, 56.4 (Winter 1997), 11-18 (p. 16).

Sigmund Freud characterises the fetish as an object with which a child symbolically replaces the mother's vagina, after the traumatic realisation of the mother's lack of a penis. The fetish, as Freud suggests, 'is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost', keeps the male subject's 'threat of castration' at bay, and acts as 'a protection against it'.<sup>24</sup> Freud also notes that the fetishist is one for whom 'the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it, but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim.'<sup>25</sup> In this case the aim of performance might be for subjects – artist and audience – to interact in a shared time and space, with phenomenological, affective, and olfactory senses engaged. This live experience is not replaced by the objects that remain after the event but in being indexical to performance these objects bear some relation to it. Like the fetish, the object in this regard relies on what Dominic Johnson has termed, 'an event of translation or misinterpretation – a wilful act of misreading' for its accrual of value (erotic value in the former, semiotic value in the latter).<sup>26</sup> As Wyman argues, these objects do not 'speak [...] for themselves' as a performance, but they can provide points of contact between performance and objects.<sup>27</sup>

In *The Trunks*, McCarthy is still inviting his audience to engage with these performance remains *as* objects; in Freud's terms, it would be

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<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931) The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), XXI, pp. 152-57 (pp. 152, 154).

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Imago, 1949), pp. 13-50 (p. 31).

<sup>26</sup> Dominic Johnson, *Theatre & the Visual* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Wyman, 'Object Lessons', p. 30.



inappropriate to suggest that substitutions such as parts of the body, ‘the foot or hair’ for example, or ‘some inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces’, could come to entirely replace the sexual object.<sup>28</sup> Similarly it would be inappropriate to suggest that the objects in *The Trunks* can replace the performances in which they were used, or to suggest that they come to replace the artist himself. Arguably, however, the artist, as he becomes more well-known in the art world through the sale of works and an increased visibility in exhibitions, begins to become synonymous with his art works. These objects, having been used by McCarthy in conjunction or connection with his own body, take on the characteristics of fetishes. The ‘essential over-estimation of the sexual object, which inevitably extends to everything that is associated with it’, might relate to the objects and remains of performance; since the event itself can no longer be achieved or re-claimed, the material remains of the piece become the means of reconnecting with it.<sup>29</sup>

However, the situation changes – it ‘becomes pathological’ as Freud suggests – ‘when the longing for the fetish passes beyond the point of being merely a necessary condition attached to the sexual object and actually takes the place of the normal aim’.<sup>30</sup> For the objects in *The Trunks*, this would mean that they are no longer indexical to the performances in which they were used, but they actually become the performances or the performer themselves, an investment that Wyman warns against, following Peggy

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<sup>28</sup> Freud, ‘The Sexual Aberrations’, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*.<sup>31</sup> The potential conflation of the object and performance might be explored through the display of performance objects, for example in the exhibition *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (1998), in which McCarthy's *Assortment* was shown. *Out of Actions* traced the development of performance from its early generative period in the 1940s through to its moment of recognition as a viable form in the 1970s. Significantly, this history was represented in the exhibition through the display of objects, documentation, and other performance ephemera, 'the residue,' as its curator Paul Schimmel describes it: 'the work of art, that resulted from [artists'] performance work.'<sup>32</sup>

Arguably however, the items in *The Trunks* are still observed as objects. Stored away for years and then taken out to be photographed, audiences only ever engage with them at a distance on account of their techno-mediation. *Human Object* goes further in mimicking the artist-audience interaction of live performance. *Human Object* conflates different elements of the fetishised object, the stand-in for the artist and the interaction between performer and audience, its porous body-like structure producing excreta and other bodily waste that becomes iconic throughout McCarthy's practice. *Human Object* behaves as a hybrid structure which delivers neither aesthetic beauty nor autonomous functionality. It could be a sculpture moulded to reference the human form at which gallery visitors

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<sup>31</sup> Wyman, 'Object Lessons', p. 30; Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Schimmel, 'Introduction and Acknowledgements', in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, ed. by Paul Schimmel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), pp. 11-15 (p. 11).

gaze, or it could be a children's toy re-designed as an interactive artwork. It is in both cases however entirely unsuitable, and perhaps be more at home in a gallery shop as a joke souvenir. In New York in 2007 McCarthy put this idea into practice and produced his own edible chocolate figurines based on one of his sculptures, *Santa With Buttplug* (2007), a bronze version of which was exhibited at Art Basel in Switzerland earlier in the year.<sup>33</sup> Like Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* (Artist's shit) (1961), 30-gram tins of the artist's excrement which were sold by the gram at a price fixed to that of gold,<sup>34</sup> McCarthy sells his own version of artist's shit (cheap tat that may or may not have some deeper meaning), which, in a twist typical in McCarthy's oeuvre, is edible; the art viewer as a consumer of images is now also a consumer of (objectionable) objects. In *Human Object*, and later sculptural works such as *Santa With Buttplug*, McCarthy presents a link between art, shit and money (or consumerism or capital more generally) by collapsing them into single, discrete objects. McCarthy presents objects which are framed as playthings or consumables, but which at the same time resist or repel audience interaction.

To return to Winnicott's transitional objects, the 'fate' of which is 'to be gradually allowed to be decathected [the withdrawal of feelings of attachment from the object], so that [...] it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo', McCarthy's objects incur a similar fate.<sup>35</sup> For McCarthy, cathexis, or the investment of personal significance in the

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<sup>33</sup> Kate Taylor, 'Paul and the Chocolate Factory', *W Magazine*, November 2007 <[http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2007/11/paul\\_mccarthy/](http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2007/11/paul_mccarthy/)> [accessed 30 December 2013].

<sup>34</sup> Paul Schimmel, 'Leap Into the Void: Performance and the Object', in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, ed. by Paul Schimmel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), pp. 16-119 (p. 47).

<sup>35</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 5.

objects, is indicated by his reading of them as ‘co-performers’ or co-subjects instead of extraneous props.<sup>36</sup> When stored in *The Trunks* or displayed in *PROPO*, the objects are no longer played with or used in performance, but are contained within a very particular space – the art gallery – a liminal space in which they are no longer toys nor performance aids or props (both of which imply some activity or interaction), but remain *as objects*. Just as a child might pack away their newly ‘decathected’ transitional objects to indicate a move away from childhood, McCarthy locks his objects in trunks and suitcases to separate himself from the primacy of performance in his early career. In Winnicott’s terms, the use and meaning of these objects, having been channelled through performance, is spread out ‘over the whole cultural field’, between the ‘inner psychic reality’, in this case the creative faculties and bodily performances of the artist, and ‘the external world’, here, the art world.<sup>37</sup>

The trajectory of *Assortment* outlined here traces McCarthy’s movement away from live performance in 1983 (locking away the objects used in the preceding decade); to exploring the performative relationship between subjects and humanoid objects in the gallery space (accompanied by a removal of the artist’s body); to the exhibition and sale of performance objects as art works (accompanied by a more established presence in the art world). This direction through the interconnectedness of objects and performance also forms the structure for this chapter, which works chronologically through McCarthy’s work between 1983 and 1992, with

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<sup>36</sup> Paul McCarthy, ‘Interview with Marie de Brugerolle and Julien Bismuth’, in *Not To Play With Dead Things*, ed. by Marie De Brugerolle and Eric Mangion (Nice: Centre National d’art Contemporain and JRP Ringier, 2010), pp. 98-102 (p. 99).

<sup>37</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 5.

two significant pieces at either end: *The Trunks* (1983) as McCarthy's resignation letter to performance; and *The Garden* (1992), often characterised by critics<sup>38</sup> and curators<sup>39</sup> as the piece that established his place in the art world. The relationship between performance and objects in McCarthy's work is particularly significant during the 1980s and early 1990s, in which the history of recent performance from the 1970s becomes visible to the art world via the objects that survive it. However, by exhibiting objects from performance, art institutions are absolved perhaps of having to deal with the physical and political messiness of performance, preferring instead to exhibit contained objects that have been marked or shaped by performance. I explore what McCarthy's retirement from live performance might mean for the exhaustion of one form as an effective and viable medium, and the employment of other forms of materiality to continue the themes and issues explored in his formative performance practice. Specifically, I consider how the objects and installations created after an intense period of performance making might be informed and influenced by performance.

### **Retirement from Performance: Seeking a Popular Avant-Garde?**

When asked why he stopped making performances in 1983, McCarthy gave the following response:

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<sup>38</sup> Dan Cameron 'The Mirror Stage', in *The Artist's Joke*, ed. by Jennifer Higgie (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 124-28 (p. 124).

<sup>39</sup> Paul Schimmel, unpublished interview with the author, Los Angeles, 2012.

I don't know. The situation in performance art had changed a lot. I wasn't as interested in a lot of the dialogue of performance art. I went back to doing a lot more drawing. I wanted to make wax figures, wax sculptures, almost replacements of myself. It didn't really translate until years later, with *Bavarian Kick* in 1987 and *The Garden* in 1991-92.

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.<sup>40</sup>

Drawing on a range of different reasons, McCarthy presents a complex picture of the transition from performance to other modes of artistic expression. First, I will work through the relationship between McCarthy's practice and the changing context of performance art in the 1980s in some detail, before turning to other factors McCarthy cites in his withdrawal from performance – the surrogacy of objects for the performer, survival and the material conditions of production in particular.

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<sup>40</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, 'Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy', p. 28.

Preceded by the non-committal statement ‘I don’t know’, his dissatisfaction or disinterest in ‘the dialogue of performance art’, refers perhaps to the prevalence of monologue-based solo performances by artists such as Eric Bogosian, Karen Finley, Carmelita Tropicana, and Ann Magnuson in the 1980s. In an interview with Lynn Barber for the *Observer* in 2003, McCarthy states that performance art at this point ‘had become really about cabaret and performing on a stage with microphones’, something he was less interested in.<sup>41</sup> The few pieces that McCarthy performed live for public audiences such as *Class Fool* (1976), in which most of the audience left the room before the performance had finished, seemed to have an alienating effect on the artist, and perhaps contributed to the distancing of himself from his performance audience in the privileging of video, sculpture and installation.

By attempting to distance himself from contemporary performance art in the 1980s, McCarthy is able to establish and maintain a presence in the art world that is built on his reputation of making challenging and visually assaultive performances in the 1970s, but now produces somewhat more palatable sculptures and objects. Although visual connections might be drawn between McCarthy’s 1970s performances and Finley’s visceral performances such as *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989), in which the artist smears her body with chocolate, red candy hearts, bean sprouts and tinsel, Finley’s reliance upon spoken, textual content of the work is quite unlike McCarthy’s refusal of speech in performance. In Finley’s

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<sup>41</sup> Lynn Barber, ‘Power and the Glory’, *Observer*, 11 May 2003 <<http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2003/may/11/features.magazine37>> [accessed 25 January 2011].

performance there is a clear narrative which deals with the violent oppression and victimisation of women, represented not only through the spoken word but illustrated by visual props. As Kent Neely writes, chocolate is used to represent shit, ‘a metaphor for those times that [Finley] had been made to “feel like shit”’, and bean sprouts to represent semen, another ‘ironic symbol’ applied so that ‘her appearance, her identity, was buried by the projected images of dominant, male society’.<sup>42</sup> The characters that McCarthy performs communicate in stifled mumblings, shrieks and grunts, his audience only catching certain words or phrases in moments of clarity, before returning to the confusion of his non-verbal ramblings, accompanied by his standard visual vocabulary of ketchup, raw meat, mustard and mayonnaise; symbols of consumerist society. Whilst similar in symbolism – primarily, edible materials that both represent themselves and something more complicated – McCarthy’s materials refer to consumer culture in general, whereas Finley’s point more explicitly to the politicised experience of women and other marginalised subjects. Also, Finley’s works are often much more obviously referential to specific social problems (AIDS, incest, abortion, rape) or historical events. For example in the case of *Victims*, she symbolically re-enacted the violent rape of African-American teenager Tawana Brawley in 1987 (which was later exposed as a hoax). McCarthy’s works are first and foremost visual experiences, ‘a physical process, making an object while in character’, which showcase his continued interest in the ‘images produced during the performance’.<sup>43</sup> As

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<sup>42</sup> Kent Neely, ‘*We Keep Our Victims Ready* by Karen Finley; *Border Brujo* by Guillermo Gómez-Peña; *Everything That Rises Must Converge* by John Jesurun’, *Theatre Journal*, 42.4 (December 1990), 495-97 (p. 495).

<sup>43</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 20.



discussed in Chapter Two, McCarthy's seemingly apolitical and overtly violent representation of personal trauma and social suffering has unsettling implications for the reception and 'acceptability' of his work in the art world. Finley's performances however leave audiences with little doubt as to the passion and rage with which she responds to societal injustices, and the specific social and historical contexts she critiques.

Finley's performances belong to a stage in the development and institutionalisation of performance art that Britta B. Wheeler characterises as 'seeking a popular avant-garde'.<sup>44</sup> Wheeler, who uses *High Performance* (discussed in Chapter One) 'as one historically linear source of the development of the field', traces the institutionalisation of performance art through four proposed periods: the emergence of artist-run spaces in the 1960s; the early institutionalisation of performance art, 1978-83; seeking a popular avant-garde, 1983-90; and post-culture wars fragmentation and revitalisation, 1991-2000.<sup>45</sup> Between 1983 and 1990 (a period roughly matching the trajectory of McCarthy's career I trace in this chapter), Wheeler observes that '[m]ore people began to call themselves performance artists', and produced work at venues, such as nightclubs, 'that attracted audiences that were less knowledgeable about art'.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, artists produced performances that challenged their audiences in three ways: through 'radical content, unpredictable form, and nontraditional arts

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<sup>44</sup> Britta B. Wheeler, 'The Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde: Performance Art as Democratic Culture, 1970-2000', *Sociological Perspectives*, 46.4 (Winter 2003), 491-512 (p. 494).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 501. See also: Uzi Parnes, 'Pop Performance in East Village Clubs', *TDR*, 29.1 (Spring 1985); and Steven Hager, *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene* (Gordonsville: St Martin's Press, 1986).

settings.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, whilst performance art of the 1980s began to increasingly look like entertainment – ‘taking place onstage and with distinct separation from the audience’ – the content of the works addresses more explicitly political themes.<sup>48</sup> Wheeler concludes that during this period ‘[t]he field of performance art began to have the best of both worlds – a politically engaged avant-garde art form and a potentially mass audience derived from a broad social spectrum.’<sup>49</sup>

McCarthy’s work went through a transformation of its own during these years, however this trajectory differs in at least three ways from the institutionalisation of performance art that Wheeler traces. Firstly, the moment at which McCarthy’s work is more widely recognised occurs when he is occupied with making sculpture and other object-based pieces than making performance. Although performance was the focus of his early career, and as I argue, has informed his artistic practice throughout, it was not performance but installation that confirmed his status in the wider art world. For McCarthy, there was perhaps no singular development of performance from avant-garde art form to edgy entertainment for mainstream audiences, but rather the development of performance was put on hold and explored in a more fragmentary way through the objects left behind.

Secondly, instead of presenting his work at non-art venues during this period, McCarthy appeared to shrink away from public audiences. Having only had a few disorientating encounters with public audiences,

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<sup>47</sup> Wheeler, ‘The Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde’, p. 501.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 503.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 501.

McCarthy primarily performed to audiences of invited friends and colleagues in studio spaces, or at festivals with a performance-savvy audience. Retiring from performance and making works that could be contained within art galleries meant that McCarthy's work reached a wider audience, but rather than being disseminated through non-art venues, he did so almost exclusively through art world channels. In the display of later video performances such as *Pinnocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* (1994) and *Bossy Burger* (1992), audience members were invited to interact with the pieces within the gallery space. For example in *Pinnocchio*, visitors dress in the same costumes as the performers on screen – brightly coloured dungarees, large red shoes and a cartoon mask with long nose – and in *Bossy Burger* the video is screened in the original wooden performance set and can be heard as viewers explore the space. This technique of showing the video performances inside the original architecture of the performance space and allowing visitors to walk around it has been replicated in other works, including: *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone* (1992, with Mike Kelley); and *Caribbean Pirates* (2001-05), both discussed in Chapter Four. Whilst McCarthy invites his audience to interact with the pieces and in the process inserts live bodies (of the audience) back into his works, these interactions occur within the confines of the gallery. McCarthy himself remains at a distance from the audience.

Thirdly, Wheeler suggests that for performance art of the 1980s and early 1990s, the outrageousness of the performances began to exist 'in the

content of the works rather than in their structural form'.<sup>50</sup> Here there is a distinct separation of the performer from the audience, and McCarthy's work certainly follows the pattern in this respect. His move from live performance to object-based works indicated a broadening out of his practice; he put much more distance between himself and his audience but was, at the same time, able to produce more works. However, McCarthy's work tends toward self-reflexivity, seemingly commenting on and critiquing the role of art as a tool for interrogating the systems of the art world, and nothing more. As I have argued in previous chapters, however, this apparent transparency of McCarthy's work often gives way to something more complex. McCarthy's work maintains a dissident tone by being welcomed into the art world whilst also critiquing its veneration of canonised artists.

In a video performance entitled *Painter* (1995), McCarthy, wearing a blue painter's smock, curly wig and large, cartoon-like hands and a bulbous nose, satirises Abstract Expressionist painter Willem De Kooning. He performs as an eccentric, and suggestively maniacal, artist-genius, as he goes about his daily activities: painting, meeting art dealers, and making a mess in his studio. He appears to be both educating his audience as he talks through the creation of his work (it is evidently difficult to extract a coherent description of his complex artistic process, so he 'shows' his audience by lashing and stabbing at the canvas with his oversized paintbrush), and entirely occupied with his own neuroses, often behaving as a petulant child (after arguing with his art dealer the artist urinates in an office plant pot in an act of defiance, and, later, hacks off a finger from his

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

oversized hand). With the apparent self-reflexivity of this piece – referencing Abstract Expressionism and action painting as potential predecessors of McCarthy’s work, as well as his characteristically non-linguistic, visceral performances of the 1970s – McCarthy positions his work as both canonical to and critical of the art world. As Robert R. Shane points out, *Painter* was made ‘precisely at the moment when [McCarthy] was becoming part of the mainstream art world’, thus his ‘attack on the New York art world at that moment in his career was the height of hypocrisy [having] been thoroughly canonized into the art world that he was ostensibly criticizing.’<sup>51</sup> Here the content of McCarthy’s work becomes political but only in relation to his own position in the art world.

To return to Wheeler, she concludes by suggesting that in the period 1983 to 1990, performance art began to ‘have the best of both worlds – a politically engaged avant-garde art form and a potentially mass audience derived from a broad social spectrum’, and barring the presentation of works in non-art venues, McCarthy’s work begins to take on a similar role.<sup>52</sup> Retiring from live works in 1983 and seemingly abandoning performance for object-based art did not immediately bring McCarthy success, but it was perhaps the first step in the process of canonisation or institutionalisation of his work. An important step in this process was the re-introduction of the body, or representations of the body as stand-ins for the artist.

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<sup>51</sup> Robert R. Shane, ‘Paul McCarthy’s *Painter* (1995) as Self-Portrait and Self Loathing’, *Art Criticism*, 24.2 (2009) 84-103 (p. 96).

<sup>52</sup> Wheeler, ‘Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde’, p. 501.

## **Exhaustion and Labour: The Object as Stand-in for the Artist**

It is telling that McCarthy describes his creation of wax figures and sculptures – for example *Carter Replacement Mannequin* (1980), a mannequin seated at a desk wearing a suit jacket and President Jimmy Carter mask, which McCarthy wore in a performance entitled *Tale of Two Cities* (1980) – as ‘replacements’ of himself, at a time when he was beginning to distance his own body from the art work.<sup>53</sup> Not only might these bodies stand in for the artist, but they are physically present where it might be impossible for him to be, and can be re-used in a number of different art works, for example: the objects in *The Trunks* are used as the subjects for the *PROPO* photographic series; and the moving mannequins in *The Garden*, described later in this chapter, are recycled in several later works.

Among his reasons for retiring from performance McCarthy cites personal, psychological factors as well the physical exhaustion of performing.<sup>54</sup> In descriptions of his performances from the 1970s, McCarthy emphasises his interest in exploring memory and trauma, and particularly the confusion between personal and wider cultural memories channelled through the media.<sup>55</sup> McCarthy indicates that it was something of a burden to work in this way, in which public and private realities became interchangeable, and he admits that he mistrusted ‘a lot of what has been

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<sup>53</sup> McCarthy cited in Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 28.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*; Barber, ‘Power and the Glory’.

<sup>55</sup> Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 14.

conjured up in [contemporary U.S.] culture'.<sup>56</sup> This period of disorientation occurred when he received conscientious objector status and avoided the Vietnam War draft, 'when suddenly the experience of being confronted with [his] existence was overwhelming', he states.<sup>57</sup> By producing replacement bodies to perform for him, McCarthy develops a way of creating art which still puts the body at the centre of the work but at the same time distances himself from it.

McCarthy pairs his confusion of public and private reality and personal, psychological strain with the very practical problem of making money from performance. Until the 1980s and early 1990s, McCarthy's performance work was relatively little known, and only circulated within magazines like *High Performance*. From the mid-1990s onward McCarthy gained wider recognition in the art world in a number of ways: inclusion in 'blockbuster' exhibitions such as *Helter Skelter* (1992) and *Out of Actions* (1998), both of which sought to make a bold statement about the viability and credibility of Los Angeles as a cutting-edge, international art centre; an increasing number of solo exhibitions and large career retrospectives, such as *Paul McCarthy* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 2001) and *Paul McCarthy – Head Shop/Shop Head* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2006); and subsequently, an increase in writing on the artist in reviews and essays collected in monographs and exhibition catalogues (as outlined in the Introduction). In these examples there is an emphasis on creating a material output that circulates beyond the art works, for example in exhibition catalogues, often large, weighty tomes that are extensively illustrated. In

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<sup>56</sup> McCarthy, cited in *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

part I read McCarthy's recycling of objects to create new works as an effort to maintain artistic authority within the expanding visual and textual dissemination of his work. Not only is it economically viable to turn performance objects into a marketable product, but the idea of exploiting cultural capital is inherent in McCarthy's work. For example, his interest in performing for an audience, not through direct contact but through a 'frame' or 'window', suggests that McCarthy had long been in the business of altering accepted notions of truth and reality.<sup>58</sup> By reflecting on 'culture's use of control', he imposes his own skewed version of authorship, in which objects are potentially interchangeable with the performing subject.<sup>59</sup>

When asked about the significance of performance and its effectiveness in engaging with issues such as cultural violence, the perception of illusion and reality, and alienation from society, McCarthy responds by saying that:

Performance deals with issues that I am concerned with but it cannot deal with all issues. There are issues that exist within objects, where the discussion of inanimate and animate objects – inanimate objects being the other – occur. I do not believe that all of my concerns can be played out in performance.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Éric Mangion, curator of the group exhibition *Not To Play With Dead Things* (Villa Arson, Nice, 2008) describes McCarthy's use of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 22.



performance and objects as inseparable: ‘Whether kneaded, mixed or simply piled up, he looks upon objects not as secondary props but as real sculptures that cannot be separated from his own gestures’.<sup>61</sup> McCarthy calls the objects used in performance ‘props’ or ‘co-performers’, capable of ‘shift[ing] identity’. They are as much a part of the performances as the artist himself.<sup>62</sup>

In a review of the live performance *Monkey Man* (1980), artist Nancy Buchanan describes the central prop that accompanies McCarthy onstage as ‘a life-sized half-mannekin [*sic*] fashioned from a dress-maker’s dummy, with a bald, fashion-model head the artist could turn by inserting his hand into its back’ (see Image 6).<sup>63</sup> The ‘creature’, as she calls it, ‘was at once grotesque, funny, and profoundly meaningful. A green, plush-covered toy snake dangled beneath its torso, [a] bizarre representation of its androgyny, that matched the artist’s strapped-on plastic breasts.’<sup>64</sup> A number of children’s dolls and small, headless mannequins also populate the stage, looking as if they were bearing witness to the ongoing performance. Throughout, McCarthy wears a cartoon monkey mask, and like his puppet, adopts an identity that is both male and female, animal and human, life-like and visibly artificial. As we have seen, these qualities can also be seen in some of McCarthy’s earlier performances such as *Sailor’s Meat* and *Tubbing*, in which the artist ‘performs’ sexuality as both male and female

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<sup>61</sup> Éric Mangion, ‘The Fetish-Making Finish of Performance Art – Interview with Raphaëlle Giangreco’, in *Not To Play With Dead Things*, ed. by Marie De Brugerolle and Eric Mangion (Nice: Centre National d’art Contemporain and JRP Ringier, 2010), pp. 10-30 (p. 19).

<sup>62</sup> McCarthy, ‘Interview with de Brugerolle and Bismuth’, p. 99.

<sup>63</sup> Nancy Buchanan, ‘Paul McCarthy, *Vented Trilogy Quiz* or *Monkey Man*’, reprinted from *LIVE*, No. 4, (Fall 1980) in *High Performance*, 3.11-12 (1980), 149 (p. 149).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

through costume and personae, and blurs the boundary between human and animal by communicating only through grunting and moaning. In her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* Donna Haraway signals the beginnings of the ‘leaky distinction’ between organism and machine – the cyborg – in the transgression of the boundary between human and animal.<sup>65</sup> If the mechanical figures in *The Garden* are cyborg replacements for the artist (as discussed in more detail below), and in the chronology traced here they represent the most sophisticated humanoid objects in McCarthy’s repertoire, then the roots of this transition might be seen in McCarthy’s earlier performances in which human subjectivity is already destabilised.

In *Monkey Man*, McCarthy performed on a stage in front of an audience seated at tables covered with white cloths and hotdogs arranged as centrepieces (see Image 7). Buchanan read this cabaret-like set up ‘partially as a comment on the current insistence on performance-as-entertainment’.<sup>66</sup> This reading draws on concerns about the development of performance art towards what might be called ‘entertainment that offers an illusion of reality’, a form seemingly all too aware of its own artifice, by *High Performance* editor Linda Frye Burnham.<sup>67</sup> For Burnham, performance-as-entertainment indicates that authenticity, marginality and seriousness, as seemingly inalienable values of performance art, have been gradually diluted by mass appeal. As discussed earlier, Wheeler offers a reading of this move towards entertainment as a necessary step in the development and

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<sup>65</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p. 152.

<sup>66</sup> Buchanan, ‘Paul McCarthy’, p. 149.

<sup>67</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, “‘High Performance,’ Performance Art, and Me’, *The Drama Review: TDR*. 30. 1 (Spring 1986), 15-51 (p. 51).

institutionalisation of performance art.<sup>68</sup> Gavin Butt furthers this point when he argues that styles of performance such as cabaret might be rejected from official histories of performance because they appear to lack seriousness. Projects such as Mel Brimfield's *This Is Performance Art* (2010), a 'spoof TV documentary' that narrates the history of performance and live art through a '[m]elding of hagiographic mythologizing tendencies of art history with the gossipy and sensationalist narratives of celebrity culture', wilfully transgresses the boundaries of performance, inserting its own idiosyncratic version of performance history within 'official' narratives.<sup>69</sup> Above all, Butt argues, Brimfield's project exposes and transgresses '*the taste cultures*' that enclose or protect performance art, and in the process 'solicit[s] a performance public in which it is possible to speak or act without regard for the exclusionary operations of taste culture'.<sup>70</sup> Such projects work within the structures of popular forms of performance to comment on and critique the content of official 'high art' histories.

McCarthy's performances in turn might be described as entertaining, touching, violent or disturbing, and yet also self-referential. Arrangements of hotdogs on the tables during *Monkey Man* might point to cabaret entertainment but they also refer to McCarthy's earlier performances, for example *Hot Dog*, in which hot dogs are also displayed as table decorations and used as props. In the previous chapter I explored the vocabulary of images, objects and materials in McCarthy's practice, including mayonnaise, ketchup, raw meat and hot dogs, and *Monkey Man* indicates

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<sup>68</sup> Wheeler, 'Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde', p. 501.

<sup>69</sup> Gavin Butt, 'The Common Turn in Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22.1 (February 2012), 46-61 (pp. 46-47).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 58. Emphasis in original.

how McCarthy continues to deploy this repertoire in his work. Referring broadly to American consumer-culture, these items are, as Buchanan suggests, ‘activated’ in performance, becoming ‘representatives for the body elements – sperm, blood, excrement, flesh tissue’.<sup>71</sup> As established in Chapter Two however, these materials also always refer to themselves, though the way in which meaning and effect are produced allows the materials to also take on different associations too. McCarthy’s work often jars with normative taste cultures (his visceral ‘food’ performances of the 1970s and *The Garden* installation might be said to be in bad taste) but his work, I argue, is eminently acceptable for and accepted by the art world.

The oscillating identity of objects in McCarthy’s performance also extends to the tone of the performances, as objects are assigned identities, personalities and even emotions, as ‘co-performers’.<sup>72</sup> Buchanan describes *Monkey Man* as ‘a complicated and poetic work examining cultural violence and confusion about sexuality’,<sup>73</sup> a funny, intimate and yet violent encounter between the performer and his puppet. She writes that McCarthy

moved back and forth between comic moments (but these were, again, complex: the violent and pathetic tenderness as the artist kissed his creature, crushing its face in the process) and profound gestures (when he moved into the audience, space was obediently maintained; from time to time, he struck unmistakably classic poses).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Buchanan, ‘Paul McCarthy’, p. 149.

<sup>72</sup> McCarthy, ‘Interview with de Brugerolle and Bismuth’, p. 99.

<sup>73</sup> Buchanan, ‘Paul McCarthy’, p. 149.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

McCarthy animates the creature, his co-performer, and engineers the funny, violent, and profound moments in which they interact. There is no pretence that the creature moves independently, but the performance begins to demonstrate the transition of objects from supporting props to co-performers. The gestures of emotion or care – but also of abuse – indicating the object’s dependency on human contact are also present in McCarthy’s later piece, *Human Object*. In *Monkey Man*, McCarthy interacts with his co-performer both tenderly and violently, as perhaps a child with his favourite toy or ‘transitional object’.<sup>75</sup> For Winnicott, the transitional object is ‘affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated’, and ‘must survive instinctual loving, and also hating and, if it be a feature, pure aggression.’<sup>76</sup> In McCarthy’s performances his objects are certainly subjected to aggression and tenderness, as Buchanan highlights, and in the case of the objects in *The Trunks*, they might also be said to *survive* this process. The idea that these objects might take on a life of their own beyond the performance is more complicated.

In his article ‘Puppetry and the Destruction of the Object’, Matthew Isaac Cohen writes that: ‘Performers and audience conspire in performance to grant puppets the illusion of life; in performances “co-created” by performers and spectators [...], puppets take on the appearance of their own volition’.<sup>77</sup> When McCarthy animates or activates objects he asks the

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<sup>75</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, pp. 1-25.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> Matthew Isaac Cohen, ‘Puppetry and the Destruction of the Object’, *Performance Research*, 12.4 (2007), 123-31 (p. 124).

audience to enter into his perception that inanimate objects can also be performers. In conversation with Stiles, McCarthy says that the

ultimate difference [...] between performance and the static object is not in perception, the point of view of another human. The real difference is the position of the performer, the person who acts. But I find hardly any difference in the observation of that act being made by another human or by a static object.<sup>78</sup>

Disregarding the fact that such objects need to be manipulated by a performer in order to be complicit in the performance, McCarthy disrupts the notion of who is performing and for whom. Cohen locates this particularly alien quality in the use of puppets, which are both ‘alien others *and* closely associated with the person. They are “not me” and also “not not me”’.<sup>79</sup> Whilst McCarthy’s audience may not be convinced that these objects are performing, just as they do not really believe that ketchup is blood (this requires something of a suspension of disbelief), they become complicit in the rendering of the performed actions as violent, tender or cruel. ‘McCarthy’s bloody automata and puppets’, writes Cohen, ‘highlight alienation and the absurd excesses of cruelty and abuses of power in politics and the media.’<sup>80</sup>

The objects McCarthy uses are often shop-bought, mass-produced items, purchased nominally as a last minute addition to the performance, or

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<sup>78</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 22.

<sup>79</sup> Cohen, ‘Puppetry and the Destruction of the Object’, p. 124.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

as makeshift stand-ins for more convincing materials. When asked about his choice of dress for *Political Disturbance* (1976), a public performance in which he dressed in an ‘Arab’ mask and headscarf, McCarthy replies; ‘[i]t just sort of came together like that. I hadn’t really contrived it. It’s just that I had bought this Arab mask’,<sup>81</sup> before putting on the mask to show the interviewer (who then laughs). Prefaced in *High Performance* magazine by an artists’ discussion on funding for performance and the potential effect of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, the editors were perhaps hoping for an answer from McCarthy which explicitly revealed the politics of his piece (to which he alludes in the title).<sup>82</sup> In his video performance *Bossy Burger*, in which the artist plays a crazed chef presenting a television cooking programme, McCarthy chose the mask of Alfred E. Neuman, the fictitious cover character of *Mad* magazine, a U.S. satirical magazine running since 1952. McCarthy is similarly nonchalant about the selection of this character mask, explaining:

The Alfred E. Neuman mask was bought the day of the performance. I went to a store and out of 20 masks, I just picked that one. And the same with the chef’s outfit [...]. The character of Alfred E. Neuman as a chef was unexpected and is related to chance and coincidence.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Paul McCarthy, cited in Linda Burnham, ‘Performance Interrupts: Interview with Paul McCarthy’, *High Performance*, 1.2 (1978), 8-12, 44-45, (p. 9).

<sup>82</sup> Jim Moisan, ‘News’, *High Performance* 1.2 (June 1978), 1, 48 (p. 1). The panel discussion ‘Performance Art: Ethics and Economics’ was held at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 18 March 1978, and included performance artists Nancy Buchanan, Chris Burden, John Duncan, Cheri Gaulke, Kim Jones, Allan Kaprow, Leslie Labowitz, Paul McCarthy, Barbara Smith, Clair Sparks and John White. Moisan attributes the mention of the oil embargo to Kaprow.

<sup>83</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, ‘Interview: Stiles in Conversation with McCarthy’, p. 19.

Despite Stiles' attempts in interview to steer the discussion towards a psychoanalytically inflected reading of the chef character, as remembered from a previous conversation – 'I think you told me that Alfred E. Neuman [...] was the image of how you saw yourself as a child' – McCarthy is non-committal about anything other than the 'chance' encounter with, and purchase of the mask.<sup>84</sup> In both examples McCarthy's apparently unsatisfactory rationale for selecting these objects, which, like his use of household condiments and raw meat, have become iconic within his performance repertoire, may at first glance suggest flippancy – or may gesture, even unconsciously, to poverty or hardship – but can also give way to something more complex.

McCarthy's apparent ambivalence towards the items he selects is perhaps a result of his viewing objects as transitional or oscillating, just as props and puppets can be co-performers, ketchup can be blood, mayonnaise can be semen, rather than fixed and determined. Masks are perhaps more difficult to destabilise; as objects they wear their identities boldly, both masking the identity of the wearer and proposing a fixed yet artificial rendering of a particular character. *Political Disturbance* and *Bossy Burger*, two instances in which the cultural politics of the chosen masks might be useful in considering the political implications of McCarthy's work, their determined meaning is similarly rebuffed. In another work in which a seemingly anonymous mask is used – *Contemporary Cure All* (1978) – a layer of ground meat is packed onto the face of the main performer before a rubber mask of an old man character is placed on top of that. The idea of

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<sup>84</sup> Stiles also refers to another performance, *Sailor's Meat*, which she believes McCarthy had told her 'referred to [his] dad'. Ibid.



merely covering up the wounded subject with layers of food and an artificial, anonymous mask rather than directly addressing issues in contemporary culture is significant here. Not only do the performers in *Contemporary Cure All* ‘fix’ their patient by castrating him, they obscure any identifiable facial features with a mask, thus covering up any potentially difficult questions relating to identity politics. The mask-like object *Looking Out Skull Card* (1968) – as described by Iwona Blazwick – has ‘a double function: providing the wearer with a form of concealment; and a framing device through which to look’, such that McCarthy both hides his identity and assumes an exaggerated version of it.<sup>85</sup> In *Experimental Dancer* (1975), McCarthy performs naked in front of a video camera, wearing a cartoon mask that conceals his whole head, and dances to pop music over the course of 23 minutes. His body hair has been shaved and he makes rhythmic inhalations and exhalations from within the mask. The artist changes position as he dances, but alternately pulls on his penis and then clamps his genitals between his thighs so that they are visible only from behind.<sup>86</sup> As well as both displaying and hiding his body as a ‘performer’ – as in *Tubbing and Sailor’s Meat*, he both courts and dismisses the camera’s gaze – he uses the mask and manipulations of his body to perform an indeterminate gender.

McCarthy’s refusal of depth, here played out through a resistance of meaning in the selection and use of masks and identities, might in fact be a perfect postmodern gesture. Fredric Jameson identifies ‘flatness or

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<sup>85</sup> Iwona Blazwick, ‘Masks, Statues and Automata: Paul McCarthy as Figurative Sculptor’, in *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head, Works 1966-2006*, ed. by Magnus af Petersens and Paul McCarthy (Stockholm: Steidl, 2006), pp. 25-32 (p. 25).

<sup>86</sup> These observations are from my own transcription of the piece. Paul McCarthy, *Experimental Dancer*, Edit #2 (1975) 23:08 min.

depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense' as a 'constitutive feature' of the postmodern, 'perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the Postmoderns'.<sup>87</sup> Depthlessness, in Andy Warhol's words, begins and ends with the surface: 'If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it.'<sup>88</sup> Conveniently for McCarthy, this refusal of depth in favour of surface qualities – the rejection of a personal, unconscious reading of objects, and that the objects have a stable meaning – might be a factor in bolstering the introduction of his work into the commercial market. McCarthy's performances of the 1970s were materially messy – they involved the spilling and smearing of fluids, force-feeding and vomiting, and the alienation of live audiences. Object-based works such as *The Trunks* enabled these performances to enter the art market via the material objects that were left behind, specifically by making his work seem more compatible with theoretical trends associated with postmodernism.

Furthermore, McCarthy's performances of the 1970s, *Sailor's Meat* in particular, address the potentially 'messy' issues of identity, gender and sexuality. This gender-bending performance sees McCarthy perform both male and female personae, experiment with gendered costume and adornment and mix bodily fluids and consumer products. With works such as *The Trunks*, buyers, gallerists, and critics need not address the identity politics of the piece, perhaps reflecting the newfound marketability of McCarthy's work, which I locate in this very trajectory of performance

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<sup>87</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pp. 6, 9.

<sup>88</sup> Andy Warhol, cited in Gretchen Berg, 'Andy Warhol: My True Story' (1966) in *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews, 1962-1987*, ed. by Kenneth Goldsmith (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), pp. 85-96 (p. 90).

objects. This discussion becomes particularly relevant to the next section, in which I explore *The Garden* as a cleaned-up, mechanised version of McCarthy's early performances, a more museum-friendly piece which nevertheless retains the dirty humour of his earlier works. This is perhaps telling in the context of the *Helter Skelter* exhibition: although purportedly representative of contemporary Los Angeles artists of the 1990s, it received criticism for its notable lack of gay artists, artists of colour, and women artists, and that neither performance nor identity politics were given substantial attention.

By refusing the singular ownership of a gesture or object, McCarthy creates a potentially perverse practice; he chooses variously disturbing and unsettling imagery but seemingly forecloses the assumption that there is a connection between the object chosen or the art work produced and the subject that makes or presents it. McCarthy destabilises the possibility of making direct connections between individual pathology and the presentation of objects and gestures.

However, in the process of encountering performance objects, the way in which we think about them in relation to performance and subjectivity is called into question, and influenced by the context in which they are received. Recounting his matter-of-fact selection of objects perhaps illustrates McCarthy's resourcefulness in creating work on a budget, using what is most readily and cheaply available. Yet Stiles' reading of the objects as indicative of McCarthy's unconscious, personal connection with them, attaches a history which goes beyond the event itself, focusing not on the life of the objects after performance, but on the possibility of their pre-

history. Both raise questions about why and how particular objects are used in performance, and what kind of emotional, cultural or historical value should be invested in them but imply very different responses. McCarthy engineers his performances so that subject and object are confused, which might be seen most clearly in performances representing castration and birthing scenes where objects are seemingly amputated from or produced by the body. For example in *Contemporary Cure All* (1978), the patient's penis (a plastic dildo) is cut away and replaced with a plastic vagina-shaped object, and in *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982) McCarthy, wearing a hospital gown and large spherical *papier maché* helmet, 'gives birth' to a doll. As with the use of ketchup to represent blood, these actions are not convincing or realistic in themselves, but represent how objects are treated or acted upon (as subjects) in performance.

In *Monkey Man, Human Object, and The Trunks*, the capacity for objects to elude or even transcend human performance is located in the fact that they have at one time been activated, and can potentially be animated once again. Despite McCarthy's ambivalence about where the objects were sourced and how they came to be used in performance, they are invested with a history that is both specific to his practice and broader cultural production. Activated in performance, the mannequin in *Monkey Man* is a co-performer in a duet, but afterwards it is left amongst the other dolls as part of the backdrop. The *Human Object* instead awaits its visitors and their gestures of care and maintenance, and receives visitors in a private room designed so that one person at a time can interact with and spend time with it, offering the possibility of an intimate encounter.

McCarthy's refusal to see the differences between performer and object, and perhaps thus between performance and sculpture, seems to oppose the potential confusion of the latter in each binary with the former. I think McCarthy is deliberately divisive in this act of refusal and some of his sculptural works incite or require performative gestures from the viewer – for example *Human Object*, and *Rear View* (1991-92), a headless, limbless plaster sculpture evocative of a human form and yet utterly lifeless, which invites viewers to bend to the level of the figure's anus to peer inside to view an idyllic, snow-covered Alpine scene – whereas other works perform by moving of their own accord, for example *The Garden*. Rather than reading these objects as providing a complete history of performance (although *The Trunks* might be characterised as an archive of performance made up of surviving objects), they provide multiple access points for those not present at the performance, jog memories for those who were, and provide a framework for thinking about how objects complicate or complement performance more generally. *Rear View* refers back to the use of the body in McCarthy's performances of the 1970s – the object is representative of the body and yet it is also used as a tool or vehicle to convey a series of representations of reality. These object-based works also highlight how performance is reconfigured in different spaces (museums, galleries, performance spaces, books, journals and photographs) and in different mediums and disciplines.

My discussion now moves from the manipulation of objects in performance to objects that perform in the gallery space, specifically, the

kinetic sculpture *The Garden* which performs as a ‘complete’ art work by re-introducing moving bodies into McCarthy’s sculptural repertoire.

### ***The Garden (1992)***

McCarthy’s *Human Object* might be read as a prototype for the mechanised sculptural pieces he developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s; it does not strictly perform *for* its audience, but relies on visitors to perform to complete its cycle of actions. In 1987 McCarthy produced a more advanced kinetic piece entitled *Bavarian Kick*, described by curator Magnus af Petersens as a ‘mechanical ballet’.<sup>89</sup> The piece comprises two rudimentary mechanised stick-figures that emerge from either side of a small stage, beers in hand, move together to clink glasses, and then leave the stage. The metal figures indicate the shape of human bodies whilst their heads and bulbous red noses make them abstract and comical like cartoons. Though their costumes hint at distinctions between the figures’ gender, this is merely referential; they are, ultimately, just machines. In *Cultural Gothic* (1992) McCarthy develops more advanced mechanical moving figures as a hybrid form between body and object, or what Haraway calls a ‘cyborg’: ‘a cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of fiction’.<sup>90</sup> The mechanics of the moving mannequins in this piece, a father who stands behind and rests his hands on the shoulders of his young son, are

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<sup>89</sup> Magnus af Petersens, ‘Paul McCarthy’s 40 Years of Hard Work – An Attempt at a Summary’, in *Paul McCarthy Head Shop/Shop Head, Works 1966-2006*, ed. by Magnus af Petersens and Paul McCarthy (Stockholm: Steidl, 2006) pp. 9-23 (p. 18).

<sup>90</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 149.

more convincingly concealed. Their bodies dressed in casual clothes and their heads, faces and hands realistically depicted, the figures look like mannequins modelling clothes in a shop window. The piece also features a taxidermied goat, which stands in front of the boy; the boy thrusts his crotch towards the goat's rear end, whilst the father figure nods sagely in encouragement. In *The Garden*, McCarthy continues the themes set out in *Bavarian Kick* and *Cultural Gothic* and extends and complicates the hybridity of moving objects, mechanisms and the human body, particularly in relation to masculinity and sexuality, through a reworking of nature and culture.<sup>91</sup>

*The Garden* (1992) (see Image 8) is a man-made forest environment, the title of which, as Jennie Klein has observed, 'suggests a re-worked Garden of Eden, one in which the carnal knowledge long attributed to women is exposed through the masculine bodies of patriarchal secession'.<sup>92</sup> Large trees, fake foliage and boulders, some borrowed from the set of American television show *Bonanza* (1959-73), adorn the large platform on which the piece sits. Amongst the foliage, not at first visible but audible from the whirring mechanical sounds, are two figures, a father and a son, mechanised mannequins who dutifully copulate with the tree and the grass. 'The viewer realizes', Klein observes, after seeing the piece at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York in 2001, 'that she or he has stumbled upon a rite of masculine passage, one in which the father shares

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<sup>91</sup> In her writing on cyborgs, Haraway reflects on the wider implications of the development of hybrid of organism and machine; '[n]ature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other'. Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>92</sup> Jennie Klein, 'Paul McCarthy: Rites of Masculinity', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 23.2 (2001), 10-17 (p. 10).

his sexual perversion with his son'.<sup>93</sup> *The Garden* is similar in tone to *Cultural Gothic* in that it explores a lineage of masculinity and male sexuality as learned only in relation to nature, presented as a perverse definition of the natural order. *The Garden* seems at first to be a pastoral installation environment, part of a theme park ride or an educational tableau. On closer inspection, it presents a portrait of the dangers of repression, of presenting sexuality in only a pre-fabricated and cleaned-up form, portrayed in an environment marked specifically by its artificiality. The 'bodies' in *The Garden*, the father and son, are somewhat hidden; their presence and movements are only to be acknowledged in the moment of realisation in which blissful ignorance is shed and a conscious knowledge of the body and sexuality is observed.

The mechanised figures 'perform' partly to replace the body of the artist, occupying an uncertain role between subject and object in the gallery space. The installation of multiple surrogate bodies into a fantastical environment indicates a cleaning up or removal of the otherwise messy, borderless body that McCarthy presents in earlier performances. As with video works such as *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, in which, as Levine highlights, '[t]he sense of pure revulsion [felt by McCarthy's audience] was dampened by the chosen space and the use of video', the border between art work and audience in *The Garden* is clearly delineated.<sup>94</sup> The duplicity of the piece, however, is apparent. The audience are both witness to and implicated in the onstage action. Klein's description of the embarrassment

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. The retrospective exhibition *Paul McCarthy* was exhibited at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, 22 February – 13 May 2001.

<sup>94</sup> Cary Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures: Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 30.



provoked by stumbling upon a seemingly private ‘rite of masculine passage’ is an integral element of the piece, and yet the mechanised figures will continue their actions regardless, tirelessly and undeterred.<sup>95</sup>

In two works from the mid-1990s, Dennis Oppenheim looks in a similar way at the appearance of seemingly abstract mechanical sculpture that reveals an unsettling connection with bodily fluids and processes. Oppenheim (1938-2011) was a contemporary of McCarthy who also began his public career with performance works in the 1960s and 1970s. Oppenheim’s *Blood Breathe* (1996) consists of two large, upside-down carved foam noses fixed to the wall, in which the nostrils are represented by two pools of steaming, simulated blood, heated by electric hot plates. In *Blushing Machine* (1996) a series of flashing red lights are projected out onto a circle of semi-transparent, flesh-coloured fibreglass panels that roughly resemble the side of a human face. Oppenheim turns the bodily processes of blushing and breathing into mechanical constructs, represented and reflected back to audience members who, in turn, breathe and blush. Lee Klein has described these pieces as coming together ‘to form a vicious’ – and in the case of *Blood Breathe*, viscous – ‘amusement park, which extends the 1980s fetishization of body processes into the realm of mechanization.’<sup>96</sup> McCarthy’s installation, by contrast, does not contain any such fluids, real or represented, unlike his earlier performances. However, by declaring its duplicity, hoping to catch viewers by surprise by concealing the figures amongst the foliage, viewers of *The Garden* may in turn become

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<sup>95</sup> Klein, ‘Rites of Masculinity’, p. 10.

<sup>96</sup> Lee Klein, ‘The Artist as Toy-Maker: The Vicious Amusement Park of the Premillennial Baroque’, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 22.1 (January 2000), 72-75 (p. 73).

aware of the presence of other ‘bodies’ and feel embarrassed, awkward, even blush. *The Garden* addresses the uncanniness of intersubjective spectatorship, even in the absence of the live body of the artist. Like the use of familiar household condiments that the audience is never quite convinced of being bodily fluids, McCarthy’s moving figures in *The Garden* cannot fool the audience into thinking they are real, but, rather, indicate that their very presence might produce a similar response as to a real human body.

Another historical example of sculptural work with a clear and unsettling connection to the body is Paul Thek’s *The Tomb* (1967), an installation consisting of a pale pink pyramidal structure within which lay a life-size effigy of Thek, with its tongue sticking out and the fingers of one hand cut off to leave bloody stumps. It provides a similarly uncanny encounter with the body as object. In an account of first seeing the piece, art critic Robert Pincus-Witten provides a comprehensive description of the work and the feeling of encountering it:

One enters a spacious, rosily-lit and incensed haze from which rises a large, three-tiered ziggurat. [...] Passing through the short entrance one arrives at a shallow parapet, like the interior of a glass phone booth, through which one peers into the dim, pink light of the burial site of the artist’s wax simulacrum. The effigy is stretched out before us – the dead artist has been interred with unction. [...] Thek’s stringy blond locks have been casually brushed away from his forehead, revealing a dead mask, eye-lids closed, and a dark,

plagued tongue flopping upon a half-parted mouth. [...] Absolute fetishism.<sup>97</sup>

*The Tomb*, which also became known as *Death of a Hippie*, was significant in Thek's career, but the figure disappeared after Thek refused to accept it from a shipping company in 1982, 'apparently because of damage the piece had incurred in transit.'<sup>98</sup> There are a number of parallels between *The Tomb* and *The Garden* that indicate the artists' interest in the encounter with the bodily 'stand-in', creating environments in which audiences simultaneously recognise the familiarity of the human body and are potentially alienated by the abject bodies they find there. Interestingly, Pincus-Witten refers to the wax effigy as 'Thek', without needing to distinguish it as a surrogate body. Leading from Pincus-Witten's description of *The Tomb*, Axel Heil highlights the notable difference between the outer appearance of the piece, a "thing", 'a colored wooden pyramid with a ziggurat shape – the absolute form, which some leading Minimalist artists (Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, and Sol LeWitt, for instance) also used at that time so as to make clear what they were after', and the 'intense atmosphere, the colored light, the scent, and the feeling of being thrown back upon oneself in a gallery space void of people'.<sup>99</sup> For Heil, *The Tomb* is a monument to death which appears at first to conceal or obscure the body absolutely, and is associated

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Thek's Tomb... absolute fetishism...', *Artforum*, 6.3 (1967), p. 24, cited in Axel Heil, 'This Is the End – The Tomb and Its Metamorphosis', in *Paul Thek: Artist's Artist*, ed. by Harald Falckenberg and Peter Weibel (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 97-118 (p. 98).

<sup>98</sup> Matthew Israel, 'Finding Thek's Tomb', *Art in America* (November 2010) <<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/finding-theks-tomb/>> [accessed 20 January 2014].

<sup>99</sup> Heil, 'This Is the End', p. 98.

with the apparent cool detachment and clean exterior of Minimalist sculpture. Inside, however, the ‘intense atmosphere’, change in light and smell, and ‘the feeling of being thrown back upon oneself’, becoming aware of another bodily form (albeit ‘dead’), invokes a bodily, gut response. By contrast McCarthy’s *Garden* seems to be about life; the abundance of trees, grass and foliage, the cycle of reproduction and knowledge. On closer inspection however, it suggests not the flourishing of life but the deadening of nature: the foliage is artificial, the figures mechanised, continuing unquestionably in their machinic task.

Although McCarthy’s mechanised figures are not recognised explicitly as stand-ins for the artist, they perform – perhaps as all material art works do – in lieu of his presence. Thek’s figure, by contrast, very much resembles the artist, in facial features, long hair and a moustache, and for Heil ‘does not for a moment allow one to doubt that this sculpture involves a representation of a self-portrait.’<sup>100</sup> Accompanying Pincus-Witten’s article in *Artforum* was an image of Thek reclining next to his effigy in *The Tomb*, as if to confirm the likeness or, as Heil has described, ‘the artist’s confrontation with his “other self”’.<sup>101</sup> The body the artist chooses to replace himself with, however, is dead, if not biologically (having never been alive) then artistically: ‘the fingers on its right hand – Thek’s working hand’ – were cut off, leaving bloody stumps’, and leaving the artist ‘symbolically “silenced,” unable to do his work.’<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>102</sup> Israel, ‘Finding Thek’s Tomb’.

Notably in Thek's career, *The Tomb* bridged the gap between two distinct areas of practice which, as I also read McCarthy's work, indicates a similarly ambivalent attitude to the art market. Although Thek did not work in performance, in the early to mid-1960s he made objects that resembled the human body, or body parts, and often paired them with Pop cultural imagery, creating a jarring contrast of clean lines and glistening flesh. For example, his sculpture *Meat Piece with Warhol Brillo Box* (1965), a pristine 'box' with a clean exterior, conceals what looks like slab of meat, a fleshy, glistening interior (the side of the box is cut away to reveal the innards). As Matthew Israel notes, in 1967 'Thek stopped making art objects for the market (though later in his career he returned to the object)', and 'moved to Europe and embarked on the creation of groundbreaking, large-scale, richly detailed immersive environments'.<sup>103</sup> *The Tomb* brought these two practices together, and the same might be said for McCarthy's *Garden*; the latter re-introduces the body into McCarthy's work and the audience 'encounter' with the piece references the alienation of audience in his earlier performances.

Defined as an installation that invites or requires the spectator to complete the piece – as Claire Bishop has noted, the 'insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art' – to bear witness to the actions taking place, *The Garden* is also an experiment in how automata perform, and how effectively, in lieu of the artist.<sup>104</sup> As critic Dan Cameron has suggested, '[w]ith *The Garden*, McCarthy was able for the first time to transmit the ephemeral qualities of

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate, 2005), p. 6.

his performances into a permanent construction that could be experienced without the artist's presence'.<sup>105</sup> In *The Garden*, the mechanical objects perform of their own accord, even though their movements are limited. The physical labour of the artist is replaced with animatronics. Since one of the reasons McCarthy gave for retiring from live performance was the burden of physicality that live performance demands, it is interesting to note how McCarthy's pieces perform when the live act has been exhausted. How exactly can material objects and installations be said to perform at all without or in lieu of the live body of the artist?

In her article 'Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor', Rebecca Schneider discusses the economic precarity of performance and questions what happens when 'dead labor' – or 'capital which is not immediately engaged with living labor' – is reinvigorated by live performance.<sup>106</sup> In particular, Schneider discusses a protest action by Occupy Wall Street participants on 3 October 2011, in which protestors 'bloodied themselves, munched on Monopoly money, and marched on Wall Street as zombies.'<sup>107</sup> The action was symbolic since the protesters 'intended to bounce zombiness back onto those [investment bankers] who, classically, live off labor without care for infrastructural means of accountability.'<sup>108</sup> Thinking through how objects of performance might constitute dead labour, and even the body of the artist not actively labouring in front of an audience, gives some insight into how the stand-in performs in both Thek's *Tomb* and McCarthy's

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<sup>105</sup> Dan Cameron, 'The Mirror Stage', in *The Artists' Joke*, ed. by Jennifer Higgie (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 24-29 (p. 24).

<sup>106</sup> Rebecca Schneider, 'It Seems As If... I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor', *TDR: The Drama Review* 56.4 (Winter 2012), 150-62 (p. 156).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

*Garden*. Schneider states that ‘for Marx, dead capital is capital that is not in immediate use, such as the machinery of a factory in off-hours or a theatre on Monday night.’<sup>109</sup> For McCarthy this might easily refer to the mechanical figures in *The Garden*, who perform for visitors during museum opening times, and are presumably ‘turned off’ once the visitors leave. However, as Schneider notes, Marx also argues that ‘[c]apital that is not immediately engaged with living labor, or otherwise reconstituted by the circulation through the live, is dead capital.’<sup>110</sup> Seen through this lens, dead capital might be more persuasively characterised as McCarthy’s *Human Object* piece; an art work that requires the immediate engagement with living labour; to be activated, cleaned and fed by gallery visitors.

Alternatively, Schneider writes, ‘capital, once produced by live labor, can also be called congealed or dead labor’, therefore commodities are ‘congealed quantities of “homogenous human labor”’.<sup>111</sup> The objects stored in *The Trunks* represent such an example of congealed labour; the objects are valuable only insofar as they have been used during the labour of performance. Displayed variously in *Assortment* or *PROPO*, the objects are not entirely re-activated by live labour, but re-commodified and presented in new contexts. Furthermore, Schneider suggests that ‘[d]ead capital constantly depreciates’, however McCarthy manages to subvert this fate of his objects in *The Trunks* by underlining their transformation through decay.<sup>112</sup> Though they depreciate materially, rotting, growing mould and becoming more repellent or resistant to being handled, the objects appear to

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p., 156.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

gain in monetary value, continually re-displayed and eventually sold at auction. But, as Schneider states, as in theatre as well as visual art, '[i]t's the decay we love to hate', the promise of inevitable depreciation or even disappearance that we so value.<sup>113</sup> For the objects in *The Trunks* the narrative of their development and depreciation becomes part of their value, and their role in the recognition of McCarthy's work in the wider art world.

Commodities might however be defined in another way; 'the laborer, who offers "his living self" as a commodity, as a "living self" that is congealed or dead when not productively employed in generating capital'.<sup>114</sup> McCarthy, as an artist who, since 1983, no longer performs for a live audience, is potentially such an example of dead labour. Instead of presenting his 'living self' as a commodity, or in the case of earlier performances, 'producing affect as commodity', he presents the figures in *The Garden* as stand-ins, commodities or quantities of congealed labour.<sup>115</sup> Though they are the product of human labour and are congealed as such, they move as if continually re-animated, enacting their monotonous routines. Thek's *Tomb* however presents the bodily stand-in not only as a commodity but an instance of dead labour that promises never to be re-animated by the live. The body in *The Tomb* is created with explicit reference to the artist's appearance, with the fingers of the right hand cut off. The artist has not only retired from labour – but is *dead*, never again to produce commodities. Heil suggests that the process of replicating oneself, and in Thek's case, creating a 'deceptively lifelike' doppelganger, is in itself

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.



a process of closure or death.<sup>116</sup> Whilst, for Heil, '[i]t is precisely as a deception that a replica is most attractive to the viewer', for the artist, 'the work is the result of its own genesis', and thus generates the crucial question "Where do I go from here?"<sup>117</sup> By creating a figure that 'stands-in' for him in different ways, Thek creates a piece which acts as his own tomb, and enacts his own death. Fittingly, having gone through a series of retouches and modifications for different exhibitions, the figure in *The Tomb* eventually disappeared via its own eccentric process of decay or ephemerality.<sup>118</sup>

The figures in *The Garden* perform in a number of ways that reference human behaviour, but somehow exceed the limitations of the human body with machinic reliability. The sexual performance of the mechanised figures offers one such reading. Ralph Rugoff reads the piece as 'a peaceful scene: the figures hump away with soothing regularity, as if dreamily absorbed in their task – or emotionally disengaged, like your average white male'.<sup>119</sup> Rugoff's perception of the scene as 'peaceful' and the figures as 'emotionally disengaged' in the physicality of their actions is a reminder of the cultural conditioning McCarthy sought to disrupt in his earlier performances.<sup>120</sup> For audiences well-acquainted with horror film violence and gore, whether clumsily overdramatic or executed as realistically as possible, McCarthy's visceral performances point to the

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<sup>116</sup> Heil, 'This Is the End', p. 150.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Israel, 'Finding Thek's Tomb'. Heil documents the details of the maintenance of *The Tomb* and the disappearance of the figure in his essay 'This Is the End – The Tomb and Its Metamorphosis', pp. 97-118.

<sup>119</sup> Ralph Rugoff, 'MOCA's Helter Skelter and the Art of Our Times', *LA Weekly*, 4.9, 31 February 1992, 18-25 (p. 20).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

muddling of signs that occurs in the viewing process, such that ketchup is aligned with blood. Whilst this confusion of signs is conceptually intriguing, Rugoff makes a more disturbing ‘muddle’ when he confuses dreamy ‘soothing regularity’ and mechanical or objectifying sex. The mechanised figures are reliable in that they vacantly continue their performance, neither committed to their task nor capable of stopping. Neither does their task appear to have any end result, resolution or climax. For Haraway, the cyborg, as these figures might be categorised, ‘does not dream of community – the model of the organic family [...]. Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not re-member the cosmos’.<sup>121</sup> McCarthy may have duplicated himself in machine form, created offspring to carry on performing where he left, but their actions are ultimately fruitless.

Another reading of *The Garden* would imply that the figures are “fucking nature”, destroying it with thoughts only towards their own gain. Robert R. Shane suggests, using Haraway’s ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ (in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*), that *The Garden* might be described as replacing the ‘paradise of origin [the Garden of Eden] with a simulation’, such that ‘the perversity of the figures and the simulation of nature can be read as symptoms of the same cultural shift’.<sup>122</sup> ‘A symptom of the new simulated world’ is that the figures in *The Garden* do not ‘seek mates’ in the sense of requiring them for reproduction, and instead are ‘moved by a mechanical compulsion’.<sup>123</sup> Arguably though, the way in which the piece

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<sup>121</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 151.

<sup>122</sup> Robert Rand Shane, ‘Commodity and Abjection: A Psycho-social Investigation of Pop Culture Imagery in the Artwork of Paul McCarthy’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Stony Brook University, State University of New York, 2009), p. 95.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

reworks concepts of nature and culture is intimately tied to how it is perceived by viewers. In Klein's account, *The Garden* is duplicitous; the viewers' potential embarrassment on seeing the figures is tied to their subjective expectations of what one finds in art installations (assuming these expectations are convivial), and perhaps even what to expect from McCarthy's work. She describes the piece as 'pop art that has spoiled, performance art minus the performer, the movie set without the film [...], it is simultaneously repellent and seductive, repulsive and compelling. Watching the actions of these figures is the next best thing to seeing McCarthy perform in person'.<sup>124</sup> Unlike earlier works in which objects need to be animated by the artist, the figures in *The Garden* seemingly replace the artist completely. As Haraway puts it, '[t]he machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are *they*'.<sup>125</sup>

Whilst the figures in *The Garden* illustrate the dark humour of McCarthy's earlier performance works – for example in *Sailor's Meat* McCarthy fashions a penis from a hotdog which he then uses to penetrate a half-empty mayonnaise jar, the actions of an apparently overly zealous consumer – they are quite unlike the body that McCarthy presents and performs 'in person'.<sup>126</sup> In his live performances, McCarthy presented a body which was messy, volatile and affecting for his audience. In video works McCarthy presents that same abject body, but in the absence of a live audience and set behind the camera screen, the body becomes a cipher,

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<sup>124</sup> Klein, 'Rites of Masculinity', p. 11.

<sup>125</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 180.

<sup>126</sup> Klein, 'Rites of Masculinity', p. 11.

offering a confusing concoction of reality and artifice. This is perhaps most evident when McCarthy uses objects instead of his body, for example in *Sailor's Meat* he chooses to 'perform' with a hotdog penis rather than his own, and uses a mayonnaise jar as an accompanying receptacle. Using moving objects that retain only a trace of the bodies on which they were modelled – the figures in *The Garden*, for example – might well seem the next logical step in the process towards complete artifice.

Pointing to the relative success or failure of McCarthy's work to perform effectively as a replacement for the body, Shane suggests that in fact the figures in *The Garden* come 'very close to the domain of the inanimate. [...] To even call the figures animate would in some ways be a misnomer'.<sup>127</sup> Success in McCarthy's repertoire might mean that the work effectively polarises his audience between humour and disgust, and in this case, the mechanical object-body performs more effectively to this end. Failure is perhaps more difficult to determine although might, in this case, indicate that the mechanical bodies are something of a let-down compared to his performances of the 1970s. Whilst the mechanical figures in *The Garden* are restricted only to their assigned movements, as figures that reference the human body and behaviour, they are nonetheless compelling as objects that perform.

Performance scholar Erin Hurley describes her fascination with the 'madly compelling' automatons in Nathalie Claude's theatre piece *Le salon automate (The Salon Automaton)* (2010), in which Claude performs

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<sup>127</sup> Shane, 'Commodity and Abjection', pp. 99-100.

alongside and interacts with three automaton ‘guests’ onstage.<sup>128</sup> First, Hurley writes, ‘they mesmerized in their creepy life-likeness’, their visual appearance uncannily human (they even ‘had their own makeup artist’).<sup>129</sup> However, on hearing the internal mechanical workings of the figures, they then ‘captivated as technical wonders’.<sup>130</sup> Finally, on contemplating how the figures worked and were able to perform certain actions onstage, Hurley concludes that she ‘fell under their spell as performers’.<sup>131</sup> Whilst the animatronic characters in this piece prove themselves as performers, for example they ‘enliven the ailing Hostess [played by Claude] with their entertaining conversation and artistic display’, they also display their limitations.<sup>132</sup> The automata are ‘insufficient to the task of being good company. They can only ever repeat themselves’.<sup>133</sup> For Hurley, the juxtaposition of actor and automata highlights the human aspects of Claude’s performance, the ‘warmth and humanity for which she is known’, and the life-like but ultimately alienating performance of the guests.<sup>134</sup>

By contrast, McCarthy’s live performances have tended towards the alienation of his audience, often involving a disturbing implication of direct violence towards himself or audience members. For example, in *Class Fool*, McCarthy’s attempts to move amongst his audience, naked, covered in ketchup and hopping towards them resulted in the majority fleeing the room before the performance had finished. Although alienating in the sense that

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<sup>128</sup> Erin Hurley, ‘Companioned Solos: Nathalie Claude’s *Trilogie de la folie*’, *Canadian Theatre Review*, 149 (Winter 2012), 22-26 (p. 24).

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

the performance provokes feelings of repulsion or fear, they also suggest that McCarthy reaches out to his audiences in a very human way, indicating a desire to be near other bodies. Viewers in this case are asked to choose between the individual, gut instinct to flee the performance, or the acculturated respect for the performing artist to sit through it until the end.

Arguably, there is no such obligation in the gallery installation. Whilst, as Hurley points out, '[o]ne might reasonably argue that "companionship" is a meta-narrative of most solo performance', in *The Garden*, the absence of the artist allows audiences to come and go as they please.<sup>135</sup> To see the performance in its entirety might mean remaining in the gallery until the power sources of the animatronics are shut down or waiting until the mechanisms of the figures have been exhausted, or malfunction. That their performance is seemingly inexhaustible is one of the attractions of *The Garden* figures; in this way they are preferable to the human body (it absolves the artist of the labour of performing) but lack the requisite human feeling to match McCarthy's earlier performances. Instead they give a convincing performance of vacancy and emptiness. Furthermore, despite the bawdy humour of the figures humping the tree and the ground, they are physically or mechanically incapable of creating the same bodily mess as McCarthy. Their bodies categorically un-fluid, they represent, in part, a cleaned-up, gallery-permissible version of the body in McCarthy's performances, devoid of all the troubling emotional complexity – which perhaps leaves viewers wondering, 'is this it?'

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

As performing objects, the figures in *The Garden* also have an afterlife. The trees and boulders used to create the artificial environment previously used as part of the set of *Bonanza* have a history, and illustrate a trajectory that sees the objects move from one type of performance to another. That objects from mainstream American television can move into the art world is indicative of McCarthy's disregard for the categorisation of forms and materials according to genre or medium. The movement of McCarthy's practice from live performance to video, sculpture, and object-based works, as well as between and beyond these forms, makes it difficult to identify a chronological, linear development of his work. This is certainly true of *The Garden*, which, as a complex piece that might be described as an installation, sculpture, or mechanical performance, reverberates throughout McCarthy's practice, creating works that embody a performative aesthetic, and yet continually point to their status as objects.

*The Garden* was originally exhibited in Los Angeles in 1992 in a group show curated by Paul Schimmel: *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*. One of themes of the exhibition was to showcase contemporary Los Angeles artists whose work explored 'visions [of contemporary culture] in which alienation, obsessions, dispossession, or perversity either dominate the landscape or form a disruptive undercurrent'.<sup>136</sup> After the exhibition had finished (it ran from 26 January to 26 April 1992), *The Garden* was to be disassembled, but McCarthy arrived late due to disruption caused by the Los

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<sup>136</sup> Paul Schimmel, 'Acknowledgements', in *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, ed. by Catherine Gudis (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992), pp. 17-18 (p. 17).

Angeles Riots, which began on 29 April 1992.<sup>137</sup> The riots, which started in South Central Los Angeles, but spread to other areas over six days, started after a jury acquitted four white Los Angeles Police Department officers of assault, after they were videotaped beating an African-American man, Rodney King, following a police pursuit. The violence of the assault was captured on videotape, and disseminated and framed by news coverage. This process of dissemination has connections to McCarthy's interest in the mediated framing and cultural packaging of violence. His video work in particular explores 'what happens when you put a frame [...] in front of the performance and the viewer watches it through this window. [...] It allows the artist to 'hide parts' of the performance from the audience and 'control it', ultimately, reflecting 'on culture's use of control'.<sup>138</sup> The mention of the riots in McCarthy's account of retrieving *The Garden* from MOCA is one of the few references in exhibition-related material to the widespread civil unrest in Los Angeles after the show, which, in its very title purports to represent the cultural atmosphere of 1990s Los Angeles, and by extension, the legacies of Los Angeles of the 1960s. 'Helter Skelter' is a direct reference to criminal and cult figure Charles Manson, and specifically the race wars he anticipated and attempted to precipitate. Manson believed, 'and convinced his followers, that there would eventually be an uprising of blacks against whites which Manson referred to as "Helter Skelter", from

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<sup>137</sup> Paul McCarthy, 'Conservation Matters: Objects in Transition, Contemporary Voices', Getty Center, 24 January 2008, <[http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/videos/public\\_lecture\\_videos\\_audio/oit\\_contemp\\_voices.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/videos/public_lecture_videos_audio/oit_contemp_voices.html)> [accessed 29 October 2010].

<sup>138</sup> McCarthy, cited in Stiles, 'Interview: Stiles in conversation with McCarthy', p. 28.



The Beatles' song [from 1968] of the same name'.<sup>139</sup> There is a bitter irony in the name of the exhibition that seemingly cannot be resolved or downplayed. The imbalance of male and female artists and the lack of ethnic diversity in the *Helter Skelter* exhibition was also keenly noted by reviewers and critics (as discussed below), providing a broader and more unsettling context for McCarthy's piece, and particularly for how the body is subject to the violence of cultural control.

After the exhibition was finished, McCarthy recalls finding one of *The Garden* figures, the younger man, in a state of disrepair: 'the ass [and] the legs had split open', 'the shirt got pulled up', 'the arms had gotten wrapped around the head and the legs fell off'.<sup>140</sup> The rips in the soft foam and rubber figures had formed under the strain of their continual up-down movement. At some point during the show the tears had been glued back together, only to rip again.<sup>141</sup> McCarthy describes it as representing 'a real brutality': 'almost like a man who had been possibly raped and then left on the front lawn'.<sup>142</sup> Rugoff's reading of *The Garden*, and the confusion, in a rather unsettling way, of the 'soothing regularity' of the figures' movements with sexual violence is underlined here.<sup>143</sup> This figure then became a separate piece called *MOCA Man* (1992) (see Image 9), a solo, moving sculpture, removed from the forest environment it had once inhabited. The flaccid figure lies horizontally on his bed of artificial turf, this time raised up on two saw horses, clearly revealing the motorised mechanism beneath.

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<sup>139</sup> Nuel Emmons, *Without Conscience: Charles Manson in his own words as told to Nuel Emmons* (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>140</sup> McCarthy, 'Conservation Matters'.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Rugoff, 'MOCA's Helter Skelter', p. 20.

His arms are flung behind its back and crossed over, its shirt pulled up and trousers down revealing the torso and rear end that have been patched up with tape and glue. The figure's face, half obscured by the folding of its limp arms, still stares vacantly into the distance, with its now bedraggled wig only just held in place. The implication of violence in this piece is related to the figure's oscillation between subject and object, which moves back and forth according to the cultural conditions in which it finds itself. In *The Garden* it has a specific role in a recognisably metaphoric environment, but once removed from this, and disassembled from the framing of the art exhibition, it takes on a far more chilling representation of the brutalised body.

In his article 'Thing Theory', Bill Brown suggests that we take objects for granted 'because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, [and] a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts'; moreover, objects assert themselves as things by reminding us of their materiality, such that '[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us'.<sup>144</sup> Brown goes on to say that '[t]he story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation'.<sup>145</sup> In the transition of *The Garden* figure from part of a larger installation, comprised of a series of objects carefully arranged, to a damaged subject, brutalised and removed from his ordinary environment, the figure stops working as an image in a metaphorical reimagining of the

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<sup>144</sup> Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), 1-22 (p. 4).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

Garden of Eden, and becomes a thing that troubles subject-object relations. However, the figure's 'thingness' does not materialise at the moment of McCarthy's realisation of its potential to be something else (both a representation of a brutalised human figure and a new art work), but when it begins to break and wear out.<sup>146</sup> This occurs as a gradual process over the duration of the installation, and as evidenced by the glue marks and tape, the figure goes through a series of adaptations and repairs, adding further layers to its story. Like the items in *The Trunks*, these objects assert themselves as things by revealing their materiality over time. Just as the *Trunks* objects develop mould and decay, so the *Garden* figures are re-framed as new works that put the degradation of materials and the object's changing relationship to human subjects at the centre.

*The Garden* figures took on yet another configuration in the piece *Dead Men* (1992-94), in which both figures – now stilled – lay face up, stripped of their clothes, on wooden tables, as if like corpses. The figures are dirtied with mud indicating their forays into the forest and have been worn down from their constant movement against the tree and grass. Stripped of their clothes and foliage to hide behind, a large hole gapes in the crotch of each figure where the mechanisms would have been positioned. The figures have not been castrated as such since they never had genitals, nor any use for them; their representation of sexual performance is controlled by a motor and has nothing to do with desire or reproduction, but everything to do with compulsion and monotony. Whilst, as Amelia Jones has noted, the penis in McCarthy's work is 'enacted as a *removable object*',

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

for these figures, their other appendages are also removable.<sup>147</sup> In a later iteration of the piece, McCarthy removed the legs of the figures entirely and secured them upright in an oil barrel to create *Legs in Barrel* (1994). Finally, the legs from the figures were cut at the knee and covered in clay to create *Rabbit Ears* (1994), a sculptural piece that abstracts the humanoid objects, reverting back from the cyborgian machine-organism towards a human-animal pairing.

Like Thek's *Tomb*, which has been described as a 'set', 'a morphogenic model subject to shocks, expansions, and ruptures' that 'has to be constantly readjusted and refurbished,' McCarthy's *Garden* might also be described as an ongoing project requiring maintenance or tending.<sup>148</sup> *The Tomb* undergoes a series of reconstructions until its subject – the dead hippie within – eventually disappears. *The Garden* goes through a similar process of degradation but this is publicly documented in the creation of a series of new works, its figures diminishing in each iteration until they are merely 'rabbit ears'. McCarthy's recycling – or destruction – of *The Garden* as a museum piece could be seen as a stark refusal of the market economy of the art object as he continually re-uses pieces to create works of ever-decreasing complexity. This also acts as a reminder of how McCarthy's post-performance works are conditioned by performance. Even his robustly material works mimic the ephemerality (that is, the supposed *ontology*) of performance – by 'becom[ing themselves] through disappearance'.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Amelia Jones, 'Paul McCarthy's Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity' in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Dan Cameron and Lisa Phillips (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 125-31 (p. 129). Emphasis in original.

<sup>148</sup> Jürgen Ploog, cited in Heil, 'This is the End', p. 101.

<sup>149</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 146.

Alternatively, this might be a way of participating more fully in this economy, by settling with a self-destructing and commercially unviable installation, which consumes itself over the course of its public exhibition.

Whilst *MOCA Man*, *Dead Men*, and *Rabbit Ears* were made from the body parts of the figures shown at *Helter Skelter*, the installation has been re-constructed for a number of other exhibitions, including McCarthy's retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York in 2001, and the figures have been replaced, along with the motors, trees and grass, as they become damaged and worn.<sup>150</sup> Here, the idea that these mechanised figures somehow exceed the human body – performing for longer and more consistently – breaks down, as they reveal the limits of their materiality. For each time *The Garden* is shown, or restaged, McCarthy devised instructions for how to set it up, enabling him to be absent during its construction so that he 'do[es]n't really have to be there'.<sup>151</sup> Ultimately, McCarthy has produced a work that can be constructed and performed in his absence by replacement bodies. As for the figures in *The Garden*, not content with their being exhausted by mechanical movement, McCarthy continually returns them to the art world in increasingly pared-down forms: a process of re-performance and renewal which might be seen throughout his work.

The ways in which McCarthy's work from the 1970s and 1980s has been disseminated and 're-performed' across different narratives and histories of art is explored in the next chapter, which looks at the revival of significant historical performance works in the *Pacific Standard Time* festival in Los Angeles in 2012. As a conclusion to this chapter, which has

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<sup>150</sup> McCarthy, 'Conservation Matters'.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

explored the timeline of McCarthy's career from live performance to the use of objects to wider recognition in the art world, and as a bridge to the next, I discuss the themes and critical reception of the *Helter Skelter* exhibition in which *The Garden* was first shown. The reviews and critiques of this Los Angeles-centric show indicate to some extent the cultural and political context in which McCarthy's work was received and explicitly labelled as 'Los Angeles art'. As well as presenting a snapshot of contemporary Los Angeles art, the exhibition (perhaps also the critical reception it received) set the stage for a number of exhibitions and projects that sought to revisit, revise, and in some cases re-write the histories of Los Angeles art, for example: *Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960-1997* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark (1997); *Los Angeles 1955-1985, Birth of an Art Capital* at the Pompidou Centre, Paris (2006); *California Video* at the Getty Center, Los Angeles (2008); and *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980* (2012).

***Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s (1992)***

*The Garden* was installed at MOCA, Los Angeles, in 1992, as McCarthy's contribution to the group exhibition *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*. Curated by Paul Schimmel, the show featured 16 Los Angeles artists, including Chris Burden, Lynn Foulkes, Mike Kelley, McCarthy, Jim Shaw and Raymond Pettibon, whose work, as Schimmel describes, 'portrays the darker sides of contemporary life – visions in which alienation, obsessions,

dispossession, or perversity either dominate the landscape or form a disruptive undercurrent.<sup>152</sup> Billed as a showcase of artists who spanned ‘different generations, backgrounds, disciplines, and formal practices’, *Helter Skelter* was an experiment in countering dominant narratives of post-war Los Angeles art such as ‘Light and Space’ sculpture, or ‘Finish Fetish’ aesthetic.<sup>153</sup> Instead it presented contemporary art that portrayed ‘the darker, angst-ridden side of contemporary life, [which had] little in common with the stereotypes of L.A. as a cultural wasteland or a sunny dreamland of fun’.<sup>154</sup>

However, as several critics point out, there had already been challenges to this utopian vision of Los Angeles. For example, Christopher Knight notes, the ‘grim assemblages of Ed Kienholz, whose sharpley [*sic*] moralizing art is contemporaneous with the perceptual emphasis of ‘60s Light & Space’.<sup>155</sup> In his searing critique of Reyner Banham’s book *Los Angeles: An Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), published in *Artforum* in 1972, Peter Plagens suggests that Banham ‘fobs off as nutritious the same old conventioner bullshit about “freedom” (mobility, sun, sex, affluence) for everybody which bloats L.A. with eager seekers and a quick-buck

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid. The full list of artists whose works were included in the exhibition is: Chris Burden, Meg Cranston, Victor Estrada, Llyn Foulkes, Richard Jackson, Mike Kelley, Liz Larner, Paul McCarthy, Manuel Ocampo, Raymond Pettibon, Lari Pittman, Charles Ray, Nancy Rubins, Jim Shaw, Megan Williams, Robert Williams. A further nine contributed written works to the exhibition catalogue: Michelle T. Clinton, Dennis Cooper, Harry Gamboa, Jr., Amy Gerstler, Jim Krusoe, Bia Lowe, Rita Valencia, Helena Marta Viramontes and Benjamin Weissman.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Paul Schimmel, ‘Into the Maelstrom: L.A. Art at the End of the Century’, in *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, ed. by Catherine Gudis (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992) pp. 19-22 (p. 19).

<sup>155</sup> Christopher Knight, ‘An Art of Darkness at MOCA’, p. 6.

economy.’<sup>156</sup> Rather than deny or counter the mythologies of L.A.’s cultural history, Plagens meets them head on. ‘If the world’s image of L.A. is indeed “an endless plain endlessly gridded with endless streets, peppered endlessly with tacky-tacky houses clustered in indistinguishable neighborhoods, slashed across by endless freeways [...]”’, he says, ‘then the world is right.’<sup>157</sup> In the group exhibition *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles, 1945-1980* at the Pasadena Museum of California Art exhibited in 2012 (discussed in Chapter Four), curator Michael Duncan actively sought to reconnect contemporary perceptions of Los Angeles art as ‘dark’ and ‘quirky’ informed by *Helter Skelter*, with abject expressionist work of the post-war era.<sup>158</sup> This lineage, otherwise forgotten in Schimmel’s show, presents abject, figurative art as somewhat revelatory. Although, as Suzanne Muchnic notes, Schimmel had hoped ‘to round out the image of Los Angeles, not create a new, equally narrow one’,<sup>159</sup> arguably this concern with presenting an alternative, darker side to Los Angeles art reinforces the somewhat reductive binaries that govern its history.<sup>160</sup>

Schimmel was keen to acknowledge the credibility of contemporary Los Angeles artists and to illustrate that ““regional” art need not bear the burden of provincialism’.<sup>161</sup> In the process, *Helter Skelter* introduced the

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<sup>156</sup> Peter Plagens, ‘Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil’, *Artforum*, 11.4 (1972), 67-76 (p. 68).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>158</sup> Michael Duncan, *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy* (Santa Monica: Foggy Notion Books, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>159</sup> Suzanne Muchnic, ‘Art in the City of Angels and Demons’, *Los Angeles Times*, 26 January 1992, 4-5, 76-78 (p. 5). MOCA Exhibition Archive, Box 61, Folder 32.

<sup>160</sup> Cary Levine suggests that distorted discussions of art in Los Angeles ‘include a range of reductive binaries – East Coast-West Coast, utopia-dystopia, Southern California-Northern California, artifice-reality, sunshine-noir – as well as overstated parallels within the city itself, with its sprawling topography and prominent entertainment industries, and its diverse artistic production.’ Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures*, p. 13.

<sup>161</sup> Schimmel, ‘Into the Maelstrom’, p. 20.



work of contemporary artists to international audiences and the art market. As one critic put it, the ‘real purpose’ of the exhibition was ‘to fabricate a pedigree for hot young art stars who are in the process of making the transition from the gallery to the museum.’<sup>162</sup> The charge that Schimmel ‘fabricates’ a canon of young artists as a marketing ploy to promote Los Angeles art is cynical but perhaps not unfounded; McCarthy, for example, was 47 years of age at this point and had been working as an artist since the late 1960s. Furthermore, the transition of artists’ work from galleries to museum contexts implies a transition from the temporary, experimental space of the gallery to the permanency and grandeur of the museum (that is, from the presentation of performances to the production of objects) which is certainly true for McCarthy and the international recognition he attracted with *The Garden*.

The critical reception of McCarthy’s work in local and national media at the time, as well as others from the exhibition such as Burden, Kelley, Shaw, and Pettibon, further fuelled the ‘controversy’ of the show, which Schimmel celebrates as one of its successes. One reporter from Virginia labelled the work in *Helter Skelter* ‘Sewer Art’ that ‘teaches us to strive to be base’, and that the best there is to hope for in such art ‘is the perverse, the profane and the bestial’ – a strikingly (yet unwittingly) accurate observation of the artists’ interest – particularly Kelley’s – in revealing the banality and oppressiveness of contemporary life.<sup>163</sup> These

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<sup>162</sup> Author unknown, short profile of *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* exhibition, *L.A. Style*, January 1992, n.p. MOCA Exhibition Archive, Box 61, Folder 32.

<sup>163</sup> Author unknown, ‘Sewer Art’, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Richmond, Virginia, 6 March 1992, n.p. MOCA Exhibition Archive, Box 61, Folder 32.

reflections seem to anticipate Rugoff's celebration of 'rear-guard'<sup>164</sup> aesthetics in McCarthy's work, realised literally in works such as *Rear View*, and *Ass End I and II* (1972), black and white videos in which McCarthy gradually approaches the camera screen, leading with his ass, until it obscures the camera completely; and metaphorically in the work more broadly. Similarly, Plagens bemoans what he sees as art's 'regressi[on] toward adolescence', which is seemingly endemic in the show.<sup>165</sup> He points to Kelley's work – somewhat reductively – as an example of the show's inherent sexism (one in a list of criticisms), describing an 'appropriated cartoon of a housewife suffering an anally inserted Christmas tree' as part of Kelley's installation *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry* (1991).<sup>166</sup> Schimmel's aim to reconfigure misconceptions of Los Angeles art is reflected in some of the individual artists' concern with the reception of their work in this regard. For example, Kelley proposed that perhaps the most widely held misconception of his work was '[t]hat I make it to shock and outrage people, that it's just bratty'.<sup>167</sup> To the contrary, Kelley's work reflected what he saw as society's ills and, particularly in this piece, the corporatisation of culture. Similarly, McCarthy indicated concerns about the reception of *The Garden*, worrying 'that people will view this elaborate installation [...] as a perverse joke' when in fact, he states, '[i]t's a serious criticism of what

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<sup>164</sup> Rugoff, 'Survey', p. 36.

<sup>165</sup> Peter Plagens, 'Welcome to Manson High', *Newsweek*, 2 March 1992, 65-66 (p. 65). MOCA Exhibition Archive, Box 61, Folder 32.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Kristine McKenna, 'The Taboo Artist', *Los Angeles Times*, 5 July 1992, 4, 57, 66 (p. 57). MOCA Exhibition Archive, Box 61, Folder 20 'Mike Kelley, General Correspondence and Research, 1991-2'.

we've done to nature and the facade world in which we live, where people travel to Disneyland or the movies to see nature.'<sup>168</sup>

However, Plagens was correct to point to the notable imbalance between male and female artists in the show (12 male and four female), and was not the only critic to do so. Rugoff's review in *LA Weekly* focuses on dismantling the controversy of *Helter Skelter*, which he calls 'MOCA's splashy megashow' that 'avoids more issues than it confronts head on, and neglects the politics and aesthetics of race and class that might have really made the show "potentially controversial."' <sup>169</sup> Rugoff critiques the show's promise of inclusivity in representing 'L.A. Art in the 1990s', which it fails to deliver, with only two non-white artists represented – Filipino artist Manuel Ocampo and Mexican-American artist Victor Estrada – and an imbalanced gender split.<sup>170</sup> Neither can the *Helter Skelter* artists be described, as Schimmel puts it, "do-gooders", meaning '[t]here's no activist art in this show, nothing about AIDS, gay sexuality, feminism or art's commodity status.'<sup>171</sup> Whilst, as Rugoff concedes, the art in the show was confrontational to mass audiences, the work was also duplicitous, 'something innocent on closer inspection turns out to be perverse', citing McCarthy's *Garden* as a prime example.<sup>172</sup>

This imbalanced representation of artists was highlighted further by a protest at the opening of *Helter Skelter* by protest group P.I.G.s (Politically Involved Girlfriends) who distributed flyers featuring an image

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<sup>168</sup> Meg Sullivan, 'Artists describe the meaning of their works: Abstract thoughts on what it's all about', *L.A. Life*, Friday January 24, 1992, p. 6. MOCA Exhibition Archive, Box 61, Folder 32.

<sup>169</sup> Rugoff, 'MOCA's Helter Skelter', pp. 19, 25.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>171</sup> Schimmel, 'Into the Maelstrom', p. 21.

<sup>172</sup> Rugoff, 'MOCA's Helter Skelter', p. 20.

of queer icon Divine from John Waters' film *Pink Flamingos* (1972), highlighting the exhibition's narrow definition of Los Angeles culture, and pointing to MOCA's marginalisation of women artists, artists of colour, and queer artists as the most drastically underrepresented group.<sup>173</sup> P.I.G.s' main protest was with the 'token inclusion' of very few artists from these groups, and as such were careful not to call for censorship, but to draw 'attention to what gets left out of MOCA', and to appeal to visitors to '[t]hink about what you see'.<sup>174</sup> The main accusation was that Schimmel 'slices up the L.A. cultural pie by giving straight-identified white male artists the biggest piece', which 'comes as no surprise [since] Schimmel's curatorial program gives the same old picture of Los Angeles: straight-identified white males dominate and define what "community" and "culture" are'.<sup>175</sup>

Schimmel's version of 'community' perhaps speaks more clearly to the presence of Los Angeles art on an international stage, presented by renowned institutions such as MOCA, rather than realistically reflecting the different communities that make up Los Angeles culture. Under scrutiny, Schimmel's suggestion that *Helter Skelter* was conceived to recognise and represent Los Angeles artists on their home turf, and yet to export this culture to both national and international audiences (breaking with long held conceptions of Los Angeles art in the process), seems an oxymoron. This exhibition played its part in the development of Los Angeles as an international art capital, and, arguably, Schimmel's bold curatorial style has

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<sup>173</sup> P.I.G.s (Politically Involved Girlfriends), Press Release 'Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990's'. MOCA Exhibition Archive, Box 61, Folder 33, 'Helter Skelter Media Coverage 1992 March-Dec, 1993'.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

shaped the way Los Angeles art has been presented internationally (for example his *Public Offerings* [2001] exhibition and *Out of Actions* [1998] both insist upon the inclusion of Los Angeles artists alongside those from New York, Europe and Japan, in shaping narratives of performance and conceptual art of the post-war era).<sup>176</sup> However, *Helter Skelter's* inability to envisage a more multicultural picture of Los Angeles art is due in part to its institutional framing, which merely replaces one ideology (Finish Fetish/Light and Space) with another (dark, humorous, seemingly perverse art which explores violence and sexuality). It therefore encourages the continued proliferation of binary oppositions as an effective mode of characterising Los Angeles art.

Similarly, on the subject of replacing one institutional structure with another, the P.I.G.s infer in their press release that Schimmel 'obviously believes that if you are not in the nuclear family you must be in the Manson family, hence the title of his show'.<sup>177</sup> I doubt the exhibition encourages pathological readings of artists whose work transgresses sanctioned definitions of acceptability by proposing darker readings of contemporary consciousness; rather, it gives these readings a space in which to be exposed to and considered by a larger audience. However, this can only ever be true for those artists included in the exhibition. Those left out of the show who fall between the vastly different categories of 'the nuclear family' (read: an institutionalised canon of Los Angeles artists) and 'the Manson family' (the

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<sup>176</sup> *Public Offerings* explored the work of prominent young artists such as Matthew Barney, Damien Hirst, Chris Ofili and Takashi Murakami, who graduated from leading international art schools in the 1990s. The exhibition also explored the work of these artists as it came out of major regional centres across the globe, including Los Angeles, Berlin, London, New York and Tokyo.

<sup>177</sup> P.I.G.s, 'Press Release'.

chosen and notorious few selected to represent a generation of artists disaffected by 1980s conservatism) are confined to their marginalised status by continually being left out of shows that survey the scene of Los Angeles art and culture.

Although not widely acknowledged, it was noted by critic Christopher Knight that performance art was physically absent from the show, while its remnants and influence were everywhere. For artists such as Burden, Kelley, and McCarthy, performance featured significantly in their past work, and yet was not represented here; as Knight suggests, '[t]he ghost of the genre haunts the museum's galleries'.<sup>178</sup> In McCarthy's case the remnants of performance also 'haunt' the exhibition catalogue. *The Garden* was a new work, made especially for *Helter Skelter* and was presumably unfinished before the catalogue went to print. Its image does not appear in the catalogue, just a description that reads; 'Garden (working title)', '[m]ixed media; Approx. 20 x 25 ft'.<sup>179</sup> In its place are a series of photographs of props and objects from performances, including a plastic bone resting in a bowl caked in dried ketchup, a headless Action Man doll, tubs of cocoa butter, aftershave, bottles of ketchup, and a pair of fake plastic breasts resting against a lit-up mirror in a dressing room. There are also a series of photographs from live performances including *Hot Dog* (1974), *Grand Pop* (1977), and *Contemporary Cure All* (1978). For a show that focused primarily on contemporary art, the work of the included artists

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<sup>178</sup> Knight, 'The Museum as Stage', p. 85.

<sup>179</sup> 'Works in the Exhibition', in *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, ed. by Catherine Gudis (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992), pp. 178-81 (p. 179).

evidently came with some baggage: a history or perhaps an expectation of a revival of late 1960s and 1970s performance.

Similarly, in his review of the show, Rugoff suggests that *Helter Skelter* 'owes a debt to that raw, improvisatory aesthetic of performance art, a tradition that both McCarthy and Burden significantly extended in the '70s', and that the 'rude physical intensity of these performances was unmatched by anything in pop culture'.<sup>180</sup> Suggesting that 'there's been no widespread oppositional culture since [the 1960s]', and similarly in the art world, performance art has become institutionalised and fundamentally changed in the process, Rugoff finds it disturbing that the generative effect of performance art from the preceding decades have seemingly been erased in this exhibition. Knight celebrates performance art's disruption of the institutionalised forms of art and display 'as part of a larger effort to get art out of the rarefied precincts of the museum and away from the commercial imperatives of the marketplace'.<sup>181</sup> In the 1980s however, 'as the museum and marketplace together roared toward an unprecedented position in the popular artistic consciousness, certain performance strategies and imperatives were absorbed into sculpture and, especially, into installation art'.<sup>182</sup> He is positive about the introduction of performative sculpture and installation works to gallery audiences 'commonly primed for inertia', but since the history of performance art is merely implied in this exhibition, it seems that something has been lost in the translation from performance event to performative object.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Rugoff, 'MOCA's Helter Skelter', p. 24.

<sup>181</sup> Knight, 'The Museum as Stage', p. 85.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

As I have argued, perhaps a more accurate predecessor to *The Garden*, and other works presented by artists in *Helter Skelter*, is the work of Paul Thek, and particularly *The Tomb*. Heil indicates that Thek's work of the 1960s, including *The Tomb*, held little interest for curators and museums of contemporary art for selection in permanent exhibitions. Such works, 'which stood for "the sixties," were considered intellectually yellowed, politically tendentious and difficult to keep clean.'<sup>184</sup> It was, however, only after an 'effusive reception fuelled by the likes of artists as Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Jason Rhoades [(1965-2006) an artist with whom McCarthy collaborated on projects such as *Shit Plug* (2002), an installation of receptacles containing faeces collected from public toilets during the opening weekend of documenta XI] that this type of art would once again gradually ascend to first rank status.'<sup>185</sup> In this account, the recognition of works by contemporary artists in a 'megashow'<sup>186</sup> like *Helter Skelter* not only positions their work in a specifically curated context and within a history of installation art, but also entails the re-acknowledgement of older works, and in the case of *The Tomb*, a work which has been physically lost.

Whilst *Helter Skelter* seemed to be missing a history of performance by focusing closely on contemporary art in the present moment of the 1990s, Schimmel's group exhibition at MOCA, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (1998), looked explicitly at the history of performance across the U.S., Europe and Japan, as told through the objects and photographs left behind. The exhibition enacted the dilemma

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<sup>184</sup> Heil, 'This Is the End', p.115.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Rugoff, 'MOCA's Helter Skelter', p. 19.



of representing a history of ephemeral performance through objects whilst not appearing to reduce the radical, experiential nature of performance to the objects and props that are activated by or left over from the live event. In a similar vein to reviews of *Helter Skelter*, critics of *Out of Actions* focused on this inherent contradiction. Bruce Hainley, writing in *Artforum*, conceded that ‘without the body there is no performance, no object on which the body leaves its trace, its funky residues’, and yet as an exhibition about ‘what artists have done with the body from 1949 to 1979 seen through the ephemera that remain’, *Out of Actions* ‘was also problematic because the actual body was nowhere to be found’.<sup>187</sup> McCarthy’s contribution to the main show exhibition was: *The Trunks* (1973-83); photo-documentation of his video performance *Face Painting – Floor, White Line* (1972); and pages of scripts used in his performance *Meat Cake* (1974). Although none of these pieces included live performance or video works, McCarthy’s repertoire of art to date was well represented.

As an antidote to the absence of the body in *Out of Actions*, and the overwhelming presence of ‘forlorn objects’, props, videos, and photographs, McCarthy and Kelley also curated a series of live performances in parallel with the exhibition.<sup>188</sup> There is no documentation of these events in the exhibition catalogue, but the artists wrote a short text accompanying the series to introduce visitors to the exhibition. As critic Michael Rush observed, the text ‘is essentially a debunking of the exhibition’s very existence, which, according to Kelley and McCarthy [...] is an attempt “to

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<sup>187</sup> Bruce Hainley, ‘Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979’, *Artforum*, 37.1 (September 1998), 145-47 (p. 145).

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

sway the construction of the history of performance art in the direction of a materialist art-historical reading.”<sup>189</sup> This text and the accompanying performances act as a counterpoint to the object-oriented history set out in the exhibition. Inevitably, however, they miss out on the canonising process of publication in the *Out of Actions* catalogue, itself an object designed to outlive the temporary arrangement of performance remains in the exhibition.<sup>190</sup> As Rush suggests, despite the contradiction of an object-oriented institution representing a history of ‘spontaneous, low-tech, unfunded artist actions it claims to celebrate, [...] it took a museum to do it; and to do it with such style that it accommodates the iconoclastic, anti-object spirit so eloquently stated (and presented) by Kelley and McCarthy.’<sup>191</sup>

*Out of Actions* dealt explicitly with the relationship between live performance and objects, considering objects as both evidence of a performance having taken place, and as having been imbued with the performance that created them. The exhibition represented a crucial moment in performance being subsumed into a broader history of art, and significantly, one that is based in Los Angeles but has an explicitly international focus. As Schimmel suggests, writing in 1998, ‘[t]oday we are far enough away from this period [1949-79] to understand and appreciate the international relationships, broad cultural exchanges and

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<sup>189</sup> Michael Rush, ‘A Noisy Silence’, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 21.1 (1999) 1-10 (p. 2). Rush cites Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley from a printed text obtain from the visitors’ desk at the Museum of Contemporary Art, on entrance to the exhibition *Out of Actions*.

<sup>190</sup> As Schimmel suggests, ‘[t]his book is in many ways the most lasting product of the exhibition, and we hope that it will make a significant contribution to the literature of performance-based art.’ Schimmel, ‘Introduction and Acknowledgements’, p. 12.

<sup>191</sup> Rush, ‘A Noisy Silence’, p. 3.

multigenerational interactions during this extraordinarily protean period.’<sup>192</sup> If anything, however, the existing tension between the live performance event as marginal and the art object as central to the visual representation of performance in the gallery is further exacerbated by this distance. The inclusion of live performance appears to be a way of addressing this tension, but also provoking a contradiction in the different ways that exhibition audiences encounter performance as art history.

On this point, Schneider has noted that ‘[t]oo often, the equation of performance with disappearance reiterates performance as self-annihilating.’<sup>193</sup> She conveys, in her reading of Schimmel’s survey essay ‘Leap into the Void’, that ‘the orientation toward the act’, as opposed to the tendency toward creating objects, ‘is an orientation toward destruction.’<sup>194</sup> The objects displayed in the exhibition as the leftovers or remains from performances are both evidence of this self-annihilation – the disappearance of the body – and of a return of the primacy of objects in representing the output or product of artistic processes. Furthermore, these objects are imbued with a sense of agency as they traverse different periods of art history, and enable retrospective readings of the past.

Throughout this chapter I have put forward a number of claims about how McCarthy’s artistic practice usefully complicates the relationship between performance and objects, to demonstrate how, historically, one form – performance or object-based work – becomes increasingly more

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<sup>192</sup> Schimmel, ‘Introduction and Acknowledgements’, p. 11.

<sup>193</sup> Rebecca Schneider, ‘Archives: Performance Remains’, *Performance Research*, 6.2 (2001), 100-08 (p. 101).

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. Schneider looks specifically at a quotation from Schimmel’s essay in which he suggests that performance in the period following the Second World War is ‘informed by the recognition of humanity’s seemingly relentless drive toward self-annihilation.’ Schimmel, ‘Leap into the Void’, p. 17.

viable. The tension between the ephemeral performance event and material object is highlighted in *Out of Actions*, but is perhaps left unresolved and poses further questions about how performance histories can be satisfactorily revived if the artists' bodies are 'nowhere to be found'.<sup>195</sup> In the next chapter I explore further revisions of performance art history in Los Angeles through live re-performance as a way of engaging more closely with the material conditions in which performances are made and received.

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<sup>195</sup> Hainley, 'Out of Actions', p. 145.

## Chapter Four

### **Re-performance and Performance Art History in Los Angeles:**

#### *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980*

*Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980* was initiated by the Getty Research Institute with the aim of celebrating the history of post-Second World War art in Los Angeles. An unprecedented collaborative initiative, the project drew together over 60 cultural institutions across Southern California, and culminated in a series of exhibitions, performances and events in Los Angeles between October 2011 and March 2012. The project encompassed a wide range of media and art-making practices across many cultural groups active during this period, ‘from L.A. Pop to post-minimalism; from modernist architecture and design to multi-media installations; from the films of the African American L.A. Rebellion to the feminist activities of the Woman’s Building; from ceramics to Chicano performance art; and from Japanese American design to the pioneering work of artists’ collectives.’<sup>1</sup> The programme also included a ten-day Performance and Public Art Festival that took place in January 2012, and featured a wide variety of adaptations and reinventions of historical performances, as well as newly commissioned pieces that drew on the history of performance art in Los Angeles. Whilst the performance festival only occupied a small part the *Pacific Standard Time (PST)* programme, the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘General Fact Sheet’ Press Release, *Pacific Standard Time*, September 2011, <[http://www.pacificstandardtime.org/presscenter/12\\_pacific\\_standard\\_time\\_general\\_fact\\_sheet\\_3\\_6\\_12.pdf](http://www.pacificstandardtime.org/presscenter/12_pacific_standard_time_general_fact_sheet_3_6_12.pdf) [accessed 25 September 2012].

history of performance in the region appeared in a number of different branches of the project, for example: as part of a genealogy of figurative art relating to both Abstract Expressionist painting of the 1940s and object art of the 1980s; as one of many experimental practices employed by artists in the 1970s seeking to diffuse the idea of a dominant style of art making; and in expanded performance, public art and feminist projects seeking to raise awareness of and effect change in attitudes towards violence against women.

I explore the representation of performance in *PST* by looking at the relationship between the live re-performance of historical events and the representation of performance histories through non-live media, objects and documentation in exhibitions. I look at re-performance as a way of framing performance art of the past for the purposes of revising, reinforcing, or for the first time acknowledging, its place within histories of art. This argument is premised on an expanded definition of re-performance that looks beyond live re-enactment to the role of performance documentation in the reiteration of performance art and its histories. In *PST*, the process of re-performance is also inherently tied to accessing and exposing archives of performance documentation. Therefore, I look at both live re-performance and the presentation of performance documents in exhibitions as part of the same process of revisiting and re-writing performance histories, which is reflected by the aims and objectives of the *PST* project. In Chapters One to Three, I explored how the work of Paul McCarthy has been documented and disseminated, and how it circulates in the art world in various material forms. In this chapter I look specifically at *PST* as a context in which the

history and influence of performance art is reconsidered, and how McCarthy's work is positioned not just in performance but broader histories of art.

In the second half of this chapter I explore McCarthy's performance work alongside that of his contemporary, Suzanne Lacy. Both of their work was repeated across the *PST* project, in histories both specifically dedicated to performance, and more general histories of art. I address re-performance as a process of multiple, related scholarly and artistic activities through McCarthy and Lacy's work as it is represented across a number of participating institutions and public sites throughout Los Angeles. After a discussion of the cultural context of *PST* and a more detailed introduction into the concept of re-performance and how I use the term, I discuss the different modes of re-performance McCarthy has employed across his artistic career to contextualise later reiterations of his work in *PST*. I then explore McCarthy's performance work as represented in two *PST* exhibitions – *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980: From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy* and *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*. Finally, I discuss Lacy's extended performance piece *Three Weeks in January* (2012), a re-enactment of a project entitled *Three Weeks in May* (1977), which takes the public space of the city as its framework.

Lacy's historical work and re-performances as a currently-practicing artist provide an interesting, and in some ways unlikely, counterpoint to the development of McCarthy's work. Both born in 1945, Lacy and McCarthy made performances in Los Angeles in the 1970s, and were part of the same

community of artists whose work was documented and disseminated in *High Performance*. Whilst McCarthy's work developed towards object-based practices and multi-media installations, Lacy continued on a trajectory of socially engaged practice and community projects. Both artists have received significant attention from art galleries, and Lacy's live community projects have recently found support in large institutions such as Tate, as the art world extends its selective embrace of performance and live art.<sup>2</sup> Re-performance for both artists enables them to engage with the history of their own work and wider narratives of art, and facilitates an ongoing interaction with the contemporary moment. For me, McCarthy and Lacy's work offers two different, but parallel, trajectories of performance art between the 1970s and the present.

### ***Pacific Standard Time: Stated Aims and Outcomes***

One of the stated aims of *PST* was to bring the diverse history of post-war art in Los Angeles 'to the attention of a larger national and international public' via 'thorough archival documentation and interpretations.'<sup>3</sup> Presenting different strands of this history and disseminating it was one of the overarching projects of *PST*. There were also three further underlying aims: to reconsider the work of marginalised artists and their impact on the

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<sup>2</sup> Lacy presented a large interactive performance piece called *Silver Action*, involving women around the age of 60 who had participated in activist projects. Suzanne Lacy, *Silver Action*, Tate Modern, London, 20 February 2013.

<sup>3</sup> David Bomford and Thomas W. Gaetgens, 'Foreword', in *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980*, ed. by Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuck, Glenn Phillips and Rani Singh (London: Tate, 2011), pp. xviii-xix (p. xvii).



unique character of Los Angeles art; to engage with archived material, bringing into focus work that had been dismissed as anomalous to dominant styles of art-making; and to re-write the history of well-known periods in art history, offering new perspectives on the past.

The first aim was to acknowledge work by artists and groups not substantially recognised, and whose stories had subsequently been forgotten, ignored, or left out of art history. *PST* was designed to be broad-ranging but also pay close attention to individual threads of history that contribute to the landscape of Los Angeles art. Lucía Sanromán has suggested that ‘*PST* work[ed] to legitimize the art practices of those groups that have historically been considered “minorities” in the United States – such as the art of Mexican American or Chicano artists, African Americans, and queer and feminist artists.’<sup>4</sup> *PST* organisers attempted to reconcile these absences by funding projects that presented these artists centre stage in large group shows or retrospectives. Three of the most notable examples were: the work of the Chicano/a performance and multi-media art collective Asco who received their first ever retrospective, *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980*, an exhibition at the Hammer Museum tracing the legacy of African American artists working in Los Angeles between 1960 and 1980; and the influence of feminism and the significance of Woman’s Building (1973-91), a hub for feminist art practices in Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s, recognised in an exhibition, *Doin’ It In Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s*

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<sup>4</sup> Lucía Sanromán, ‘*PST* Mexican American and Chicano Exhibitions Legitimize the Periphery’, *Art Journal*, 71.1 (2012), 76-87 (p. 77).

*Building*.<sup>5</sup> All three were accompanied by substantial exhibition catalogues indicating a three-part process to their presentation: accessing and uncovering archived material; presenting art works in a prominent institutional space; and disseminating these histories, re-written into survey essays and scholarly texts.

Importantly, these exhibitions focused on individual histories but also addressed the wider cultural politics of *PST*. In particular, they tackled the precarious job of renegotiating art histories, ‘a fragile thing that requires seriousness of purpose, persistence with research, and intellectual honesty.’<sup>6</sup> This intellectual honesty encompasses a self-reflexive glance at the position of participating art institutions and their role in shaping the history of Los Angeles art. A notable example is LACMA where Asco’s first retrospective was held. In 1972 on a visit to LACMA, Gronk, one of the founding members of Asco, asked why there was no work by Chicano artists displayed in the museum. He was told, by way of reply, that there simply were no Chicano artists. Later, Gronk returned with fellow Asco artists Harry Gamboa, Jr., and Willie F. Herrón III, and spray painted their names onto the outside wall of the museum. Early the next day, Gronk returned with fourth Asco member Patssi Valdez to photograph the wall, and declared LACMA their own ‘readymade’ work of art. The action became known as *Spray Paint LACMA* (1972), or alternatively, *Project Pie in De/Face*. It is significant therefore that ‘[a]lmost forty years later, LACMA

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<sup>5</sup> *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, LACMA, 4 September – 4 December 2011; *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980*, The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 2 October 2011 – 8 January 2012; *Doin’ It In Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s Building*, Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 1 October 2011 – 21 February 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Sanromán, ‘*PST Mexican American and Chicano Exhibitions*’, p. 79.

has become the site of the first large-scale consideration of this significant yet underrecognized conceptual art group.’<sup>7</sup>

However, with this recognition comes the question of institutionalisation; Sanromán asks, ‘[w]hat happens when those narratives are brought into the mainstream, absorbed into art history, institutionalized, and legitimized? How can their outsider spirit be preserved?’<sup>8</sup> Sanromán highlights an important and potentially problematic outcome of *PST*; however, this issue is not new in wider discussions of canonisation and the cultural politics of difference. In 1990, Cornel West suggested that ‘the new cultural politics of difference [is] neither simply oppositional in contesting the mainstream [...] for inclusion, nor transgressive in the avant-gardist sense of shocking conventional bourgeois audiences’, and requires artists to reveal the operations of power at work in the contexts of their cultural production.<sup>9</sup> This ensures, however, that artists are held in an ‘inescapable double bind’, whereby they attempt to overhaul the power structures of institutions whilst remaining financially dependent on them for the dissemination of their work.<sup>10</sup> In *Spray Paint LACMA*, Asco resist this double bind by using guerrilla tactics, unsupported and not condoned by the institution. In making the piece they reveal the systems of power at work in one of Los Angeles’ mainstream cultural institutions, and the means by which they were marginalised from it; the absence of work by Chicano

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Govan, ‘Directors’ Foreword’, in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, ed. by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), pp. 14-17 (p. 16).

<sup>8</sup> Sanromán, ‘*PST* Mexican American and Chicano Exhibitions’, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Cornel West, ‘The New Cultural Politics of Difference’, in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West (New York, Cambridge, London: New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1990), pp. 19-36 (p. 19).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

artists in the museum was indicative of the invisibility of Chicano artists to the institution. Asco inhabited this allocated marginalisation and used it to create a new conceptual work through which their names were inscribed onto the outside walls of LACMA. They were neither within the institution nor fully outside of it, but occupied a liminal space between.

The anxiety of somehow neutralising the political project of Asco's work by presenting it within the institution that previously disregarded them is also tied to the precariousness of being characterised as marginal. Michael Govan, one of the directors at LACMA, argues that 'the radicality and truly experimental qualities that define Asco do not lose their impact in this exhibition, rather they resurface, bringing further attention to the strategies and methods of an art group that consistently used their images and ideas to unsettle and provoke.'<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Amelia Jones situates Asco's previous exclusion from histories of art precisely in that 'their work was in between, functioning [...] in a borderland', and particularly 'when considered against the codified theories and histories of postmodernism and contemporary art', their work just 'hasn't fit'.<sup>12</sup> As Jones writes in 2011, their work maintains this in-betweenness, it

crosses and confuses categories that remain entrenched in the dominant discourses of contemporary art; it is not simply conceptual art, nor is it just performance art, nor is it typical of the largely

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<sup>11</sup> Govan, 'Directors' Foreword', p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Amelia Jones, "'Traitor Prophets': Asco's Art as a Politics of the In-Between', in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, ed. by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), pp. 107-41 (p. 108).

affirmative identity politics-driven Chicano or feminist or  
gay/lesbian/queer practices of the 1970s or 1980s.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of *PST*, the project of which was to foreground the multiplicity of Los Angeles art, Asco's story is brought into a mainstream institution but retains something of its outsider spirit by moving across and between genres of art.

At the heart of Sanromán's concern that such narratives should retain their 'outsider spirit' is the possibility that in the wrong hands they might appear more like a marketing campaign in which the city of Los Angeles; 'its culture and spirit of youthful insouciance, its previously consistently vilified urbanism, and even its minorities'<sup>14</sup> are presented to international audiences merely as entertainment. Sanromán appeals to audiences to reflect on the seemingly contradictory process of *preserving* a radical past which has yet to be substantially represented. This critical analysis of *PST* and its strategies for presenting histories of art as previously marginalised but now centred is likely to be ongoing. A significant factor in *PST*'s contribution to the ongoing expansion and renewal of art history will be to ensure that a continuing engagement with these histories remains of central concern to researchers, curators and artists in future projects, rather than existing as one-off exhibitions. The outcome of this first objective is twofold: to reconsider marginalised narratives and bring them to the attention of a wider public; and to reconsider how art histories are presented more generally, and how audiences engage with and extend them. For me,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Sanromán, 'PST Mexican American and Chicano Exhibitions', p. 78.

*PST* offers an important model for thinking about how performance histories can be revised and represented differently for public audiences, for example, as a documentary photograph, a video, a performance object or sculpture, and as a live re-enactment. It also presents the historical work of individuals alongside broader histories of practice, such that the narratives presented influence and inform one another. Similarly, my thesis follows the trajectory of performance work by McCarthy, but also relates this to broader historical shifts in the assimilation of performance art into the art world, as I demonstrate in this chapter.

The second objective of *PST* was to engage with archival material and focus on collections of work that had fallen out of favour and did not fit with contemporary narratives of Los Angeles art, but for *PST* were refashioned into exhibitions that dealt with the nuances of its history. For example, the exhibition *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles, 1945-1980: From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy* (discussed later in this chapter) at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, presented a history of figurative art overlooked in popular narratives of American post-war art which favour New York Abstract Expressionism.<sup>15</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg kept the focus of American post-war art criticism and the art market firmly on New York-based artists, notably, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline.<sup>16</sup> Arthur C. Danto says of this period, that it

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<sup>15</sup> *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles, 1945-1980: From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy*, Pasadena Museum of California Art, 22 January – 20 May 2012.

<sup>16</sup> For example: Clement Greenberg, “‘American-Type’ Painting” (1955), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 208-29; Harold Rosenberg, ‘The American Action Painters’ (1952), *Tradition of the New* (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1965), pp. 23-39.

was ‘difficult to convey how dogmatic vintage New York art-talk was: how righteous, denunciatory, intolerant, prohibitional [...]. There was a radical insistence on the narrowest interpretation of what painting essentially is and is not, and what can and what cannot be art.’<sup>17</sup> *L.A. RAW*, not unlike the earlier project of *High Performance* as outlined in Chapter One, represented a direct challenge to New York-centric narratives of post-war American art but also to reconnect seemingly disparate art practices, including painting, drawing, sculpture, assemblages, photography, and performance art through representations of the human figure.

In connection with the first objective, this strand focuses on revisionist histories of Los Angeles art in order to correct an otherwise unbalanced history of post-war American art. However, it also departs from this model. In *L.A. RAW* many of the featured artists are well known in their own right (among those included alongside the title artists Lebrun and McCarthy are Judy Chicago, Chris Burden, Betye Saar, and David Hammons) but are brought together and exhibited for the first time under the designated title ‘Abject Expressionism’, a project that was itself only realised under *PST*. Whilst *PST* works in one vein to change the terms by which American post-war art is characterised internationally, perhaps a more significant outcome has been ‘to bring unparalleled attention to those previously buried and even vilified narratives.’<sup>18</sup> Although *PST* has provided a platform by which Los Angeles art can be recognised

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<sup>17</sup> Arthur C. Danto, cited in Michael Duncan, *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy* (Santa Monica: Foggy Notion Books, 2012), pp. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Sanromán, ‘*PST* Mexican American and Chicano Exhibitions’, p. 77.

internationally, the work it does in recognising Los Angeles artists on their own terms is equally valuable.

Malik Gaines writes that whilst *PST* offered ‘a modest change to the standard Europe-to-New-York history, [...] that proposition has mobilized a proliferation of alternate histories, many of which reflect political motivations far more radical than the Getty’s own.’<sup>19</sup> As a project that attempts to bridge the gap between initiatives to reinstate or restore old narratives and garner new and innovative research, *PST* raises questions about the visibility and acknowledgement of lost narratives and the ways in which they are re-presented to an extended international public.<sup>20</sup> Gaines proposes that a productive way of thinking about *PST* exhibitions that are based on a model of centres and peripheries is to ask ‘whether or not that spatial sense of power is indeed still operable in 2012 in a centerless city, within a postmodern, multicultural linguistic space, or under the auspices of a collaborative, networked museological model.’<sup>21</sup> Essentially a heterogeneous project that emphasises the multiple, parallel histories and voices of post war Los Angeles art, *PST* is simultaneously tied to the Getty, which acts as a centralising force on participating institutions. However, exhibitions such as *L.A. RAW*, geographically de-centred both in unveiling a history of post war art to parallel that of New York and its geographical location in Pasadena, northeast of Los Angeles, are vital to acknowledging and challenging the centralising operations of power that *PST* represents.

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<sup>19</sup> Malik Gaines, ‘City after Fifty Years’ Living: L.A.’s Differences in Relation’, *Art Journal*, 71.1 (2012), 88-105, online content <<http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=2887>> [accessed 13 August 2012].

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Phillips, Rani Singh, and Joan Weinstein, ‘Preface’, in *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980*, ed. by Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuck, Glenn Phillips and Rani Singh (London: Tate, 2011), pp.xx-xxi, (p. xxi).

<sup>21</sup> Gaines, ‘City after Fifty Years’ Living’.



The third objective of *PST* was to reconsider well-known periods of Los Angeles art history, which were reformulated and reframed to give a fresh perspective on their contribution to contemporary understanding of art from this period. For example the artistic pluralism of the 1970s – a particularly generative period for performance art – was reframed in explicitly political terms by curator Paul Schimmel in the exhibition *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art, 1974-1981* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA).<sup>22</sup> This exhibition stretched the boundaries of *PST* by extending the period of time covered by one year to 1981, and by including work from both Northern and Southern Californian artists. By exploring the diversity of artistic practices within a time frame chosen by the individual curator, Schimmel created a small-scale version of *PST* in which no one history or style dominates. The result was an exhibition that showcased the many different facets of California art of the 1970s, explicitly aligning it with the contemporary political context. Under this third objective *Under the Big Black Sun* reflects what Schimmel sees as an exciting and generative period of art making, an historical moment in which contemporary understanding of California's artistic past is rooted.

The significance of this third objective – redressing the past by reframing how we read the history of art in the present – is reflected in a statement by *PST* organisers who describe the project as ‘a collaborative act that began by documenting the past but grew into a powerful statement about the potential of the present.’<sup>23</sup> Rather than record every aspect in

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<sup>22</sup> *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, MOCA, Los Angeles, 1 October 2011–13 February 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Peabody et al., ‘Preface’, p. xxi.

detail, the organisers sought to survey ‘the main ideas, movements, and moments that shaped the era, with the goal of providing an intellectual common ground and a point of departure for anyone interested in Los Angeles’s creative history.’<sup>24</sup> In a precursor, of sorts, to *PST*, LACMA organised a wide-ranging exhibition entitled *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* (2000) that, again, ‘was not intended as an art historical survey or a selection of a pantheon of artists’, but was ‘to encourage new ways of thinking about many familiar [works and] to discover unfamiliar work’.<sup>25</sup> A new project, started in 2012 by the Hammer Museum and LA><ART (a gallery and artists’ space in Los Angeles) entitled *Made in L.A.* focused on emerging and under-recognised contemporary artists and featured an award of \$100,000 to a selected artist, who, after being shortlisted by a jury of outside curators, was put forward for a public vote by biennial visitors.<sup>26</sup> In local press, Catherine Wagley suggested that if *PST* ‘aimed to prove that important, historic things have happened’ in Los Angeles then its counterpart *Made in L.A.* ‘is out to show that what’s happening here now is important everywhere.’<sup>27</sup>*Made in L.A.*

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<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuck, Glenn Phillips and Rani Singh, ‘Shifting the Standard: Reappraising Art in Los Angeles’, in *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980*, ed. by Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuck, Glenn Phillips and Rani Singh (London: Tate, 2011), pp. 1-3 (pp. 2-3).

<sup>25</sup> Andrea L. Rich, ‘Foreword’, in *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* ed. by Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, Ilene Susan Fort (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: LACMA and University of California Press, 2000), pp. 22-23 (p. 22).

<sup>26</sup> The 2012 winner was Meleko Mokgosi, a Botswana-born painter for his multi-panel work *Pax Kaffraria: Sikhuselo Sembumbulu* (2012). Other finalists included Simone Forti, Liz Glynn, Erika Vogt, and Slanguage. Brian Boucher, ‘Meleko Mokgosi Wins “Made in LA” Mohn Award’, *Art in America*, 16 August 2012, <<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2012-08-16/mohn-prize-meleko-mokgosi/>> [accessed 24 October 2012].

<sup>27</sup> Wagley, Catherine, ‘Hammer Museum’s “Made in L.A.”: Three Artists’ Journals to L.A.’s New Biennial’, *LA Weekly*, 31 May 2012, <<http://www.laweekly.com/2012-05-31/art-books/hammer-museum-made-in-la/>> [accessed 24 October 2012].

neatly follows *PST*'s historical survey by indicating the breadth of artistic practice that Los Angeles still offers.

There is however a large gap between the end of the period covered by *PST* in 1980 and the contemporary work shown in *Made in L.A* in 2012, and an absence of over three decades of art-making. Questioned about the decision to finish *PST* programme coverage in 1980, Thomas Crow, former director of the Getty Research Institute (2000-07) who oversaw the planning stages of *PST*, suggested that after 1980 Los Angeles art became more internationally prominent, it was 'handled and discussed in a wider world of exhibitions and art discourse, whereas the earlier period fell under a vague mythology.'<sup>28</sup> In a paper entitled 'Los Angeles Art, A Dictionary of Received Ideas' that I heard him present at LACMA in January 2012, Crow directly addressed some of these mythologies. He structured his argument around four interconnected yet reductive ideas about art in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s: since Los Angeles is a sprawling city there can be no sense of cohesive artistic community, therefore the physical geography of the city dictates not only how and where artists live but also determines their art; the 'Finish Fetish' aesthetic dominant in the 1960s reflected the car culture of the city; artists working in close proximity to the Hollywood film industry are inevitably influenced by it, and subsequently substitute shallow humour for 'rigorous intellectual criticality'; and finally

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Crow, 'Pacific Standard Time: A Preliminary Conversation – Andrew Perchuk, Thomas Crow, and Howard Singerman', *Art Journal*, 71.1 (2012), 9-36 (p. 12). This sentiment is repeated in the preface to the *PST* catalogue in which the editors state that previous accounts of Southern Californian art 'tend to date the birth of Los Angeles's art scene to the 1980s – suggesting that earlier decades were empty of meaningful activity.' Peabody et. al, 'Preface', p. xx.

that the work of Los Angeles artists lacks historical weight and depth.<sup>29</sup> Rather than positing these ideas as obstacles to overcome, Crow used them as markers around which to construct a discussion about the international influence of Los Angeles art. Similarly, the markers around which *PST* is programmed, 1945 and 1980, are positioned to initiate a continual questioning of the structures imposed or inherited from art history. *PST* might be seen as a project that both attends to and begins to deconstruct the mythologies of its past.

Another reason for the 1980 endpoint of *PST* was the emergence and recognition of a network of art schools in the region in the 1980s and early 1990s – particularly students from CalArts, University of California, Irvine, and Pomona College – which highlighted the international artistic and economic possibilities of art making in Los Angeles. Implicitly, this also suggests that prior to 1980 Los Angeles offered a unique and diverse environment for making art, at least within the infrastructure of its art schools, but this was not well known to international audiences. Crow's presentation seems to suggest otherwise; namely that art made before 1980 was widely recognised but primarily through a series of constructed mythologies that circulate more easily than a realistic reflection of its diversity. After 1980, Los Angeles becomes what Howard Singerman has described as a 'generalized art system', which mimics other prominent art centres around the world.<sup>30</sup> *PST* is therefore not only a survey of the diversity of post war art in Los Angeles, but a self-conscious look at the

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Crow, 'Los Angeles Art, A Dictionary of Received Ideas', unpublished lecture, *Here and There: Artistic Exchange between Germany and California in the 1960s and 70s*, LACMA, Los Angeles, 10 January 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Howard Singerman, 'Pacific Standard Time: A Preliminary Conversation', p. 14.

expansion of the art market, channelled through some of its largest art institutions founded between 1945 and 1980: the Getty Museum (founded in 1954); LACMA in its current form (1961); the Norton Simon Museum (1974); and MOCA (1979).<sup>31</sup>

This framing of *PST* characterises art in Los Angeles post-1980 as a homogeneous and institutionally structured phenomenon, the roots of which lie within the diversity of work produced in the preceding decades. It also identifies the pre-1980 period as something of an unknown entity in relation to the supposed clarity with which post-1980 Los Angeles art is theorised. If the role of *PST* was to demystify post-war art in Los Angeles, illuminating it for an international audience, then implicitly it also further mythologized post-1980 art by accepting that its narrative has already been adequately and substantively told. Whilst the aim of *PST* was to produce a realistic reflection of Los Angeles art history, it also wrestled with the extant mythologies of this history, which might otherwise continue to dominate.

Some of the main themes of *PST* that I have discussed – acknowledging previously marginalised artists; looking to archived work to redress seemingly anomalous histories; and re-writing well-known periods of art – might be used to read the framework of *PST* as a whole or to consider each of its constituent elements. I have briefly illustrated each of the objectives above with examples from the exhibitions programme, since the narratives put forward in these shows negotiate the institutionalising structure of the art museum (acknowledging, redressing or re-framing the histories they depict). In addition, however, each of these objectives speaks

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

to the process and outcomes of re-performance, or re-enacting historical performances, as employed within the *PST* programme. More than merely repetition, re-performance seeks out a new context or lens through which to read performance art of the past such that it can inform and influence how we understand performance histories to be created in the present.

The use of re-performance in *PST* as a way of accessing these histories acknowledges the difficulty of adequately representing histories of performance in an exhibition format. It also points to the idea that not all audiences interact with performance in the same way, and as part of the *PST* programme of opening Los Angeles art to new audiences, diversity in the presentation of material was an important factor. The outcomes of re-performance, which rely in part on the accessibility of documentation, include: the acknowledgement of little-known or forgotten pieces; re-situating of performances outside their original context (and in cases such as activist and feminist performance, they may risk being de-politicised); and the further canonisation of well-known works, re-performed on the basis of their centrality to histories of performance.

Within the *PST* Performance and Public Art Festival, different modes of re-performance were employed, for example: artists re-enacting their own historical works or employing others to do so; early-career artists taking inspiration from older works to create new performances; and artist projects commissioned by *PST* to engage with the history of performance in Los Angeles. Performance art in *PST* was not, however, confined to the Performance Festival, but was also re-staged as documents and objects presented in exhibitions, and re-iterated as written narratives across

numerous publications commissioned. Within *PST*, re-performance acted to bring the history of performance art to the attention of a wider public, and to change thinking around how histories of visual art are constructed as distinct and separate from performance.

### **Re-performance**

Re-performance might be a reiteration, re-articulation, or re-enactment of an historical live performance, presented in a context other than that in which it was originally staged. Any reiteration of a performance via photographs, videos, written texts, oral re-tellings, or physical re-enactments, is inevitably a re-performance. There is however a crucial difference, as Matthew Reason has argued, between repetition and reproduction. This difference lies between the re-enactment of live events that are re-performed as live, and non-live media performances (for example video documentation) that are re-played. This distinction highlights

how the dynamic process of re-performance continues with each live performance (and is manifested in the very repetition), but has ended and ceased to be dynamic with non-live media which are not themselves repeated but instead remain the same on each replaying.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Matthew Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 20.

The way in which a performance is re-presented is crucial for understanding not only the context of its initial staging, but the implications of its re-staging in a contemporary setting. Whilst attempting to avoid prescriptive judgements as to the efficacy of different modes of re-performance, particularly between live re-enactment and mediated presentations, there are still a number of issues to negotiate.

Perhaps the most significant articulation of the ephemerality of live performance is Peggy Phelan's statement that its primary ontological condition is disappearance.<sup>33</sup> Phelan acknowledges that whilst performance documentation is possible, it may no longer be called performance as such, but instead goes under another name. Her definition of performance becomes problematic when considering how histories of performance are created and circulate via documentary technologies, allowing individuals beyond its immediate audience to ascertain how the event was produced and received. More accurately, documents of performance circulate alongside the events themselves, and documentation is therefore significant to the process of re-performance.

Addressing Phelan's concept directly, Philip Auslander has argued that performance is always already an act of reproduction, since the history of live performance and mediating technologies that record it are inseparable. Auslander states that '[i]t is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media.'<sup>34</sup> Auslander does

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<sup>33</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

<sup>34</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 40.



however distinguish between different types of reproduction based on the use of differing technologies. He uses the term ‘mediatized’ to refer to ‘mechanical and electric technologies of [aural and visual] recording and reproduction’, whereas written descriptions, drawings, and paintings of performance, although containing information relating to the event are ‘not direct transcriptions through which we can access the performance itself.’<sup>35</sup> Documentary technologies that have developed in parallel to live performance have therefore shaped the way audiences understand and interact with performance history (as argued in Chapter One, where I traced the history and influence of *High Performance* magazine). This is perhaps where Auslander and Phelan’s arguments overlap. By way of addressing the interlinked histories of live performance and documentation, in 2012 Phelan wrote of *High Performance* magazine that ‘[m]uch more than documenting the early days of performance, it helped produce the history of live art as we know it today.’<sup>36</sup>

Whether wholly reproduced in mediatized form or partially documented through text or images, the reproduction and circulation of performances through documentation is also a significant factor in the process of re-performance. Written histories play an important role in how performances are remembered, not only in writing as a means of documentation, but also in the reconstruction of histories that circulate alongside performances. As Michael Ned Holte has noted, the amount of new scholarship, exhibition catalogues, and publications produced about

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> Peggy Phelan, ‘Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral’, in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California 1970-1983*, ed. by Peggy Phelan, (New York and London: Routledge 2012), pp. 1-38 (p. 8).

*PST* is vast, and ‘will exist in perpetuity, for a much larger audience than will engage the collective effort *in situ*.’<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Reason’s suggestion that re-performance extends the vitality of live art informs my reading of how *PST* audiences receive histories of performance through live re-enactments. Since they also read these histories through non-live media in exhibitions and in catalogues, performance in *PST* occupies modes of reproduction that are multiple and simultaneous rather than singularly effective.

Phelan’s definition of disappearance as the primary ontological condition of live performance highlights, or indeed practically ensures, its disappearance from histories of art. *PST*, in its objective to acknowledge previously marginalised artists and practices, seeks to address this. In *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California 1970-1983* (one of the publications commissioned for *PST*), Phelan acknowledges this risk, which is led at times by wilful ignorance of marginal histories of performance, noting that ‘[t]he racist and sexist blind spots that have prevailed among curators, commentators, and collectors for far too long [have] done immense violence to the history of art.’<sup>38</sup> Within the diverse programme of exhibitions and events presented in *PST*, many more histories and performances were able to be reproduced due to increased funding, heightened scholarly attention, and access to large venues and prominent spaces for representation. *PST* provided the necessary conditions for this re-

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Ned Holte, ‘Critical Distance: *Pacific Standard Time* and the History of Remembering’, *Art Journal*, 71.1 (2012), 107-19 (p. 115).

<sup>38</sup> Phelan, ‘Violence and Rupture’, p. 3.

vivification of Los Angeles performance history and ensured a continuing engagement with this history by curators, scholars and art audiences.

Just as the history of performance and technologies of re-production are interconnected, so too are the documents and written histories of performance and live re-enactments in *PST*. Amelia Jones has characterised this relationship between the distinct and knowable objects of art history (written histories, documentation and objects) and the history of performance presented through live re-enactments as a ‘the conundrum of how the live event or ephemeral art work [...] gets written into history.’<sup>39</sup> Jones suggests that perhaps ‘[t]his conundrum is productively exposed in the sites where the intersection between art and the performative is activated’.<sup>40</sup> Re-performance, a process of engaging with historical material and enacting live re-performances, is positioned at this intersection. As an exercise in re-contextualising the way audiences engage with ephemeral art, the use of re-performance within *PST* is particularly significant given the influential standing of its main participating institutions.

Michael Ned Holte has described re-performance, an umbrella term for the many and varied activities of research, collaboration, documentation and physical actions towards the reproduction of a live event, as ‘a curious act of scholarship’.<sup>41</sup> He notes that the term ‘is an awkward neologism of recent currency; “re-enactment,” “remaking,” and “restaging” are also

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<sup>39</sup> Amelia Jones, ‘The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in History’, in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. by Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012), pp. 11-25 (p. 11).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Michael Ned Holte, ‘Happening Again: Reinventing Allan Kaprow’, in *Live Art in LA*, pp. 39-60 (p. 41).

imperfect stand-ins for a range of related activities.’<sup>42</sup> Determining a suitable definition of re-performance is as slippery, it seems, as that of performance, highlighting the significance of written discourses, etymology and the labelling of performance practices, which circulate alongside live events. Reason has suggested that notions of transience and ephemerality central to the definition of live performance are so because they are repeatedly articulated across a range of texts.<sup>43</sup> Phelan’s assertion that ‘[p]erformance’s being [...] becomes itself through disappearance’ works ironically in this scenario, whereby the ephemerality of performance is repeated, and thus continually re-performed.<sup>44</sup>

In 2012, Phelan revised her earlier convictions and asserted that performance ‘is not so thoroughly exceptional’ in its ephemerality, and in fact we might learn more about the ‘slow ephemerality’ of object-based arts by looking to the performativity of live art.<sup>45</sup> She puts forward a tentative argument that the ‘primary obligation [of the art museum] is not to preserve art but rather to explore and stage its capacity to be remade.’<sup>46</sup> This proposal that the gap between the immediate disappearance of live performance and our pre-occupation with documenting and preserving it might be explored more productively by making connections across art forms, speaks to the conundrum of how best to re-present live art, and the documents that circulate around them. Specifically, it encourages art institutions to reconsider how object-based artworks, as well as performances, might also

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance*, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 146.

<sup>45</sup> Phelan, ‘Violence and Rupture’, pp. 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

be ‘re-performed’ each time they are presented for public exhibition. The challenge of adequately representing the complexity of performance art and its attendant documentation, and potential for re-performance to occur through the presentation of object-based art and non-live media was addressed in the *PST* Performance and Public Art Festival, and in a number of exhibitions.

As outlined in the thesis Introduction, Amelia Jones unpicks the relationship between performance studies and art history, two disciplines seemingly at odds in their respective attitudes towards dematerialisation, on the one hand, and the rigorous, formal analysis of objects and images on the other. Jones suggests that ‘while art history, with its connected institutions and discourses [...] insists on containing the artwork as a discrete and knowable “object,” a consideration of the performative “de-contains” the work, reminding us that its meaning and values are contingent.’<sup>47</sup> This exchange between live performance and art history is perhaps most productively exposed in re-performance, whereby the objects and documents which record performance history are actively employed in the live re-enactment of a performance. ‘[A]t their most compelling’, Jones suggests, re-enactments ‘interrogate the previously accepted bases for documenting live acts’, and at the very least entail ‘a questioning of the status of the event itself both within performance and more general histories.’<sup>48</sup>

In *PST*, performance histories are revised and renewed both through live re-enactment and the representation of historical performances through

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<sup>47</sup> Jones, ‘The Now and the Has Been’, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

non-live media in exhibitions. That these two modes occur alongside each other in the same programme is significant. Not only does it indicate an awareness of the possible contradiction between presenting documentation as representative of performance histories, and then using the same documents to re-perform these histories as live events, but it also opens up multiple possibilities for audiences to engage with historical work. Representing performance histories either exclusively through live re-performance, or through documents, objects, and texts, would be limiting; a combination of both reflects more accurately how certain histories of performance exist and have persisted within histories of art (through documentation), and the ways in which art institutions might be more attendant to the specific conditions of performance making.

To return to the main aims of *PST* – to acknowledge previously marginalised work, re-invigorate archived histories, and re-frame well-known periods of art – the means by which performances are selected for re-enactment might be examined more closely. The fact of a performance having been documented, reproduced or otherwise taken up into mediatized culture does not necessarily mean it has been saved from disappearance; documents, even when compiled as a set of records or structured historical survey, are still liable to be lost, concealed, or disregarded. Similarly, the repetition of an historical performance through re-enactment indicates that the performance is in some way valuable to the narrative into which it is written; it is worth repeating, either because of its canonical status, or because its first iteration was sparsely documented or forgotten.

There is a risk, however, that re-performance might be characterised in this polarising way; either as a way of ‘saving’ performances from history where they will otherwise surely be lost, or performances that made a significant impact on audiences in the 1970s might translate poorly to a contemporary context. Holte questions whether the re-performance of historical works in *PST* is in fact a valuable process or whether it might be ‘a law of diminishing return in effect’.<sup>49</sup> ‘[W]hat is the use’, he asks, ‘of unearthing all of this history or reenacting historical performances if they are only to be missed all over again?’<sup>50</sup> The issue is not merely the act of repetition but whether this repetition opens up the possibility for multiple, even contradictory readings of these histories rather than sanctifying them further. Holte suggests that ‘[i]t remains to be seen if *PST*’s expansive networking connects all its constituents in meaningful ways across generational, ethnic, and racial gaps, or more fully entrenches those divisions.’<sup>51</sup> He points towards a related anxiety that the political significance of a live performance diminishes once it is removed from its original context and reproduced elsewhere.

The work of McCarthy, and latterly Lacy, explored in the remainder of this chapter, negotiates a number of issues around re-performance outlined above. Their work is particularly useful for thinking through the effectiveness of re-performance within *PST*, since it speaks to a number of different histories presented in the programme. For example, McCarthy’s work contributes to histories of live performance, video, abject art, and

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<sup>49</sup> Holte, ‘Critical Distance’, p. 116.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

expressionism, whilst Lacy's is included in histories of feminist art, activism, public art, expanded performances and large collaborative projects. The representation and re-performance of their work in *PST* highlights a range of re-performance activities employed by curators; McCarthy's work is represented exclusively through non-live media in exhibitions, and Lacy's through a combination of aesthetic display, live re-enactment and socially engaged media processes. On one hand re-performance is characterised as a seemingly fixed, stabilised representation of performance work through non-live media in institutions; on the other, live re-performance is a process that constantly destabilizes notions of authenticity and liveness, and engages directly with the context in which it is re-performed *as live*. Before moving to a detailed discussion of re-performance in *PST*, I will outline the varied use of re-performance in McCarthy's artistic work, to indicate how scholarship on re-performance might inform and complicate understandings of McCarthy's artistic practice.

### **Re-performance in Paul McCarthy's Artistic Practice**

Throughout McCarthy's artistic career, performance and performative gestures have been a constant. Re-performance, re-enactment, appropriation, and adaptation have also been variously employed, and include re-performing works in homage to influential artists, appropriating genres such as pornography, Disney, and Hollywood films, and employing actors from outside the art world to re-perform the works of celebrated performance



artists. Perhaps the earliest example of re-performance in McCarthy's work was *Leap* (1968), an action in homage to Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void* (1960), McCarthy performed as a student in Salt Lake City.<sup>52</sup> Although McCarthy knew of Klein's piece, he had not yet seen a photograph of *Leap Into the Void*, which depicted the artist jumping from a second-story window towards the street below. Nor did he know that the image itself had been doctored, and that the unprotected leap had never actually taken place. McCarthy's re-performance saw the artist launch feet-first from a classroom window ledge, although there was no documentation of the event.<sup>53</sup>

Whilst the image of Klein's *Leap* (photographed and doctored by Harry Shunk) circulated as the myth of an authentic event, 'the ostensible performance documented in his equally iconic image',<sup>54</sup> McCarthy's ignorance of the photograph initiated a new reading, or mis-reading, which was in turn left undocumented. Here re-performance is employed as a way of addressing a history or genealogy of performance that is otherwise unknowable. With no image to guide or dictate the action, McCarthy performs the piece in order to know it. The irony is that by re-performing Klein's *Leap* (a fakery in itself, since the image – which depicts Klein jumping from a window with nothing to break his fall onto the street below – feigns a far more dangerous act than was ever carried out – in fact there were safety mats laid out to catch him), McCarthy simultaneously

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas McEvelley, 'Art in the Dark', *Artforum*, (Summer 1983), 62-71 (p. 66).

<sup>53</sup> McCarthy has spoken of the performance to interviewers, for example, in Glenn Phillips, 'Paul McCarthy', in *California Video: Artists and Histories*, ed. by Glenn Phillips (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008), pp. 170-73 (p. 170). McCarthy's *Leap* is also recorded in the artist's list of performances provided by Hauser & Wirth <<http://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/20/paul-mccarthy/biography/>> [accessed 5 August 2014]; and is mentioned in McEvelley's essay 'Art in the Dark', p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 28.3 (2006), 1-10 (p. 1).

misrecognises it. Alternatively, McCarthy overidentifies with the image, or takes the promise of documentation too literally. Incidentally, in 1973, Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh also re-performed Klein's *Leap*, and broke both his ankles in the fall.<sup>55</sup> It is in this misrecognition that McCarthy's practice highlights the possibility for critical engagement with accepted modes of documenting and receiving the work, rather than by rote re-enactment.

Later in his career, in a collaborative video project with Mike Kelley entitled *Fresh Acconci* (1995), McCarthy hired pornography actors to re-enact five of Vito Acconci's iconic video performances from the 1970s: *Claim* (1971), *Contacts* (1971), *Focal Point* (1971), *Pryings* (1971), and *Theme Song* (1973).<sup>56</sup> Filmed in a Hollywood Hills mansion, *Fresh Acconci* weds, as Philip Monk describes, 'the genre of haunted house films to soft-core porn art direction while addressing the then-renewed interest in the (nude) body in performance art.'<sup>57</sup> Specifically, the artists suggested that performance and body art of the 1990s (referencing the work of Matthew Barney) 'performs the function of a specialized sub-cultural erotica for the artworld despite its deconstructive pretensions.'<sup>58</sup> Kelley and McCarthy hire performers from one genre to inhabit the work of a well-known performance artist, ubiquitous in the history of New York art performance. The architecture in which the performances take place however, favours the 'degraded genres of horror and porn', is itself ubiquitous within Los

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<sup>55</sup> Tehching Hsieh, *Jump Piece* (1973), 'Biography', *Tehching Hsieh* (artists' website) <<http://www.tehchinghsieh.com/>> [accessed 20 May 2014].

<sup>56</sup> Ulrike Groos, 'Fresh Acconci', in *Paul McCarthy: Videos 1970-1997*, ed. by Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), pp. 139-41, (p. 141).

<sup>57</sup> Philip Monk, 'A Twisted Pedagogy', in *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy Collaborative Works* (Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000), pp. 9-19 (p. 16).

<sup>58</sup> Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, cited in Monk, 'A Twisted Pedagogy', p. 16.

Angeles' performance industries.<sup>59</sup> Monk concludes that whilst *Fresh Acconci* 'appears to be a joke on both Acconci and contemporary performance art', it in fact 'has its own "deconstructive" aim', by equating art and pornography.<sup>60</sup> However, the appropriation of pornography also perhaps comments on or jokes about the low quality recording in Acconci's works, which became a kind of convention for photographic and video documentation of performance in the 1960s and 1970s.

Whilst *Fresh Acconci* is primarily 'understood as a polemic against the corrupted spectacle of mid-1990s performance art', Milena Tomic has suggested that 'the rise of artistic re-enactment over the past two decades calls for a renewed interpretation' of the piece.<sup>61</sup> Notably, Tomic suggests that in *Fresh Acconci*, Kelley and McCarthy illustrate a 'fidelity to failure', 'namely, a fidelity to the thematic of institutional, interpretive, and participatory failure.'<sup>62</sup> Whilst the art historical predecessor to re-performance, appropriation art, reproduces art 'as a "mere" image', re-enactment promises that the artist and audience 'enter performatively into the very scene of proposition'.<sup>63</sup> In Tomic's reading, *Fresh Acconci* 'shatters such divisions through a fidelity to the *material* it references'.<sup>64</sup> In *Fresh Acconci*, Kelley and McCarthy created a work which disregards the necessity for re-enactment to be an 'actively positive rather than passively reproductive' process, engaging critically with the context in which both

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<sup>59</sup> Monk, 'A Twisted Pedagogy', p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Milena Tomic, 'Fidelity to Failure: Re-enactment and Identification in the Work of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy', *Oxford Art Journal*, 36.3 (2013), 437-56 (p. 439).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 443.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

historical and contemporary versions are performed.<sup>65</sup> Instead they present a piece with a ‘never-ending displacement of signifying systems’, such that there is a failure of any persuasive interpretation to take root.<sup>66</sup>

Reading the piece as an adaptation or appropriation which re-performs the tropes of performance art in a new context expands the concept of re-performance beyond the art world. Significantly, Kelley and McCarthy hired porn actors to re-enact Acconci’s performances whilst they acted as directors overseeing the project. In *Focal Point*, *Claim*, and *Theme Song*, Acconci performs alone in front of the video camera, and explores his confrontational yet intimate relationship with the viewer/camera. In *Contacts* and *Pryings*, Acconci performs with a female collaborator, Kathy Dillon, whose movements he directs or responds to. In *Contacts*, Acconci stands facing the camera, blindfolded, and estimates the location of Dillon’s hand over parts of his body. In *Pryings*, Acconci makes continuous and at times brutal attempts to pry open Dillon’s tightly closed eyes. Amelia Jones provides nuanced readings of these collaborative performances in which she claims that Acconci turns his ‘masochism and narcissism outward toward Dillon (as sadism)’ merely to ‘exaggerate his own yearning for transcendence’, by suggesting that ‘it is just such an exaggeration that allows one to read these works, through their enactment of the pathetic failure of the male subject to achieve transcendence, as troubling to norms of masculinity’.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 444.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 135.

Similarly, Kelley and McCarthy exploit the sadistic tendencies of Acconci's performances by transferring them to a different context, and directing other performers. Kelley and McCarthy do not appear in the performances themselves but are credited with authoring them (under Acconci), which frames the re-performances as both an appropriation of art, and an exploitation of performers from an apparently different cultural form. The outcome, however, is not as straightforward as to equate art and pornography, but to trouble the boundaries between them and acknowledge the possibility of reframing each within the other, made possible through re-performance. Tomic's suggestion that 're-enactment has come to fill the curatorial void left by appropriation art'<sup>68</sup> is certainly relevant here; *Fresh Acconci* enables performers from different genres to move in and out of their allotted categories. Although both the original and adapted pieces are performed to camera, under these terms porn actors can be performance artists, artists can be film directors, and by extension, as per Kelley and McCarthy's argument, the work of performance and body artists can be read as art-world erotica.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout his career McCarthy has produced work in many different mediums, and a fluid artistic exchange between genres of art-making is prominent in his work. *Fresh Acconci* however refers explicitly to different modes of performance and re-performance. It references cultural histories and influences that extend beyond the masochistic, male-bodied performances of Acconci. Re-performing Acconci's works, not through his own body but through those of both male and female hired actors, McCarthy

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<sup>68</sup> Tomic, 'Fidelity to Failure', p. 439.

<sup>69</sup> Kelley and McCarthy, cited in Monk, 'A Twisted Pedagogy', p. 16.

recodes these performances according to his own cultural vocabulary, insisting that pornography stand alongside performance art.

McCarthy has never shied away from appropriating material from other cultural sources, but rather he revels in the slipperiness and manipulation of these references which variously include: Disney films; television shows; children's literature; fairytales; and Hollywood Westerns. As with *Fresh Acconci*, McCarthy's adaptations of children's literature and Disney and Hollywood films attempt to recode and re-sexualise bodies in performance, resisting the repressed and sanitized alternative reality that Los Angeles' culture industry serves up. Indeed, as Tomic suggests, '[i]f there is a single "stable" impression underlying both Kelley's and McCarthy's practice, it is that sublimation can never be allowed to take root; everything must be de-sublimated.'<sup>70</sup> In *Caribbean Pirates* (2001-05), a multimedia installation, McCarthy presents a performance environment made up of three structures, *Houseboat*, *Frigate*, and *Underwater World*, in which filmed performances are staged. The piece is based on the Pirates of the Caribbean theme park ride at Disneyland California, which leads visitors through various tableaux involving both live actors and mechanical figures, depicting imagined scenes from the lives of pirates at sea. John C. Welchman has suggested that '[t]he pirate regime represents a continuous destabilization and reinvention of the violence and desires of the body', and that *Caribbean Pirates* epitomises McCarthy's long term interest in this aspect of the male body in performance.<sup>71</sup> In video performances such as

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<sup>70</sup> Tomic, 'Fidelity to Failure', p. 444.

<sup>71</sup> John C. Welchman, 'First Mate's Bloody Flux', in *LaLa Land Parody Paradise*, ed. by Stefanie Rosenthal (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), pp. 192-202 (p. 197).

*Pirate Party* (2005), McCarthy ‘satirizes and recathects’ the repressed experiences of the pirate ‘largely ignored in the politer literature, and all but forgotten in the mannered and anodyne neo-piratism [for example, in Gore Verbinski’s film *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003)] of the last half century.’<sup>72</sup> Whilst Crow’s suggestion that the proximity of Los Angeles artists to the Hollywood film industry inevitably effects and influences their art making was meant as an overdetermined reading of Los Angeles art, McCarthy in fact embraces this proximity. Throughout his work McCarthy maintains a perverse ambiguity whereby he appears to participate in the very systems of signification (primarily, the mainstream art world and popular entertainment) that he also critiques. This is particularly evident in McCarthy’s large installation piece *WS* (2013) explored in the Conclusion, in which his appropriation of children’s fairytales, entertainment industry and art world critique converge.

By re-performing the behaviour of men isolated from society, McCarthy performs a marginalised masculinity that has been mediatized and gradually co-opted by sanitised cultural histories. His performances re-introduce violence and sexual desires to these narratives, enacting what Jones describes as a ‘desublimation’ of masculinity.<sup>73</sup> Here McCarthy offers at least two different modes of re-performance. One is the re-performance and re-coding of masculinity as portrayed historically and culturally through the role of the pirate. Similarly to his project in *Fresh Acconci*, performers whose professional roles require them to act out the sexual fantasies of their

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Amelia Jones, ‘Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity’, in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Dan Cameron and Lisa Phillips (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 125-31.

perceived audience, re-sexualise the bodies in performance art, a form seemingly distanced from pornography. (Notably, in *Fresh Acconci* Kelley and McCarthy also re-introduce that which was either ‘underplayed or absent in 1970s performance documentation – props, scripts, staging, colour, a variety of post-production effects’).<sup>74</sup> The other is the re-performance of Disney and Hollywood films, appropriating and recoding the frameworks of reality and fantasy that they represent. Both work on the idea of re-performing popular entertainment within an art world context, and specifically within an architectural fantasy space that McCarthy constructs for this very purpose. The set acts both as the venue for creating the work (the pirate performances were for-camera only), and also the venue for the presentation of the resulting videos, allowing viewers to experience the spaces in which the pirates are immersed, mimicking the artificiality of the film set and Disney ride.

Several of McCarthy’s performances have also been re-staged and adapted by younger artists. In 2000, artists Sue de Beer and Laura Parnes re-performed and updated a collaborative piece by Kelley and McCarthy entitled *Heidi* (1991), which they titled *Heidi 2: The Unauthorized Sequel*.<sup>75</sup> In *Heidi*, Kelley and McCarthy produced a six-part video performance based on the 1880 Johanna Spyri novel of the same title, retold as a coming of age story that attempts to re-sexualise or re-awaken the characters into a state of engagement with the world around them. In Kelley and McCarthy’s

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<sup>74</sup> Tomic, ‘Fidelity to Failure’, p. 439.

<sup>75</sup> *Heidi 2: The Unauthorized Sequel* was exhibited at LACE throughout December 2000. Sue de Beer and Laura Parnes, *Heidi 2: The Unauthorized Sequel* (2000), advertised in ‘Arleak, The Periodic Newsletter of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions,’ 3, 2000, n.p. LACE Exhibition Archive, Exhibition and Performance Files, 2000-08, [accessed 23 January 2012].



rendition the artists variously perform three characters, Grandfather, Heidi, and Peter, a family seemingly ‘living in harmonious relationship with nature’, but whose sadistic behaviour constantly threatens to disrupt this harmony.<sup>76</sup> De Beer and Parnes also enact familial parent-child roles but as a revisionist history in which the patriarchal model is subverted; ‘[b]y revoking Grandfather’s tyrannical status, de Beer and Parnes empower Heidi as the head of the household and cast her character somewhere between feminist discourse and the horror film genre.’<sup>77</sup> *Heidi 2*, a video performance and installation presented at LACE, was advertised as ‘not a spoof, parody or homage’, but a sequel that promised to be ‘more shocking, more glamorous and bloodier than the original!’<sup>78</sup> Alluding to the rhetoric of horror movie sequels, *Heidi 2* was accompanied by a Hollywood-style merchandising campaign including posters, merchandise, and life-sized Heidi dolls.<sup>79</sup> Significantly, Parnes and de Beer’s re-performance also draws on a Disney film adaptation of *Heidi* from 1993,<sup>80</sup> and so takes inspiration from several different sources (not unlike Kelley and McCarthy’s collaborations): children’s literature, Disney films, and contemporary performance art.

De Beer and Parnes’ re-performance of Kelley and McCarthy’s *Heidi* engages with the context in which the piece was performed by the two male artists, but also addresses the genealogy of the story itself. If Kelley and McCarthy’s adaptation is an attempt to de-sublimate Spyri’s

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<sup>76</sup> Kristin Schmidt, ‘Heidi’, in *Paul McCarthy: Videos 1970-1997*, pp. 126-33 (p. 131).

<sup>77</sup> *Heidi 2*, ‘Artleak’.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Gregory Williams, ‘Sue De Beer and Laura Parnes’, *Frieze* 52 (2000)

<[http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/sue\\_de\\_beer\\_and\\_laura\\_parnes/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/sue_de_beer_and_laura_parnes/)> [accessed 26 February 2013].

<sup>80</sup> *Heidi*, dir. by Michael Ray Rhodes (Walt Disney Video, 1993).

novel – as well as a nod to the sanitized fairytales proliferated by Disney – then De Beer and Parnes’ performance is an attempt to subvert a series of ubiquitous systems of art making and cultural production. As with the ‘never-ending displacement of signifying systems’ identified by Tomic in *Fresh Acconci*, in *Heidi* Kelley and McCarthy also seek to displace any stable meaning or interpretation of the piece.<sup>81</sup> In 1992 the artists produced *Heidi’s Four Basket Dances*, a colour video series in which Kelley performed four improvisatory dance pieces dressed as Heidi, in a full face mask, wig, and costumes of varying shades of green and pink.<sup>82</sup> Kelley described the dances as ‘attempts at interpretive representations of the formal relationships between the color of each costume and the form of the basket paired with it.’<sup>83</sup> In contrast to the investment in the content and structure of the Heidi story represented in Kelley and McCarthy’s original *Heidi* adaptation (the de-sublimation of repressed sexuality and the often damaging patriarchal structure of the family), Kelley’s description of *Basket Dances* is almost comically formal, as if the appropriation of the Heidi story was merely a ruse to think more seriously about performance art as a continuation of Minimalism. Kelley and McCarthy unsettle the meaning of their *Heidi* collaboration further by exhibiting the video pieces (*Heidi* and *Four Dances*) within the set in which it was originally filmed. The large-scale installation, entitled *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone* (1992), included the

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<sup>81</sup> Tomic, ‘Fidelity to Failure’, p. 444.

<sup>82</sup> Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, *Heidi’s Four Basket Dances* (1992), in *Mike Kelley: Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. by John C. Welchman (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2004), p. 212.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

videos as well as various props, including rubber figures and body parts used during the making of *Heidi*.<sup>84</sup> The artists seem to be presenting a full-scale, fully sensory ‘re-enactment’ of the piece for visitors to immerse themselves in, an experience intended to disorient and unsettle.

McCarthy uses re-performance as way of paying homage to influential predecessors, as an appropriation of cultural forms and narratives, as a tool for revising and ‘correcting’ cultural histories, and as a catalyst for further interrogation by younger artists. His refusal to transparently critique the modes of performance he appropriates is a productive force in his work, whereby he simultaneously destabilizes and undermines his own work by appropriating, adapting, and satirizing the work of others. Suggesting that McCarthy appropriates elements of the Hollywood film industry in his work as a result of his geographical proximity to it might seem tenuous were it not for his insistence on blurring the boundaries between mainstream entertainment and performance art. This is by no means the concern of all performance artists in Los Angeles, nor is it a lens through which to read the work of artists currently or previously working in the city, but for McCarthy’s work the consideration of his performance-making practice to other forms of performance outside the art world is essential. I have argued for a variety of modes of re-performance within McCarthy’s solo works and collaborations, and I now turn to focus on the broader context for McCarthy’s work in *PST*.

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<sup>84</sup> ‘A Selection from the Permanent Collection’, 21 May-11 July 2011, *Hammer Museum* <[http://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition\\_id/203](http://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition_id/203)> [accessed 27 May 2014].

*L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles, 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy*

An exhibition shown at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, *L.A. RAW* traced the history of figurative art in Los Angeles through 41 artists working across different media. The exhibition began with expressionist figurative painting of the 1940s and 1950s, reflecting in part the climate of angst and introspection of the post-Second World War period. As curator Michael Duncan suggests, this work then set the scene for later feminist, body-based, performance and politically-engaged work of the 1960s and 1970s, and accounts in part for the continued presence of figurative, expressionist work in Los Angeles from the 1980s onwards, in the form of abject art.<sup>85</sup> The term abject art is used to describe works – primarily sculptures or object-based art – of the 1980s and early 1990s that ‘incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food in order to confront the taboo issues of gender and sexuality.’<sup>86</sup> Critics drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, articulated in her book *Powers of Horror*, in which abjection is defined as that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’,<sup>87</sup> described abject art as ‘that which is often deemed

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<sup>85</sup> Michael Duncan, *L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy* (Santa Monica: Foggy Notion Books, 2012), pp. 11-21.

<sup>86</sup> Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones, Simon Taylor, ‘Introduction’, in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, ed. by Jane Philbrick (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), pp. 7-15 (p. 7).

<sup>87</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

inappropriate by a conservative dominant culture'.<sup>88</sup> This somewhat short-lived genre was acknowledged in an exhibition entitled *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1993.<sup>89</sup>

Duncan's central thesis in *L.A. RAW*, that the resurgence (or in his view, the consistent presence) of figurative art in Los Angeles has its roots in a localised history, is reflected in the use of humanism as a central curatorial theme. Duncan was able to connect a broad group of artists, whose practices include painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, performance, video, assemblage, and printmaking. He presented a cross-section of figurative art that developed across several generations of artists, a scene which, particular to Los Angeles, reflected all the energetic creativity of the art schools in the region.

*L.A. RAW* nuances at least two received genealogies of post-war American art. Firstly, it counters the dominance of Abstract Expressionism, which largely excluded figurative art and work by artists outside New York, then popularly acknowledged as the centre of the U.S. art world. Figurative artists working in Los Angeles were seemingly marginal on both counts, implying that *L.A. RAW* represents an eccentric or even parochial genealogy of figurative art. On the contrary, as Duncan suggests, 'Los Angeles postwar figurative artists flaunted their distance from the New York school',<sup>90</sup> and *L.A. RAW* merely reflected an accurate local heritage of figurative art.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ben-Levi, et al., 'Introduction', p.

<sup>89</sup> *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 23 June – August 29, 1993.

<sup>90</sup> Duncan, *L.A. RAW*, p. 11.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Duncan, email to the author, 12 March 2012.

Secondly, *L.A. RAW* offers an insight into the emergence of figuration as a viable genre of art in Los Angeles in the 1980s and early 1990s (the ‘abject’ art from the exhibition title), and contravenes characterisations of this re-emergence as an anomaly. Specifically, Duncan pits *L.A. RAW* against characterisations of Los Angeles art such as in Schimmel’s exhibition *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art of the 1990s* (1992) (discussed in Chapter Three), which explored ‘the darker, angst-ridden side of contemporary life’.<sup>92</sup> As both Schimmel and Duncan observe, the prevalence of abject, figurative art in the 1980s and early 1990s coincided with a resurgence of international interest in Los Angeles as a centre for contemporary art-making. As Duncan points out, however, few have connected this exploration of the darkest recesses of society and human psychology, ‘this dark, quirky art’, to other forms of Los Angeles art, such as light and space sculptures, assemblages, and geometric abstractions.<sup>93</sup> Duncan sought to shed light on the heritage of abject art by tracing a tradition of figurative art in Los Angeles.

Whilst *Helter Skelter* gave little indication of a history of figurative work in Los Angeles pre-1992, *L.A. RAW* engaged with figurative art across three decades of art-making and reconfigured it to reflect a genealogy in which performance survives (rather than becoming obsolete or less viable) alongside a number of different media. *L.A. RAW* initiated an exchange between different generations of artists, different forms, genres, and mediums, as well as addressing hackneyed dialogues in American post-war art history: abstraction versus figuration, New York versus Los Angeles. To

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<sup>92</sup> Paul Schimmel, ‘Into the Maelstrom: L.A. Art at the End of the Century’, in *Helter Skelter, L.A. Art in the 1990s*, ed. by Catherine Gudis (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992) pp. 19-22, p. 19.

<sup>93</sup> Duncan, *L.A. RAW*, p. 11.

some extent these oppositions may still dictate how art histories are written and read critically by audiences, as evidenced by the urgent project of *PST* to tell the story of American post-war art from a West Coast perspective. *L.A. RAW* was a response to the opportunity – afforded by *PST* – to renew and retell the history of figurative art in Los Angeles. For me the most successful aspect of *L.A. RAW* was its exposure of systems of signification which have sidelined Los Angeles art, and its exposure of an unidentified genealogy of figurative art, which has allowed for surprising connections to be made across different media.

The narrative of the exhibition began with the work of figurative expressionist artist Rico Lebrun (1900-64), an influential figure in Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s, whose paintings and drawings such as *The Magdalene* (1950) and *Buchenwald Cart* (1956) feature abstracted human figures and impressions of skeletal corpses, ‘often collages from fragments of drawings’, as Duncan has observed, ‘emphasiz[ing] the materiality of flesh as human essence’, which can only hint at the depth of human suffering they depict.<sup>94</sup> The show ended with McCarthy’s video performances from the early 1970s, including *Face Painting--Floor*, *White Line* (1974), *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint* (1974) and *Penis Dip Painting* (1974). Although the period covered was dictated by the scope of the *PST* programme, McCarthy’s work was used as the conclusion to a diverse lineage of figurative art that stretches back to 1945 (coincidentally, the year of his birth). McCarthy is positioned as an inheritor of figurative

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

expressionism and a progenitor of abject art, acting as a nexus of art-historical reference points for Los Angeles art.

One reading of the exhibition is that it contributes to well-rehearsed narratives which credit Abstract Expressionism and action painting as the genesis or myth of origin of performance art. In his essay 'The American Action Painters' (1952) Harold Rosenberg describes the canvas in new American painting 'as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or “express” an object, actual or imagined.'<sup>95</sup> Indeed, '[w]hat was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.'<sup>96</sup> The shift in emphasis from the material product or object of art to the movement and processes of the artist's body was also highlighted by Allan Kaprow in his 1958 essay 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock'. The essay begins with the death of Pollock not as an end-point but as a proposal for a legacy of performative gestures which brings art into conversation with everyday life. Subsequently, Kaprow predicts that artists of the 1960s 'will discover out of ordinary things the meaning of ordinariness.'<sup>97</sup>

Amelia Jones collates and complicates this history of action painting to performance art by introducing the term the 'Pollockian performative', which simultaneously diffuses the idea of Pollock as an heroic, originary artist who 'caused' this shift, but characterises his work (and that of performance and body artists who have come after him) 'as an indicator of

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<sup>95</sup> Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters' (1952) in *Tradition of the New* (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1965), pp. 23-39 (p. 25).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Allan Kaprow, 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock' (1958), in *Allan Kaprow: Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003) pp. 1-9 (p. 9).



its profound effects'.<sup>98</sup> Citing photographs and film of Pollock's painting process by Hans Namuth, Jones also indicates the necessity of documentation to the proliferation of the painting-to-performance narrative.<sup>99</sup> An exhibition at Tate Modern in 2012, *A Bigger Splash: Painting After Performance*, also reiterated and elaborated upon this logic.<sup>100</sup> It suggested that the relationship between painting and performance did not end with action painting, but that the two practices continue to influence and inform one another; Catherine Wood writes, the 'collision of the designed arena of painted space, and the reality of living or performing to camera, is a productive contamination that bleeds both ways.'<sup>101</sup> Similarly, *L.A. RAW* traced figurative representation and movement of the artist's body from painting to performance, with painting, sculpture, photography and video acting as documentation of the artists' performative gestures.

In *L.A. RAW* Duncan provides a unique historical context for McCarthy's practice in two main ways: by claiming a history of post-war figurative art specific to Los Angeles; and identifying a genealogy of performance art which originates in figurative expressionism in painting and drawing. However, whilst *L.A. RAW* traces this particular history, seemingly for the first time, it also rehearses some of the conventions of art history. One of the main objectives of *PST* was not only to expand and clarify histories of Los Angeles art as they are already written, but to actively

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<sup>98</sup> Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, p. 55.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> *A Bigger Splash: Painting After Performance*, Tate Modern, 14 November 2012 – 1 April 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Catherine Wood, 'Painting in the Shape of a House', in *A Bigger Splash: Painting after Performance*, ed. by Catherine Wood (London: Tate, 2012), pp. 10-22 (p. 22).

redress the ways in which they are circulated and received by audiences. McCarthy's video performances included in *L.A. RAW*, for example *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint* in which the artist repeatedly, and violently, swings a large paint-covered cloth around in a circle, whipping the window and wall of a studio, covering it in paint in the process, still have a powerful visceral effect on audiences. In *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint*, the window faces out onto the street, and at several points throughout the seven minute video passersby stop to watch McCarthy's exertions as the window gradually gets covered by the lashings of paint. As the artist also tires from the physical effort and the cloth becomes heavier as it gets loaded with paint, witnessing the piece – through the camera lens – becomes more disturbing. The piece seems to refer to the exhaustion of the painterly gesture, and the latent yet disconcerting violence of action painting, so lauded by modernist critics. As with many of McCarthy's performances the piece results in a shattering or exhausting of the artist's body (he performs until he tires himself out), and the unsettling of his audience's nerves.

Since *L.A. RAW* was arranged thematically, the status of video as documentation of live performance and a means of dissemination for otherwise ephemeral work is neither interrogated nor complicated by its restaging within this exhibition. By extension, neither is McCarthy's position within the history of art and performance in Los Angeles problematized but, rather, subsumed in *L.A. RAW* under the title of 'Abject Expressionism', it is reaffirmed retrospectively. When performances are historically and thematically paired with figurative work in other forms,

there is a danger perhaps of merely subsuming the specificity of performance under the chosen thematic heading.

RoseLee Goldberg has suggested that performance art can be read through documentation by employing the same techniques used by art historians, who are '[t]rained to collate visual clues with solid evidence to compile the iconography of a painting and of schools of painters'.<sup>102</sup> Whilst it may be familiar to consider performance documentation as representative of the event – in reality, performance documents provide for an extended audience a highly mediated window onto an event that has since passed – when we begin to formally analyse the image *as* performance, the specificity of the medium risks being lost. Connections between live historical performances and the representation of documentation in exhibitions should be made with caution, and with an eye to the specificity of the medium and the context in which it is reproduced. The re-presentation of McCarthy's performances in *L.A. RAW* through non-live media makes reference to historical performance-making, and places it alongside other historical art which focus on the body, but cannot re-enact the specificity of the form. Instead, *L.A. RAW* poses connections across different genres of art in which actions and processes of the artists' body are assumed, even if not explored or represented explicitly.

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<sup>102</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, 'One Hundred Years', in *Live: Art and Performance*, ed. by Adrian Heathfield (London: Tate, 2004) pp. 176-81 (p. 178). Also see RoseLee Goldberg, 'Performance Anxiety: RoseLee Goldberg on Historisizing "Live Art"', *Artforum*, 42.8 (2004), p. 54.

### *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*

In *L.A. RAW*, McCarthy was part of a lineage of figurative expressionism from the 1940s and 1950s, and as a precursor to abject art of the 1980s and 1990s. In *Under the Big Black Sun* his work is re-framed within a specifically political context. *Under the Big Black Sun* celebrated artistic pluralism and experimentation in California during the mid to late-1970s, and featured over 130 artists working across a range of media, including: documentary and staged photographs; abstract and representational paintings; sculptures, installations, and environments; performances and public demonstrations; narrative and documentary films and videos; ‘zines and posters; ceramics and models; drawings; decorative crafts and design objects. This diversity of artistic material was reflected in the scale of the project, and objects were organised in the exhibition space according to theme, rather than media, to emphasise the multiple contemporary strategies utilised by artists to address a number of issues such as: personal and cultural identity; American history, politics, militarism, ecology and the environment; urban life; mass media and consumerism; and religion and spirituality. Its curator Paul Schimmel devised the exhibition to address ‘the dynamic period in American art when modernism, characterized by a master narrative of progress and succession, reached a dead end, and a multiplicity of movements, forms, and genres began to take shape simultaneously.’<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Paul Schimmel, ‘California Pluralism and the Birth of the Postmodern Era’, in *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, ed. by Lisa Gabrielle Mark and Paul Schimmel (Munich, London, New York, Los Angeles: DelMonico Books, Prestel, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2011), pp. 16-21 (p. 16).

The exhibition included work from both Northern and Southern California, and extended the time period covered in *PST* to 1981. The rationale for choosing this period was that it was bracketed by significant events concerning two U.S. presidents from California: the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974, and the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 (Reagan took office in January 1981).

The exhibition responded to two main frames of reference for art and cultural production in the 1970s. Firstly, the lineage of Modernism, and the sequential development of movement and styles, as Schimmel suggests, became obsolete by the 1970s, and gave rise to a variety of different processes and practices. The second connected issue is the characterisation of the 1970s in U.S. history (and particularly the latter half of the decade) as an in-between period in which little of note – cultural and artistically – took place. In his book *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, Philip Jenkins suggests that many accounts of American history tracing the dissent of the 1960s (and the radical and liberal values with which the era is often connected) and the turmoil leading up to the Watergate crisis, suggest that little of cultural and political significance happened until the Reagan election victory of 1980.<sup>104</sup> Jenkins writes, '[i]t almost seems as if American history, wearied after the daily stresses of the 1960s, took a seven-year vacation after Nixon resigned.'<sup>105</sup> By contrast,

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<sup>104</sup> Jenkins cites several important studies of the 1970s: Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982); Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003); and Rolling Stone, *The Seventies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000).

<sup>105</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.

Jenkins notes, ‘a great deal of substance happens in the late 1970s.’<sup>106</sup> *Under the Big Black Sun* also attempted to counter narratives of U.S. history which align the apparent political lethargy of the late 1970s (or at least the weakness of the political left whilst the right gathered its strength in readiness for Reagan’s landslide victory in 1980) with cultural idleness. The sense of activity and movement in all directions represented within the wide range of media and practices in *Under the Big Black Sun* implies an attitude of dissent and noncompliance to a linear and containable narrative of artistic development.

Arthur C. Danto characterises the 1970s as a period of art which ‘was all but inscrutable. There were no movements, really, except what individuals were doing.’<sup>107</sup> Artistic practice was ‘pluralist in a de facto way’, given that no large theories or movements emerged to replace Pop and Minimalism of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>108</sup> Subsequently, Danto concludes, this gave artists ‘the sense that what *they* were doing was perhaps marginal, when in truth there was nothing *but* margin.’<sup>109</sup> Although exemplary of the pessimistic narratives of the 1970s characterised by Jenkins, Danto concedes that the 1970s were at least generative for feminist art and criticism. In a review of the *PST* exhibition *Doin’ It In Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s Building*, Jennie Klein has written of the necessity to counteract what she calls the ‘hipster banality’ of the 1970s.<sup>110</sup> She highlights *Under the Big Black Sun* as a positive example of an exhibition

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>107</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1992), p. 226.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 226-27.

<sup>110</sup> Jennie Klein, ‘Doin’ It In Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s Building’, *Frontiers*, 33.2 (2012), 129-36 (p. 135).

that presents a vast array of art objects in order to represent the concept of pluralism of the 1970s. At best however, this approach can only hint at the politics of the period, and at worst indicates that nothing substantial took root artistically. It was important that *PST* highlight the rich diversity of Los Angeles art; my understanding of *Under the Big Black Sun* is that it also sought to re-frame the 1970s as a period of diverse artistic practice and experimentation, with visible influence on later artistic practices.

Notably, feminist art and performance practices gained momentum in the 1970s and contradicted characterisations of the 1970s as pluralistic and artistically vacuous. *Doin' It In Public* surveyed feminist art and activities at the Woman's Building, which was founded in Los Angeles 1973 by Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. The Woman's Building was dedicated to feminist art practices, exhibitions and events, and saw the founding of the first feminist independent school for women artists, the Feminist Studio Workshop. Although this detailed exhibition, accompanied by two substantial publications, provided a timely retrospective on the influence of the Woman's Building, it was certainly not the first to recognise the 1970s as a generative period for feminist art and performance. In *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980* Moira Roth characterised performance as an ideal form for representing feminist identity and politics.<sup>111</sup> In *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* – an encyclopaedic publication – Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard differentiate feminist artists of the 1970s from women artists of the 1950s

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<sup>111</sup> Moira Roth, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980, A Source Book* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983), p. 18.

and 1960s, ‘in the deliberate grounding of their art in their socialized experience as women’, and who for the first time connected social politics and art by ‘exposing for open consideration what have previously been hidden or ignored’.<sup>112</sup> Another substantial survey which explores the relationship between art and feminism is *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, an exhibition and catalogue presented at MOCA in 2007. Both *WACK!* and *The Power of Feminist Art* sought to connect the feminist movement to contemporary explorations of feminism in art, the social impact of which, as MOCA director Jeremy Strick noted, were ‘considerably less understood and appreciated.’<sup>113</sup> To characterise the 1970s therefore as pluralistic and vacuous is to ignore not only the development of feminist art but the increasingly politicised forms of art making, a claim which *Under the Big Black Sun* sought to redress.

In the 1970s, performance art also found new platforms for visibility and dissemination, and gained a wider audience through specialist art magazines (such as *High Performance*, discussed in Chapter One), art spaces (such as LACE and Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art), and scholarly publications. RoseLee Goldberg’s landmark publication, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, which traced the genealogy of performance art as employed throughout the twentieth century by artists in Europe and the U.S., was first published in 1979.<sup>114</sup> In a 1988

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<sup>112</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, ‘Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century’, in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. by Broude and Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), pp. 10-29 (p. 21).

<sup>113</sup> Jeremy Strick, ‘Director’s Foreword’, in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. by Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge, London and Los Angeles: MIT Press and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007), pp. 7-8 (p. 7).

<sup>114</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).



edition of the book Goldberg reflects on what she sees as a period of major development for performance art, between 1968 and 1986. She notes, as does Jenkins in his rehearsal of narratives of U.S. cultural and political history of the 1970s, that '[t]he year 1968 prematurely marked the beginning of the decade of the seventies', in which political events unsettled cultural and social life.<sup>115</sup> Artists already questioning accepted premises for art began to disregard the art object, it 'being seen as a mere pawn in the art market'.<sup>116</sup> Locating the expansion of performance as a viable form in political and cultural dissent, Goldberg also notes that for many artists, economic necessities made performance art a short-lived dream. By 1972, she observes, body artists including Dennis Oppenheim and Vito Acconci tired of performance art, and began devising works with performative elements but utilised objects and environments in lieu of the artists' body.<sup>117</sup> Performance was, however, integral to the development of alternative art spaces in the 1970s, and was also, as Jane McFadden has argued, significant in the development of a number of art practices represented and explored in *PST*.<sup>118</sup>

*Under the Big Black Sun* simultaneously represented and challenged pluralism as the default artistic condition of the 1970s: 'a condition of many conditions, of diffused focus, of weakened dominance, of many

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<sup>115</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 2nd edn (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 152.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. Goldberg mentions in particular Oppenheim's piece *Theme For a Major Hit* (1975) which uses motor-driven puppets "performing" instead of the artist, and Acconci's power-fields works which focus on architecture and the built environment, for example *House of Cars #2* (1988).

<sup>118</sup> Jane McFadden, 'Here, Here, or There: On the Whereabouts of Art in the Seventies', in *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980*, pp. 248-98.

mainstreams.’<sup>119</sup> The overwhelming number of artworks on display in the gallery meant that different types of media overlapped and interrupted each other in the space, particularly sound works that could be heard throughout the gallery. For example, in a section representing performance and video art, clips of the Kipper Kids’ rowdy performances played in one room, McCarthy’s video performances *Sailor’s Meat* (1975) and *Tubbing* (1975) were projected in the next, and Jack Goldstein’s *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* (1975) roaring lion was on continuous loop and could be heard throughout the gallery. By Schimmel’s own admission the show sought not to define and contain the era it depicted, ‘but for it to remain unrestricted’.<sup>120</sup> For Schimmel, the ‘messiness of the 1970s should not be cleaned up, codified, or organized the way that previous art-historical periods have.’<sup>121</sup> In *Under the Big Black Sun*, ‘[r]ather than create new canons’, Schimmel wanted ‘to reopen the roster of artists, movements, and mediums – not just to reshuffle the deck, but to greatly expand our sense of the important artists and meaningful works of that era.’<sup>122</sup>

Although Schimmel shunned the canonical framing of his exhibition to highlight the ‘messiness’ of the 1970s, he chose instead two significant political dates (1974 and 1981) to frame this period in Californian art and cultural history. The exhibition contained direct signifiers of this context in the opening room of the show, including: Nixon’s letter of resignation of the presidency; Allan Sekula and Noël Burch’s *Reagan Tape* (1981), a montage

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<sup>119</sup> Peter Frank, ‘Plural Isms: California Art and Artists of the Mid- to Late 1970s’, in *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, ed. by Lisa Gabrielle Mark and Paul Schimmel (Munich, London, New York, Los Angeles: DelMonico Books, Prestel, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2011), pp. 22-26 (p. 23).

<sup>120</sup> Schimmel, ‘California Pluralism’, p. 21.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

of film clips from Reagan's acting career cut with excerpts from his first State of the Union address; and Llyn Foulkes' satirical portrait of Reagan, *The Golden Ruler* (1985). These works were accompanied by a montage of significant cultural events in U.S. and California history, which were also played on screens throughout the exhibition among other collections of work. This characterisation of art of the 1970s as pluralistic beyond the frame prescribed by *PST* and explicitly marked by political events, evokes Jenkins' suggestion of the malleability of historical decades, particularly those representative of 'unusual rapidity of change and the transformation of values and ideals in a very short time' such as the 1960s.<sup>123</sup> Jenkins suggests that '[t]he year 1970 is an especially implausible candidate for marking the end of an era, because so much unrest of the 1960s was peaking in that year, while critical events we think of as characterizing sixties liberalism actually occurred afterward.'<sup>124</sup> Jenkins argues instead that historical events are more useful as markers of history, and suggests that 'the sixties', as the decade is culturally recognised, began in 1963 with the assassination of president John F. Kennedy (represented in *Black Sun* in a video piece by T. R. Uthco and Ant Farm entitled *The Eternal Frame* (1975) documenting the artists' re-enactment of Kennedy's assassination), and ended in 1974 with the resignation of Richard Nixon (reinforced in the exhibition by the display of Nixon's resignation letter).<sup>125</sup>

In *Decade of Nightmares*, Jenkins resists the mythology of the 1970s as the 'anti-sixties'.<sup>126</sup> Schimmel also resists the methodologies of

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<sup>123</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, p. 5.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

containment offered by the sequential art history of Modernism, as well as the overarching framework of *PST*. The underlying initiative of both is to question how the periodization of decades frames the art and culture within them, and how they influence contemporary understanding of the divisions and development of history. For Jenkins it is to illustrate that the rise of conservatism represented by the 1980s was not established in that decade, but was in fact well under way by the time Reagan took office in 1981; Reagan's success in the 1980 election merely marked his inheritance of this movement.<sup>127</sup> As an extension of this, Jenkins argues for the necessity of looking beyond commonly drawn boundaries between mainstream politics and cultural histories.<sup>128</sup> One of the achievements of Schimmel's exhibition was the explicit alignment of artistic practices and mainstream politics, allowing visitors to resituate the artists' works within the political environment in which they were created.

In my expanded reading of re-performance as the re-presentation of documentation and non-live media in art museums, many of the works in *Under the Big Black Sun* by artists such as Eleanor Antin, Asco, Karen Finley, Nancy Buchanan, Suzanne Lacy and McCarthy, may be considered 're-performances'. Under Schimmel's curatorship, these re-performances were presented within an explicitly political framework. Whilst the alignment of artistic production and party politics in this exhibition might have been heavy-handed – visitors were clearly meant to understand each as informing and responding to the other – it indicates the difficulty of transporting historical artworks to a present-day exhibition, without losing a

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

sense of the cultural and political environment in which it was produced. As Phelan has suggested, live art ‘is not so thoroughly exceptional’ in its ephemerality, and nor is it, I would add, in the difficulty of re-presenting a piece without losing the socio-political context of its production and reception.<sup>129</sup> If galleries and museums are in the business of re-staging works of historical art for contemporary audiences, one of the outcomes of *Under the Big Black Sun* has been to highlight the effectiveness of also re-staging an historical political context in which to situate these works.

By framing objects of art alongside signifiers or artefacts of political culture outside the art ‘bubble’ – such as Nixon’s resignation letter – another outcome is that the exhibition creates a temporary environment in which the artworks presented might be read as political, and influence subsequent readings of artists’ work. Some works in the exhibition explicitly address significant political figures or events – for example, Lowell Darling’s “*Registrar of Voters’ Statement of Political Affiliation of Candidate*”, from the California gubernational race (1978), evidence of the artist’s attempt to run for state office; Robert Arneson’s *Portrait of George* (1981), a gaudy ceramic sculpture of the San Francisco mayor George Moscone who was assassinated in 1980; and Robert Heinecken’s *Inaugural Excerpt Videograms* (1981), blurred photographic images of Reagan’s inauguration created by placing a piece of photographic printing paper directly on a television screen – and their re-presentation in this exhibition re-iterates and reinforces their status as political works. Alternately, other works address the cultural politics of the period, including identity-related

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<sup>129</sup> Phelan, ‘Violence and Rupture’, p. 12.

political issues such as race, gender, sexuality, such as: Senga Nengudi's nylon mesh and sand performance-based sculpture *R.S.V.P.* (1975); documentation of Lacy's expanded public art piece *Three Weeks in May* (1977) raising awareness about sexual violence against women; and Judith F. Baca's preparatory drawings for a painted mural entitled *The Great Wall of L.A.* (1981).

McCarthy's contribution to the exhibition – his videos *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, both accompanied by photographs and preparatory drawings – came under a third category in which the political reading of an artist's work is dependent, at various points, on their identity and professional status as an artist. Early in his career McCarthy's visceral performances were received by sympathetic audiences in Los Angeles as valuable contributions to the shared vision of the democratic and politicising potential of performance art (as discussed in Chapter One in his inclusion in *High Performance* magazine; in Chapter Two in Barbara T. Smith's reception and analysis of *Hot Dog* [1974]; and in Chapter Three in Nancy Buchanan's perceptive interpretation of *Monkey Man* [1980]). With increased attention from the mainstream art world and inclusion in large exhibitions from the early 1990s onwards, McCarthy's artistic practice tended to be separated from the cultural political concerns of his earlier work. Amelia Jones has suggested that McCarthy is not alone in this characterisation, noting that 'work by the famous "straight White men" from LA during [the early 1970s], notably Kaprow, Burden, and McCarthy, was not then and is not now generally

viewed as having been politically motivated'.<sup>130</sup> In *Pay For Your Pleasures*, Cary Levine explicitly realigns McCarthy's performance work of the 1970s with cultural politics of gender, sexuality, and identity-motivated counter cultures, perhaps indicating a resurgence in renewing readings of work from this era.<sup>131</sup>

In *L.A. RAW* McCarthy is positioned both as an inheritor (or a bookend, mirrored by Lebrun) to figurative expressionism in Los Angeles, and the progenitor of abject art. In *Under the Big Black Sun*, McCarthy is merely one of many artists chosen to represent this productive artistic and political period in California history. *Under the Big Black Sun* might be characterised as a microcosm of the larger *PST* programme, in that it attempted the ambitious goal of representing a multitude of artists and movements of California art. Documentation of *Tubbing* and *Sailor's Meat* are included in the latter because of their significance to the history the exhibition presents, but in the process are also party to a revised reading as part of a collective political moment. Re-performed here as repetition through non-live media, McCarthy's work is re-politicised, but only in communication with the work of other artists from the period. This is particularly significant in an exhibition where the voices of the many are valued collectively over that of an individual. The irony of the show being presided over and attributed primarily to the vision of one individual, its curator Schimmel, also reflects *PST* more broadly – as a project with

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<sup>130</sup> Amelia Jones, 'Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Los Angeles Performance Art in Art History', in *Live Art in LA: Performance In Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. by Peggy Phelan (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 115-84, (p. 129).

<sup>131</sup> Cary Levine, *Pay For Your Pleasures: Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

multiple strands to attend to the diversity of Los Angeles art history, but which is centralised primarily around the Getty.

The inclusion of McCarthy's work in several different *PST* exhibitions indicates the importance of his work to a number of different histories of art in Los Angeles. The diversity and flexibility of his practice enables his work to be subsumed into different narratives, performance among them, and acts as a useful tool for curators to connect seemingly disparate generations of artists and modes of practice.

McCarthy's work in *PST* is useful for thinking more carefully about how exhibitions can influence readings of performance history (for example, by attempting to re-politicise works perhaps previously overlooked), but it is also limited. With no contribution to the live re-enactment of performances at *PST*, McCarthy's work remains firmly within the bounds of art museums. In the final section of this chapter I look to the work of Suzanne Lacy, whose large-scale project *Three Weeks in January* (2012) provides a persuasive model for the aesthetic and socio-political efficacy of re-performance within and outside the art world. The project uses re-performance to bridge the gap between the presentation of documentation in galleries and live re-enactments which engage with and even change the environment of the city. My exploration of Lacy's work highlights the limitations of McCarthy performance practice – or rather, its representation or dissemination after his retirement from live work – and its secure positioning within histories of performance and visual art. In *Three Weeks in January* Lacy utilises multiple archival and performance-related activities in tandem with visual displays, to create an exemplary model for



re-performance that addresses both the historical and contemporary context of the work, and extends the political potential of performance beyond the art world.

***PST Performance and Public Art Festival & Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in January (2012)***

Suzanne Lacy is an internationally-known artist whose work spans installation, video, and large-scale performances across a range of themes under feminist, activist and socially engaged artistic practices. A key figure in the development of West Coast feminist art and performance, Lacy has been making work since the 1970s. She is perhaps best known for her collaborative projects and expanded media performances, often involving the participation and mobilisation of large groups of individuals, and addressing issues of contemporary social and political concern. For example *Three Weeks in May* (1977) and *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977) (both in collaboration with Leslie Labowitz) focused on raising awareness of violence against women and using local media to reach wider audiences and to expose hidden themes of violence in mainstream media. In Minneapolis in 1987, Lacy organised a gathering of 430 women over the age of 60 to share their views on getting older. The conversations were recorded and the resulting documentation, *The Crystal Quilt* (1987), was broadcast on live television; it was re-performed at Tate Modern in London in 2013 as *Silver*

*Action*, demonstrating that re-performance is an established method for Lacy.

Lacy characterises her practice as ‘New Genre Public Art’, defining it in terms of ‘a socially engaged, interactive cultural practice that deploys a range of traditional and nontraditional media in public spaces for public audiences, intersecting activism, education, and theory’.<sup>132</sup> This interdisciplinary practice was inspired by the women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s, by art and performance of feminist artists, particularly her mentor at California State University, Fresno, Judy Chicago, and by the conceptual performances of Allan Kaprow (whom she studied under at CalArts).<sup>133</sup> Lacy’s work borders the line between art and life, continually questioning how one impacts the other, and significantly, whether it can be an effective pairing. As Sharon Irish notes, New Genre Public Art ‘captures [Lacy’s] commitment to insert art into the public arena, [...] and it is a flexible phrase that allows what is “new” to change over time.’<sup>134</sup> This flexible approach to the changing contexts in which her work is presented is key to the cultural impact of Lacy’s projects, and to re-performance of historical works in a contemporary environment, such as *Three Weeks in January* (2012), which was a re-staging of Lacy’s project *Three Weeks in May* (1977).

The *PST Performance and Public Art Festival*, for which *Three Weeks in January* was commissioned, featured a series of adaptations and

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<sup>132</sup> Suzanne Lacy, cited in Vivien Green Fryd, ‘Suzanne Lacy’s Three Weeks in May: Feminist Activist Performance Art as “Expanded Public Pedagogy”’, *NWSA Journal*, 19.1 (2007), 23-38 (p. 23).

<sup>133</sup> Green Fryd, ‘Suzanne Lacy’s Three Weeks in May’, p. 23.

<sup>134</sup> Sharon Irish, *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 4. Emphasis in original.

reinventions of performances from the 1970s, and new pieces which in many cases were also inspired by work from the 1970s. The objective was to celebrate the history of work by performance artists in Los Angeles through the contemporary lens of recreation, reinvention, and inspiration. Alongside an exhibition entitled *Los Angeles Goes Live: Performance Art in Southern California 1970-1983* featuring documentation and performance ephemera from artists such as Kaprow, Burden, Barbara T. Smith, Asco, and Johanna Went, LACE commissioned contemporary artists to devise new performances that engaged with historical art works. Artist Liz Glynn designed a performance platform entitled *Spirit Resurrection* (2012) that enabled contemporary artists to re-enact pieces from the *Public Spirit* festival in 1980 (discussed in Chapter One); Heather Cassils developed a durational performance entitled *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011) based on two seminal works, Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) and Linda Benglis' exhibition advertisement in *Artforum* in 1974; and Dorian Wood made historical connections between the work of Asco, cross-dressing performance artist Cyclona (Robert Legorreta), artist Ron Athey, musician Rozz Williams and the underground club scene of the early 1980s in his outdoor performance/installation piece *Atcho, or the Renaissance of Faggot Tree* (2011). By encouraging artists to develop as many different modes of re-performance as possible at sites across the city, including art galleries, museum courtyards, car parks, and warehouses, organisers hoped to avoid a prescriptive 'one way' of engaging with performance history.<sup>135</sup> In this way the Performance Festival reflected the

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<sup>135</sup> Phillips, 'Performance Art in Southern California', 5 February 2012.

wider objective of *PST* in presenting a complex and multifaceted history of artistic practice, subsumed under the heading of ‘Los Angeles art’.

Writing in 2002, performance scholar Meiling Cheng suggested that performance art in Los Angeles had in fact come to emulate the city’s ‘multicentric’ geography by being active in multiple localities and communities while remaining consistently at the edge of the cultural mainstream.<sup>136</sup> For Cheng, performance remains productive by its association with these margins, and by extension, marginal cultures.<sup>137</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s however, performance art in Los Angeles had gone through what Cheng calls a process of centring and could now add another identifiable centre to its list of multiple localities: ‘in the center for canonization in art history.’<sup>138</sup> In particular she notes that the exhibition *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object* (1998) presented at MOCA (discussed in Chapter Three), which surveyed the history of performance art through material objects and documentation, was pivotal in this process of centralisation and canonisation. It is at this point perhaps that performance art is acknowledged as a credible and respected art form, ‘recognized as a staple in the local art and culture diets.’<sup>139</sup> Particularly for artists like McCarthy, *Out of Actions* provided a large institutional platform for the visibility of his work in Los Angeles, and internationally for his contribution to the history and development of performance art. Cheng’s concerns, however, point towards performance practices that thrive by

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<sup>136</sup> Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art*, Berkeley (Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 16.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

existing outside and between institutions in multiple, ephemeral and shifting localities, often refusing to be contained in easily defined terms. It is perhaps inaccurate to say that performance art has lost something of its identity by being presented in large institutions, given the visibility that performance, among other histories too easily disregarded as ephemeral, context-specific and unreproducible, has been afforded in the *PST* programme. There are perhaps more nuanced ways of exploring how the ‘centering’ of performance art in Los Angeles – not only through documentation and objects presented in exhibitions but through the commissioning of live re-performance projects – has enabled a closer understanding of its position in art history, and its influence on the way that art is presented more broadly. *PST* does not in effect attempt to prove the ‘best way’ (most authentic to the content, materiality and context-specificity of the original) of re-presenting performance history but to provide different access points, in different localities, through which the work can be engaged with.

One of the strongest projects in the *PST* programme to illustrate this approach was Lacy’s *Three Weeks in January* in which live events, public talks, workshops and exhibitions were presented alongside and in conversation with documentation from the original project. In the context of re-performance in the art world, and particularly for *PST*, the ‘successful’ re-enactment of such a project, to employ Amelia Jones’ suggestion, might be used to ‘interrogate the previously accepted bases for documenting live acts’, such that ‘the mere fact of performing a historical or artistic event *again*’ leads to ‘a questioning of the status of the event itself both within

performance and more general histories'.<sup>140</sup> However, it is clear that the aims and outcomes of Lacy's project are far broader than the art world, and although she is sceptical about the measurable social efficacy of art,<sup>141</sup> the project ultimately hopes to influence the socio-political environment of Los Angeles by changing attitudes towards rape and violence against women.

In 1977, just after Los Angeles had been labelled by the media as 'Rape Capitol of the Nation',<sup>142</sup> Lacy organised *Three Weeks in May* in order to raise awareness of the frequency of violent sexual assaults on women in the city and 'to break down the myths that support the rape culture.'<sup>143</sup> The project included performances and installations – such as *She Who Would Fly* (1977) with artist collaborators Nancy Angelo, Laurel Klick, Melissa Hoffman and Cheryl Williams, and *Myths of Rape* (1977) organised by Leslie Labowitz – as well as non-art events such as speeches, radio interviews, speak-outs and self-defence workshops. Using data collected daily throughout the three week period from the Los Angeles Police Department central office, the artists stencilled the word RAPE in red paint onto a map of the city, highlighting the locations where attacks had been reported. A further nine stamps in lighter pink paint were applied around the first to indicate that for every rape that was reported, a further nine went unreported. The large map was displayed in a City Mall in downtown Los Angeles, a purposefully public space which could be viewed

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<sup>140</sup> Jones, 'The Now and the Has Been', p. 17. Emphasis in original.

<sup>141</sup> Paul David Young, 'The Suzanne Lacy Network: An interview by Paul David Young', *Art in America*, 6 (2012), 116-24 (p. 122).

<sup>142</sup> Lacy, cited in Green Fryd, 'Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May', p. 28.

<sup>143</sup> Editors' note, Suzanne Lacy, '*Three Weeks in May*: Speaking Out on Rape, A Political Art Piece', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 2.1 (1977), 64-70 (p. 67).

‘by countless shoppers, downtown workers, and tourists’.<sup>144</sup> Initially planned as a single map that would reflect the number of assaults, the piece was expanded so as ‘not to create a completely helpless portrait of the raped woman, and to extend further into the political sphere by using the media and public events’.<sup>145</sup> In its full realisation, the project brought together three different layers of engagement: the personal content of the piece indicated by the reporting and retelling of violent events by rape survivors; the presentation of information in the public sphere, with the aim of addressing commonly held assumptions about rape, affecting public opinion and even policy; and visual elements as well as performance, recognised in the art world.

In 2012, Lacy employed many of these same activities, but with the addition of social media campaigns to update followers on the progress of the project and publicise its programme of events.<sup>146</sup> Another addition was the display of audio-visual documentation from 1977 in two different *PST* exhibitions. The original map and audio of Lacy reciting the location of reports were displayed at MOCA as part of *Under the Big Black Sun*, and video documentation was shown at the Otis College of Art and Design as part of *Doin’ It In Public*. Visitors who witnessed these multiple public events and exhibitions could view material from both the original and current *Three Weeks* projects, at a number of points around the city. The piece was documented and performed not only in several different

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<sup>144</sup> Lacy, *ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>146</sup> These included Facebook and Twitter updates on the numbers of rape reported each day during the three weeks, and a publicity campaign ‘I Know Someone, Do You? #RapeEndsHere’, encouraging members of the public to participate and volunteer for the project.

geographical locations, and within different institutions, but it also participated in several different histories of Los Angeles art, namely, socially engaged, feminist, and multi-media art practices.

As well as contributing to different histories and localities of art, the *Three Weeks* projects also engaged with some of the specific categories of Los Angeles performance developed by Cheng in her theorisation of its multi-centricity. Cheng proposes there are at least two ways in which performance interacts with the city. The first, the ‘generative’ function, can be defined in its simplest form in terms of the aesthetic properties of the medium, which has little relation to its extrinsic efficacy.<sup>147</sup> An example of this would perhaps be performance art, which, although created in the city, makes no effort to connect with the surrounding environment of Los Angeles.<sup>148</sup> More often than not, however, ‘performance is an art form discontented with the status of being just an art form,’ and so Cheng uses the term ‘redressive function’ to refer to performance that ‘seeks to break away from its self-referential systems of signification in order to merge with the interwoven fabric of social existence.’<sup>149</sup> Arguably, as a redressive performance project, *Three Weeks* responds equally, both in 1977 and 2012, to the socio-political environment of Los Angeles. Its redressive function in 1977 was to expose the extent of rape in Los Angeles, with the aim of raising awareness of the issue and providing a space in which it could be

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<sup>147</sup> Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses*, p. 46.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 30.



freely discussed. Its redressive function in 2012, however, was to ‘End Rape in Los Angeles’, a phrase which was used as the project’s subtitle.<sup>150</sup>

In devising a recreation of the project, Lacy not only assessed its generative function – the practicalities of how to repeat such a project – but also its redressive function – how the work would engage effectively with, and alter, the environment of the city. By considering the contemporary redressive function of the piece – how it could utilise the environment to bring the past to bear upon the present – Lacy’s project suggests that the recreation of performance out of its original context might also have a positive cumulative effect, because it can have different redressive functions across each of its subsequent manifestations. As I discuss below, this theorisation of Lacy’s work suggests that there may in fact be no ‘redressive function’ in McCarthy’s work or his re-performances. As Tomic suggests, his re-performances serve only as a ‘fidelity to failure’.<sup>151</sup>

To some extent Lacy’s project also dissolves the myth that socially engaged works that are re-performed outside their immediate context are somehow de-politicised, and reduced instead merely to their generative function. For the re-presentation of McCarthy’s work in *PST*, the generative function, the means by which pieces were made and presented to audiences, can be endlessly replayed. The documentation of his work and its positioning within histories of performance will ensure that the generative function of his work continues to be reiterated by museums and galleries. Regarding the possible redressive function of his work, historically, political

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<sup>150</sup> ‘Suzanne Lacy, Three Weeks in January: End Rape in Los Angeles’, *Los Angeles Goes Live*, LACE, <<http://www.losangelesgoeslive.org/threeweeksinjanuary>> [accessed 28 May 2012].

<sup>151</sup> Tomic, ‘Fidelity to Failure’, p. 443.

readings of McCarthy's performances seem to have depended more on the use of his work by scholars and curators to redress contemporary understanding of his work *as* political. On a broader scale, and with specific reference to his contribution to the artistic landscape of Los Angeles, McCarthy's work seeks not to alter the concrete socio-political reality of the city, but to comment on its mythologies or abstract, clichéd conceptualisations of Los Angeles culture – Disneyland, Hollywood, the porn industry – reflected early on in his waning interest in performance as a 'concrete reality', and his move towards performance as 'mimicking, appropriation, fiction, representation'.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, in McCarthy's work there is no redressive function as such – beyond that contained within a broader generative function.

Cheng further nuances her categories of Los Angeles performance with direct reference to the locality of where the works are created and disseminated. Whilst performance art may be created and performed *in* Los Angeles, the city itself has little influence on the generative properties of the piece.<sup>153</sup> Whilst Los Angeles might be chosen as a theme or subject in performance, a performance *about* Los Angeles can potentially be conceived and produced anywhere.<sup>154</sup> Conversely, a redressive performance *of* Los Angeles, one which engages and even changes its environment 'cannot exist the way it does without the particular L.A. that has inspired and produced it at a given time/space axis.'<sup>155</sup> What does it mean then for

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<sup>152</sup> Paul McCarthy, cited in Kristine Stiles, 'Interview: Kristine Stiles in Conversation with Paul McCarthy', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Ralph Rugoff (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 8-29 (p. 14).

<sup>153</sup> Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses*, p. 47.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

*Three Weeks in May*, as a redressive, performative public art piece addressing sexual violence, to be repeated in the same city, and for it to be productive or have efficacy in this repetition? *Three Weeks in January* went beyond merely re-enacting the earlier work by embracing the local and international artistic platform afforded by *PST*, and reached a new and extended public through the use of social media. By contextualising the project not just as a re-enactment of an important historical feminist activist work but as an expanded performance that activates and engages contemporary public audiences and the media, *Three Weeks in January* begins to model the multicentricity of Los Angeles by occupying a place within different public, institutional, and temporal spaces. The project is also effective in terms of what Jones identifies as the interrelatedness of art history and performance studies: within the institutions and ‘discrete and knowable’ objects of art history, she argues, a consideration of the performative “de-contains” the work, reminding us that its meaning and values are contingent.’<sup>156</sup> Lacy’s work speaks clearly to the dynamic between histories of performance and live events that the *PST* Performance Festival attempted to capture, and serves as a reminder of the possibility of de-containing narratives, otherwise written, or held, within discrete framing devices.

In a recent interview Lacy revealed that her original thinking behind the 1977 *Three Weeks* project was based around the question ‘[w]hat is the social/political context that exists around the issue of rape, and can I make a

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<sup>156</sup> Jones, ‘The Now and the Has Been’, p. 12.

contribution?'.<sup>157</sup> In 2012 she had another, additional imperative: 'What is of interest to me, conceptually, in the rethinking of this work?'<sup>158</sup> Whilst Lacy was keen to address these questions that point to both the historical and contemporary socio-political context in which the project is created and its reception in an art environment, assessing the impact of such a broad project was problematic.<sup>159</sup> The decision to re-enact the *Three Weeks* project in 2012 for *PST* was doubtless due to its importance in histories of feminist, performance and public art in Los Angeles. The difficulty of re-enacting a politically and socially engaged public art piece within a model of re-performance situated primarily in the art world is, however, evident. Lacy's expanded performance structure, which connects the objects and documents of art history with the socio-political and physical environment in which the work is situated, attempts to move beyond questioning of which pieces are re-performed and why, towards a consideration of how re-performances can productively expose the relationship between live acts, art history, and an extended public engagement with art. Whilst some performances – for example, Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964, 1965, 1966, 2003) – may be valuable *because* they are already repeated or canonised within and across histories of art, and not necessarily because they are able to be re-staged effectively in new contexts, Lacy's work is valuable on both counts, and appears to be diminished neither aesthetically nor politically in the process.

Lacy's large-scale re-enactment of *Three Weeks in May* employed a broad range of performance activities addressing both the generative and the

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<sup>157</sup> Lacy, cited in Young, 'The Suzanne Lacy Network', p. 122.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

redressive function of the work in its original and newly formed contexts. Avoiding the binary opposition of the originary, historical live event and the secondary documentation or re-performance, Lacy's work involves the interaction of artists, institutions and publics, and emphasises the value of networks and communications between individuals as much as the material output of the art work. In this way it does the job of re-performance by highlighting how the process can inform and question the way we have previously accepted our engagement with performance history, through objects, documents, archives and exhibitions. As a microcosm of the wider *PST* project, it employs modes of re-performance which are multiple and simultaneous rather than singularly effective.

The presentation of McCarthy's work in *PST* is also reiterated across a number of different histories of art and performance, as explored here, but each time it is only the *generative* function of the work which is revised and resituated. To reiterate Tomic's argument that a conceptually 'good' re-performance 'takes great pains to be actively productive rather than passively reproductive' (characteristic of Lacy's work perhaps), whilst McCarthy's re-performances illustrate a commitment to nothing except 'fidelity to failure', reproducing work 'as a "mere" image', the same might be said of his representation in *PST*.<sup>160</sup> The works that are reproduced through documentation and non-live media continue to reiterate his position within Los Angeles art, but also the transferability of his work to fit with new and revised versions of its history. McCarthy's work provides a useful nexus of art historical reference points around which curators and scholars

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<sup>160</sup> Tomic, 'Fidelity to Failure', p. 443.

may begin to trace related styles and movements – for example, action painting, abject art, figurative expressionism, and artistic pluralism – which claim performance as a development of visual art.

In this chapter I have discussed how McCarthy's performance practice has been historicised in recent revised narratives of Los Angeles art, and evidence of its importance to multiple centres. In the Conclusion I look at narratives and histories of performance in projects where McCarthy explicitly puts himself and his work at the centre, and indicate how his ongoing artistic practice is shaped by his complex development of performance practice outlined in this thesis.

## Conclusion

### **Paul McCarthy's Video and Installation Works, 2008-13**

As of the time of writing, McCarthy is very much a still-practicing artist, and his continuing innovations in art and performance extend the interaction between performance and object-based art I have outlined. To reflect upon and summarise the development of the thesis and to indicate the complexity and expanded scale of McCarthy's ongoing practice, I will look briefly at several of McCarthy's recent works: *Low Life Slow Life* (2008-09), a self-curated retrospective about the artists who have influenced and shaped his practice; *Pig Island* (2003-11) and *The King* (2011), an installation at Hauser & Wirth's London galleries in 2011, alongside the video piece, *Cut Up King* (2011); and *WS*, a large-scale installation, performance and video piece displayed at the Park Avenue Armory in New York in 2013.

Significantly, all three pieces indicate a return of the artist as subject. As I have shown, in his solo performances from the 1970s, McCarthy used his own body to experiment with ideas of identity, gender, audience interaction and alienation, bodily fluids as edible condiments, and feelings of nausea and disgust (as discussed in Chapter Two). He then retired from performance and concentrated on object-based art, creating humanoid co-performers or stand-ins (as discussed in Chapter Three). In Chapter Four I focused on the *Pacific Standard Time (PST)* programme in Los Angeles, which sought to uncover and re-write Los Angeles' multiple art histories through a series of exhibitions, publications, performances and public

events. Through these events, the curators, researchers and artists enacted what Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik call, in their recent publication on performance and cultural memory, ‘memory practices’, ways of not only engaging with and recovering the past but also creating new knowledge in the present and for the future.<sup>1</sup> By looking at the position of McCarthy’s work in *PST*, this chapter considered not only how his performance work of the 1970s and 1980s has been disseminated in recent years, but also its position within wider narratives of Los Angeles art and performance that are undergoing a similar process of restructuring and renewal. In *Low Life Slow Life*, McCarthy presents a smaller version of this narrative, which points to artistic influences from the past, but also to the art exhibition as a revision of art histories in the present. In *Low Life Slow Life*, McCarthy uses his own practice as a starting point for thinking about the artists who have influenced his work; the result is a group exhibition of widely varying artists connected merely by association with McCarthy. The exhibition evidences the connections between McCarthy’s work and his peers and predecessors, but also uses his wide-ranging practice as a tool to make connections across different genealogies of art.

In *The King*, McCarthy takes inspiration from his stand-ins and humanoid sculptures of the 1990s to produce an installation piece in which a life-size model of the artist sits on a throne in the prestigious surroundings of the Hauser & Wirth gallery in London. In the accompanying video *Cut Up King*, McCarthy butchers the model with an electric saw (cutting into the

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<sup>1</sup> Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik, ‘Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture: An Introduction’, in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. by Plate and Smelik (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-24 (p. 4).



limbs to create flexible joints in order for the figure to sit down properly) in a violent yet humorous performance which recalls his earlier works of the 1970s, particularly *Contemporary Cure All* (1978), in which the performers ‘operate’ on, dis- and then re-member the genitals of the central subject. In *Cut Up King*, McCarthy performs a struggle with his surrogate body, and, in contrast to the stoic model on the throne, depicts a violation of the body through a process of destruction.

Grand in scale, *WS* (or *White Snow*) employs a large cast of performers, and uses Disney’s take on the Snow White story as its subject. The piece both appropriates and critiques the cultural mythologies of the Disney fairytale as a pervasive structure of social control, and blends this with the artist’s personal childhood memories. As ever, McCarthy’s appropriation does as much to reinforce these cultural structures as to critique them. The invitation to analyse *WS* – particularly its darker themes of sexual violence and abuse – as a result of McCarthy’s personal experience is continually rebuffed by references to external cultural issues. The piece conforms to McCarthy’s career-long tendency to invite provocations or readings of his work as biographical, and at the same time avoid wider questions about its political potential.

In all three pieces McCarthy experiments with the process of canonisation – celebrating the grandiosity, scale and scope of his work, and in the case of *The King*, putting himself visually centre-stage – and at the same time disperses the focus of his work to wider artistic and cultural influences.

## ***Paul McCarthy's Low Life Slow Life: A History of Practice and Influence***

In 2008-09 McCarthy curated the two-part retrospective exhibition entitled *Paul McCarthy's Low Life Slow Life* at the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was born out of a decision by the Institute, 'to explore new ways of exhibition making in close collaboration with artists', and would also satisfy McCarthy's career-long wish to curate an exhibition.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition was partly a recovery of McCarthy's memories of artistic influence, which traces the development of his own career through the work of others. By deferring his centrality to other artists represented in the exhibition, effectively marginalising his own work, McCarthy is in fact made even less dispensable to the narrative it depicts. This becomes particularly poignant considering that the exhibition undertakes a sort of canon formation, created not only to celebrate widely influential or prevalent artists, but also those who have fallen out of favour, been ignored, or forgotten. Whilst other solo shows and retrospectives enable the artist's narrative to be re-iterated across time, illustrating the wider significance of his work, the *Low Life* exhibition both celebrates and mediates McCarthy's positioning in art and performance histories. The importance of this exhibition in McCarthy's career and to my thesis is that it can be used as a

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<sup>2</sup> *Paul McCarthy's Low Life Slow Life: Part One*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 7 February – 12 April 2008. *Part Two*, 27 January – 30 May 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Jens Hoffmann, 'Epilogue: The Exhibition as Artistic Autobiography', in *Paul McCarthy's Low Life Slow Life Tidebox Tidebook*, ed. by Hoffmann and Stacen Berg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), pp. 631-36 (p. 635).

tool for visualising the narrative of the artist's influences and indicating the breadth of his practice. The exhibition paraphrases the work of my thesis, which is to use the trajectory of McCarthy's artistic career to arrive at a series of points at which visual art and performance intersect. In this way, my thesis mirrors the exhibition by contributing to wider histories of art and performance, but informs understandings of McCarthy's work in particular.

When devising the exhibition, McCarthy listed the artists whose work had influenced him over the years, and those with whom he had collaborated. The result was a visual spiral of artists' names and works, beginning at the edge with the late 1950s, working inwards chronologically to the present.<sup>4</sup> Part One of the exhibition focused on McCarthy's student years in Salt Lake City in the 1960s and his early career in San Francisco in the early 1970s, and Part Two looked at McCarthy's time in Los Angeles, from the late 1970s to the present. Despite the broad list of participating artists, in images of the exhibition the space itself appears fairly stark; with select sculptures, paintings and photographs on show, much of the imagery from books and magazines is exhibited in vitrines, and recorded performances are played on sparsely positioned screens. McCarthy's sculptural piece *Platform* (2007) takes pride of place in Part One, and brings together many of the works across the exhibition. The piece consists of a wooden board balanced on two oil drums, on top of which sits an assemblage of dried-up Christmas trees, toy cars, paint pots and brushes, and a host of other objects from the artist's studio. It characterises the

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<sup>4</sup> Paul McCarthy, 'The McCarthy Triangle: Part 1. Paul McCarthy in Conversation with Jens Hoffmann and Stacen Berg', in *Paul McCarthy's Low Life Slow Life Tidebox Tidebook*, ed. by Hoffmann and Stacen Berg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), pp. 587-95 (p. 587).

exhibition as a collection of stray references, not necessarily complementary in any other context, but for their juxtaposition here under McCarthy's initiative.

The catalogue, envisaged as the third part of the project, is primarily given over to reproductions, re-emphasising that this is above all a *visual* narrative. Whilst the extent of the exhibition (in two parts) and the catalogue (at 648 pages) reflects the length and breadth of McCarthy's career, it also highlights the impossibility (or perhaps the reductiveness) of tracing the lineage of every artistic idea an artist may entertain over a lifetime. It seems then an injustice to McCarthy's experience and understanding of such imagery to read the catalogue chronologically, as it represents a web of personal interconnections and memories, which may be viewed more effectively together. To reiterate, the aim of my thesis is not to provide an encyclopaedic survey of McCarthy's career – this has been done in *Low Life Slow Life*, and elsewhere – but to nuance readings of his performance work and its influence across his career.

There is a sense that in *Low Life Slow Life*, the visual arrangement of these traces represents the fluidity of personal memory, and that McCarthy orchestrates a multitude of voices across a history not necessarily bound chronologically, but discursively, across his career. As both curator and central subject of the show, McCarthy's role is divided; he refers to both tangible, visual sites of reference within his own work, and memories adopted or appropriated as his own. The exhibition might be considered a narrative of related events, objects or images not developing sequentially

from one ordinary source, but through a series of generative events or encounters.

McCarthy's story in this exhibition is not recounted by others as a paradigmatic narrative, but by McCarthy himself; it is not merely a case of no one knowing this story better, but that no one is more central to, or fully constructed by, the narratives it implicates.<sup>5</sup> This may be the case partly because while McCarthy had been working as an artist since the 1960s, his work was not widely recognised until 1992 with his installation *The Garden* (1992) (as discussed in Chapter Three). Dan Cameron has argued that in *The Garden* 'McCarthy was able for the first time to transmit the ephemeral qualities of his performances into a permanent construction that could be experienced without the artist's presence', and that this pivotal moment 'paved the way for a dramatic surge in the artist's productivity.'<sup>6</sup> By 'transmit[ting] the ephemeral qualities of his performance' and presence to the moving figures in this piece, McCarthy somehow transcends the conditions of live performance and in the process can be more easily positioned within multiple histories. The dissemination of McCarthy's art in the early 1990s was crucial to generating new narratives of his work. However, by putting so much value on this moment in his career in which his work is finally 'legitimised' by the art world, there is a danger that any work made before this is overshadowed, and read only in the service of engineering this moment. This is especially poignant in that McCarthy's work as a performance artist may only be appreciated as such once the

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<sup>5</sup> Hoffmann, 'Epilogue', p. 635.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Cameron, 'The Mirror Stage' (2000), in *The Artist's Joke*, ed. by Jennifer Higgie (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 124-28 (p. 124).

conditions of live performance have been altered beyond recognition; in this case the artist is no longer present but mechanical humanoid objects perform in his place.

Whilst written narratives of McCarthy's work such as Kristine Stiles' 'Imploring Silence, Words and Performance Essence' and Ralph Rugoff's 'Survey' can be mined to investigate the timely critical investments made in his work, the *Low Life* exhibition seems unparalleled in the visual reflexivity it offers.<sup>7</sup> The cause and effect relationship offered by a linear explanation of McCarthy's success is here decentralized; instead of a certified start and end point, the exhibition-as-narrative is driven by the complex set of relations and influences that have shaped the artist's work and his relationship to others, both historically and contemporarily. McCarthy's initial narrative takes the very definite shape of a spiral, as noted, starting on the outside with his earliest memories of artistic influence, and moving inwards chronologically to the present. Although McCarthy claims that he had 'no real explanation of why [he] made the list in a spiral form', he describes himself as having always created visual lists to impose some organisation or containment on his work.<sup>8</sup> The spiralling list, and the exhibition and catalogue that result, represent more formalised versions of those impositions, except they do not merely clarify the collection of work for the artist, but represent a multitude of voices, speaking both individually and in collaboration. Jens Hoffmann suggests that McCarthy's curatorial choices and arrangement of the exhibition reflect his own artistic practice;

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<sup>7</sup> Kristine Stiles, 'Imploring Silence, Words and Performance Essence: A Polemic', *High Performance*, 8.1 (April 1985), 33-36; Ralph Rugoff, 'Survey: Mr McCarthy's Neighbourhood', in *Paul McCarthy*, ed. by Rugoff (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 30-87

<sup>8</sup> McCarthy, 'The McCarthy Triangle', p. 587.

he is ‘an encyclopedic source of information on artists of all ages, backgrounds, and fields, and references to other artists abound in his own production.’<sup>9</sup> Therefore, to illustrate the connection between the writing of artists’ histories, or the writing of artists *into* histories, and the formation and dissemination of a discourse of practice and ideas, McCarthy’s listing of artists and their eventual inclusion in the exhibition might be seen both as personal recollection and as a process of canon construction.

As well as representing a canon of artists as an exercise in self-reflection, the *Low Life* exhibition also engages with the idea of the *required* canon, that which is necessarily constructed, more often than not, to remember those who have been previously excluded. In her discussion of canons of art history, Griselda Pollock argues that ‘[c]ritique of the canon has been motivated by those who feel themselves voiceless and deprived of a recognised cultural history because the canon excludes the texts written, painted or composed and performed by their social, gender or cultural community.’<sup>10</sup> As Pollock highlights, the constitution of this required canon is preceded by a process of critique. However, McCarthy does not represent so consistently or straightforwardly the voiceless artist, but provides the means by which others may be given a more public re-framing. Little known artists in the exhibition are still only allowed the potential of recognition *through* McCarthy rather than on their own terms. Some of the more marginal artists represented in McCarthy’s exhibition, including Doyle Strong, Al Payne and Jason Rhoades, have slipped out of art world

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<sup>9</sup> Hoffmann, ‘Epilogue’, p. 634.

<sup>10</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 4.

conversations, as McCarthy suggests, because they stopped working or died young.<sup>11</sup> While this suggests that the artists have *become* marginalised by the discontinuation of their artistic practice, there is on the other hand, a number of artists who have spent much of their working life *being* marginalised, and have only been recognised more widely later in their careers. Multi-media artist Lil Picard and painter Maria Lassnig are among these artists, but again, we only approach their work through McCarthy's positioning of them as marginalised in overarching narratives, but relevant to his own idiosyncratic concerns. The investment McCarthy makes in these artists as simultaneously marginal and influential reflects the duality of the exhibition by representing both personal artistic experience, and interactions with wider narratives and frameworks.

The flexibility of McCarthy's personal canon, representative to some degree of the limitations of the form, but which also seeks to transcend them, is rooted in McCarthy's changing status as an artist. As Pollock suggests, the canon 'not only determines what we read, look at, listen to, see at the art gallery and study in school or university', and thus influences which sources we inevitably value over others, but 'it is formed retrospectively by what artists themselves select as their legitimating or enabling predecessors.'<sup>12</sup> Meiling Cheng makes a particular criticism of the 'legitimate' heritage of performance art in Los Angeles, in which McCarthy is included, as it is purported by exhibitions such as *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* (discussed in Chapter Three), which perpetually substantiated the centrality of the white male artist. Such artists' central position Cheng

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<sup>11</sup> McCarthy, 'The McCarthy Triangle', p. 587.

<sup>12</sup> Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p. 4.



argues, matches 'L.A.'s master narratives, which tend to erase, defer, or bracket the undesirable regional for the profitable transnational.'<sup>13</sup> Whilst McCarthy apparently de-centralizes his own work in *Low Life Slow Life*, there exists an inherent contradiction: by marginalising his own work (and being the one with the authority to do so), McCarthy in fact becomes all the more essential to the coherence of the narrative that the exhibition depicts. McCarthy is not only an individual tracing his professional genealogy of influence, but an artist now significant in the art world in which this exhibition participates.

***Pig Island (2003-11), The King (2011), Cut Up King (2011)***

*Low Life Slow Life* put McCarthy's influences centre stage as a personal 'hall of fame' for those who have shaped and influenced his work, and displayed a kind of deferred subjectivity. However, *Pig Island* and *The King* have as their centrepiece the artist himself: in *Pig Island*, a set of scattered but self-reflexive references indicative of McCarthy's wider artistic practice; and in *The King*, a hyperrealistic silicone model of the artist. Both pieces were part of a multi-site exhibition of McCarthy's work in Hauser & Wirth's London galleries, collectively titled *The King, The Island, The Train, The House, The Ship*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> Paul McCarthy, *The King, The Island, The Train, The House, The Ship*, Hauser & Wirth London, 16 November 2011 – 14 January 2012.

*Pig Island* consisted of large polystyrene blocks piled with wood, clay, cast body parts, buckets of paint, half-finished figurative sculptures and fast-food containers. The piece, which McCarthy worked on over a seven-year period, ‘grew to fill [his] studio’, eventually ‘blurring the boundaries between the work and the workplace’.<sup>15</sup> It depicts the seemingly chaotic working processes of the artist in a similar style to McCarthy’s 1995 video performance *Painter*, in a critique of the artist-as-genius mythology. In fact, in a gesture much more in keeping with McCarthy’s carefully constructed illusions of authenticity, each piece of *Pig Island* was ‘meticulously positioned as if it were a carefully orchestrated film set’.<sup>16</sup>

The casts of various body parts scattered throughout the installation indicate both a body (or bodies) in the process of being put together and made whole. Throughout McCarthy’s career the body has been ever-present in various forms of dismemberment and display. In performances of the 1970s, limbs and members were detachable. In *Inside Out Olive Oil* (1983), McCarthy even constructed a large body-shaped framework and performed within it, moving in and through the limbs, naked except for an Olive Oil mask, which was later signed by the artist and sold at auction.<sup>17</sup> The battered mask, pictured in its 2002 auction photograph, is covered in dirt and mould, and its features are distorted almost beyond recognition. The wearing and tearing of the body was discussed in detail in Chapter Three in the example of *The Garden*, in constant movement against the cogs of the mechanism

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<sup>15</sup> Press Release, Paul McCarthy *The King, The Island, The Train, The House, The Ship*, Hauser & Wirth London, November 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> McCarthy’s *Olive Oil* mask was sold for \$14,340 at Christie’s, New York, on 15 May 2002. Christie’s, ‘Post-War and Contemporary (Afternoon Session), Lot 430’, <[http://www.christies.com/Lotfinder/lot\\_details.aspx?intObjectID=3914723](http://www.christies.com/Lotfinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=3914723)> [accessed 5 March 2014].

wore the soft skin material of the kinetic figures. In *Pig Island*, it is not only the detritus of the artist's studio that is represented, but the detritus of the body – limbs and figures which are recycled, unused, or yet to be completed.

*The King* (see Image 10) 'presides over the main space of the Piccadilly gallery'; on a large wooden platform a life-sized silicone model of McCarthy sits on a black leather office chair, surrounded by an assortment of paint pots, brushes and art materials.<sup>18</sup> The model sits naked on his 'throne' with his limbs partly severed and pieced back together. The figure wears a long blonde wig and its eyes are closed as if meditating, resting or perhaps dead. The scene recalls elements from McCarthy's earlier performances, for example the androgynous persona he performs in *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing* wears a similarly feminine blonde wig. The one worn by *The King* is less convincing; the hair, thin and lank, frames the artist's wrinkled and bearded face, as if the wig has aged along with the figure who wears it. The figure's hands have also been tied to the chair with rope. Similar to the artist-doppelganger in Paul Thek's *The Tomb* (1967) (discussed in Chapter Three), whose fingers on one hand had been cut off, the artist performs a definition of what Rebecca Schneider calls 'dead labor', here as a working artist whose tools of creativity have been stilled.<sup>19</sup>

McCarthy presents an image of himself as an artist that is simultaneously powerful and self-defeating. He puts a lifelike representation of himself at the centre of the piece, elevated and presiding over the space

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<sup>18</sup> Press Release, 'The King, The Island'.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Schneider, 'It Seems As If...I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor', *TDR*, 56.4 (Winter 2012), 150-62 (p. 156).

with his accompanying workstation and artist materials within reach. But the installation also stages a scene of death and defeat; not only are his hands tied to the chair (an artistic death of sorts), but the centrality of the chair on the platform might also recall an electric chair, and the raised wooden stage might suggest the gallows. Perhaps the incapacity of the artist alludes to the numerous pop culture references or trashiness in his work. In the gallery over which *The King* presides there is a display of painted canvases, hyperrealistic painted recreations of Marlboro cigarette advertisements (itself also a reference to Richard Prince's *Untitled (Cowboys)* [1980-84] series and 1980s appropriation art), and pages from gossip magazines and hardcore pornographic images. The added irony, however, is the successful acceptance of McCarthy's work into the art institution – and the fact that the building in which Hauser & Wirth's Piccadilly gallery is housed used to be a bank – gives an added element of exploitation or capitalist prestige to the piece, despite its provocation.

In *Cut Up King*, a video in which McCarthy is seen preparing the model before it takes up the position on the throne, the artist presents the doubled body as central to his work. In the first scene, the model lies on a wooden table in the centre of a darkened studio; it is lifelike in size, shape, and details such as skin colourations, body hair, wrinkles, and freckles. The scene is reminiscent of McCarthy's piece *Dead Men* (1992-94), in which mechanical figures, worn out and battered from overuse in *The Garden*, are laid onto a wooden bench with their arms and legs flung around them at odd angles as if brutally attacked and discarded. The artist stands over the body, inspecting it; coming face to face with his 'other' (like Thek's

‘confrontation with his “other self” in *The Tomb*) in a quiet moment of thought and reflection.<sup>20</sup> In the next scene McCarthy stands on the table and over the body, cutting into its limbs with an electric saw. There is a humorous and slightly disturbing juxtaposition of the quiet, tentative moment of reflection of the first scene, and the butchery in this. The artist may not have been reflecting on the uncanniness of the figure and coming to terms with a lifelike monument of himself which in many ways will outlast him. Rather, he was perhaps deciding on how best to cut it up in order for its limbs to fit into position in the installation. In this, and other works I have discussed – for example, McCarthy’s seemingly provocative choice of mask to wear during his performance *Political Disturbance* (1976) (discussed in Chapter One and Three) – McCarthy sets up potentially significant moments of engagement with issues such as war, violence, alienation and abjection, but diffuses these with often comic or taciturn gestures. As noted in Chapter Two and Three, the presence of violent images and gestures in McCarthy’s work and the ambivalent or light-hearted way in which they are presented, is for me one of the most challenging but critically effective elements of his art.

In *Cut Up King*, McCarthy and his assistant cut into the groin, knees and elbows of the figure in order to manipulate it from a stiff, corpse-like pose into a seated position. The process is laborious and often clumsy, as the artist struggles to heave the body around; like many of McCarthy’s work the video is by turns funny and disturbing. This is not just a body that looks

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<sup>20</sup> Axel Heil, ‘This Is the End – The Tomb and Its Metamorphosis’, in *Paul Thek: Artist’s Artist*, ed. by Harald Falckenberg and Peter Weibel (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 97-118 (p. 106).

vaguely human (such as the early rudimentary humanoid figures such as *Human Object* [1982], *Bavarian Kick* [1987] and even *The Garden* [1992]), or vaguely like the artist; it is a replica. The figure jolts and judders with the vibrations of the saw, its hands and legs shaking as the blade goes in and out of its 'skin'. Sawing up between the figure's legs and between the ass cheeks McCarthy slices through part of the genitals, which creates a vagina-like opening. The figure now has both a penis and a vagina, not unlike in McCarthy's performances of the 1970s such as *Sailor's Meat* and *Contemporary Cure All* in which the characters he performs often have indeterminate genders. The process is grotesque, and although it does not contain any of the representative bodily fluids such as ketchup, mayonnaise, or the flesh of hot dogs or ground meat found in McCarthy's earlier works, there is still a sense of the visceral body on display. When cut into, the skin-coloured prosthetic material of the model, which looks convincingly like human flesh, resembles a joint of meat being carved at the table. Additionally, the sound of the electric saw is abrasive and relentless; the moments of stillness and quiet between the 'scenes' of mutilation provide a brief respite – for the artist and the viewer – which punctuates the seemingly chaotic process.

In *The King* and *Cut Up King*, McCarthy employs a number of the assaultive elements of his earlier performances – the use of the surrogate body, the video screen as a barrier to the audience, appropriating sexual and violent imagery from consumer culture – but does so in the impressive institutional surroundings of Hauser & Wirth. Particularly with McCarthy's later works such as these, it becomes more challenging to identify and

justify the critical nature of his work. Throughout the thesis I have characterised McCarthy's resistance to containment and categorisation as a key tactic in what I see as the political efficacy of his work. With later, more elaborate works – particularly *WS*, described below, which appears to be the pinnacle of capitalist excess in McCarthy's work – this becomes more difficult to pinpoint.

### ***WS* and Hauser & Wirth's 2013 Spring Programme**

In 2013, McCarthy's installation, *WS*, consisting of a 'fantastical forest of towering trees with grotesque video projections of iconic characters playing out their own fairy tale drama in a replica of his childhood home', was displayed at the Park Avenue Armory in New York, filling 8,800 square foot of space.<sup>21</sup> *WS* was the offsite centrepiece of Hauser & Wirth's Spring 2013 programme, where its two Manhattan galleries were also dedicated to showing McCarthy's work: *Rebel Dabble Babble*, a 'stripped-down, sexed-up take on *Rebel Without a Cause*'; and a collection of hyperrealistic nude body casts of McCarthy and other performers in *WS*.<sup>22</sup> In a similar way to *The Garden* – although on a much larger scale – *WS* takes the idea of a fantastical forest evoking mystery and adventure, which in fact hides or conceals a multitude of sins and debauched behaviour. The central story is an adult re-telling of the Snow White fairytale, made popular by the 1937

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<sup>21</sup> Paul McCarthy *WS*, Park Avenue Armory exhibition publicity material, July 2013.

<sup>22</sup> William S. Smith, 'Paul McCarthy at Hauser & Wirth and Park Avenue Armory', *Art in America*, 2 October 2013 <<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/paul-mccarthy-1/>> [accessed 9 March 2014].

animated Disney film.<sup>23</sup> In McCarthy's version – symbolically subverted by switching the heroine's initials to *White Snow* (WS) – the central female character and the dwarves 'engage in a chocolate-smear, alcohol-soaked orgy', whilst McCarthy poses as the patriarchal, director figure, 'Walt Paul'.<sup>24</sup> Typically for McCarthy, his retelling of Disneyfied tales – for example *Caribbean Pirates* (2001-05), based on Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* films and theme park ride – re-introduces dark sexual, violent and transgressive behaviour that he imagines has been eradicated from Disney's characters, and which leave the public with an image that promotes a damaging and unattainable ideal of beauty and innocence.

The installation deals in part with childhood, memory and experience, both personal and public. The architecture in which the characters perform is a replica of McCarthy's childhood home, and Snow White would be recognisable to many who saw the film.<sup>25</sup> There is, in reality, a rejection of childhood. People under the age of 17 were barred from attending the exhibition which, as William S. Smith comments, in turn confirmed and perhaps even celebrated its 'lurid content', which included a pornographic video featuring hired porn performers.<sup>26</sup> Whilst critic Maika Pollack suggests that the 'relationship to excess and capitalism [is where] the piece's real shock factor lies'<sup>27</sup> (with which I would agree), William S.

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<sup>23</sup> *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, dir. Ben Sharpsteen, David Hand, Larry Morey, Perce Pearce, Wilfred Jackson (Disney, 1937).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Paul McCarthy, 'In Conversation: Paul McCarthy's WS at the Armory', *YouTube*, 24 June 2013 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWQ8JISP1sk>> [accessed 25 February 2014].

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Maika Pollack, 'Paul McCarthy: WS' at the Park Avenue Armory', *Gallerist*, 25 June 2013 <<http://galleristny.com/2013/06/paul-mccarthy-ws-at-the-park-avenue-armory/>> [accessed 9 March 2014].



Smith offers another suggestion about the installation's disturbing content; '[b]odies are treated like objects, and objects like bodies; everyone is compromised, and everything is used for taking pleasure'.<sup>28</sup> In Chapter Three I framed *The Garden* as McCarthy's first fully formed piece to investigate this relationship between bodies and objects, with *Human Object* (1982) and *The Trunks* (1983) representing earlier stages in this process. I suggested that *The Garden* enticed viewers into believing that there might be something more interesting or politically significant at stake than the seemingly lazy or obvious clichés about the continuing dominance of man over nature, and the monotony of male heterosexuality. *WS* does something similar but on a grander scale, and relates more explicitly to the wider art world. It provokes viewers to question whether it is really all the artist can do to critique the art world by depicting it as a fantasyland, a glittering façade of glamour and excess with a dark underside of exploitation and corruption. Smith, among others, highlights the irony of the installation – grand, expensive, and in-yer-face – that is built as a monument to criticise the very system in which it participates. It is 'a testament to the art world's current capacity for production value, which appears to be catching up to that of the entertainment industry McCarthy's work was meant to critique.'<sup>29</sup>

But, as Smith suggests, if *WS* was unpersuasive as a critique, and 'felt like an exhausted, vague parody of the culture industry, it found more traction as biography.'<sup>30</sup> He states, [b]etween McCarthy's lecherous father-

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<sup>28</sup> Smith, 'Paul McCarthy at Hauser & Wirth'.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. See also Christian Viveros-Fauné, 'Shock and Duh', *Village Voice*, 24-30 July 2013, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, 'Paul McCarthy at Hauser & Wirth'.

figure act [the protagonist of the piece is Snow White, McCarthy plays her father] and the reconstruction of his childhood home, *WS* came across as an oddly personal tale, told through a common pop vocabulary.’<sup>31</sup> In *WS*, and many of his works which present a childish or seemingly innocent visual display – for example *Pinnocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* (1994) and *PROPO* (1991) – McCarthy is in reality diagnosing the society that produces such images, which are designed to repress unpleasant or unseemly behaviour.

Despite his deferral to popular culture as the root of all pathological behaviour, in *WS* McCarthy invites audiences to consider the personal elements of the work, an idea that I have highlighted as problematic throughout his work. In his description of developing the *WS* set, McCarthy suggests that he only realised that the piece looked like his childhood home halfway through making it.<sup>32</sup> In works with his collaborator, Mike Kelley – for example *Family Tyranny* (1987) and *Heidi* (1992) – McCarthy presented various gestures that appear to be critical, such as the patriarchal family structure or capitalist exploitation, but for audiences reading them as such begin to second-guess their interpretations, and meanings are destabilised. Meanings are also destabilised in McCarthy’s performances of the 1970s, particularly in *Tubbing* and *Sailor’s Meat*, as discussed in Chapter Two, in which the condiments and foodstuffs he uses act as stand-ins for bodily fluids and substances.

McCarthy is not necessarily concerned with the specific critical point that his work seems to make, perhaps because the points are too

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> McCarthy, ‘In Conversation’.

obvious to miss. McCarthy is hardly known for his subtlety – rather, he produces garish, visceral works that attack ‘what he perceives to be the absurdity of our heroes and sanctuaries’,<sup>33</sup> or that which in culture we find most familiar. McCarthy produces a number of images, scenes, performances and architectures that are by turns familiar and strange, even alienating. Among these may be some personal traumas, some cultural truths, and some completely imaginary. To disregard McCarthy’s work, and WS in particular, as trivial, trashy, splashy or simplistic would be to miss the complexity of references and their extraordinarily disorienting effect on the viewer.

The curatorial attention McCarthy has received over the past few years appears to have established his work firmly within the art world. Although he no longer makes live performance works – and has not done so since 1983 – as I argued throughout this thesis, performance has informed and influenced many different modes of his artistic practice. McCarthy’s approach or response to the canonisation of his work – albeit with a sense of ambivalence – has been partly to develop a series of stand-ins for himself; *The King* perhaps represents the most highly developed version, and most lifelike in visual appearance. Viewers are invited to gaze upon the resplendent figure which provokes readings of hero worship and a fetishisation of the artist’s image or presence. At the same time, these readings are undermined: the installation is housed in an old bank, the only thing of value here is money and materiality, the almost-but-not-quite materialisation of the artist himself is a farcical representation of presence.

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<sup>33</sup> Neil Callender, ‘SHOCK HORROR!’, *Blanche Magazine*, 2011 <<http://www.blanche-magazine.com/shock-horror/>> [accessed 11 January 2013].

Similarly, in *Low Life Slow Life*, McCarthy's presence is everywhere – he curates the exhibition and the show is a journey through his subjective memory of artistic influence – but the body is absent, and the scattered artistic references need to be joined up in order to visualise a complete picture of the artist's practice. In instances when McCarthy does perform, for example in *WS*, he takes on a directorial, patriarchal role, but as is consistent with his early performance work and videos, he 'always takes on the most extreme humiliation himself'.<sup>34</sup> In these works he is both the centre of attention – large, brash, offensive installations in which his sense of taste, propriety and authenticity is always up for questioning – and at the same time he defers such criticisms to wider cultural tastes and behaviours.

As I have argued in this thesis, the trajectory of McCarthy's career and the movement between performance, sculpture, video, and installations has been fluid, although the gradual development to art world star is by no means straightforward. The ever-increasing scale and conditions of his institutional acceptance and the resources of the art world to accommodate his vision – for example, in *WS* – however is noteworthy. McCarthy's apparent ambivalence or resistance to commit to fully critical readings of the art world, whilst explicitly participating in its systems and structures, is a continuing 'problem' in his work. An underlying provocation of my analyses of McCarthy's artistic practice has been to question the efficacy of particular modes of criticality that he draws upon – for example, the co-optation and endorsement of mainstream culture and entertainment. I am cautious not to dismiss McCarthy as having 'sold out' to art world fame –

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<sup>34</sup> Smith, 'Paul McCarthy at Hauser & Wirth'.

since, as I have argued in this thesis, his work offers far more complex readings of individual experience and cultural phenomena. However, the continuing trajectory of his work and expansive, almost industrial, scale installations, such as *WS*, seems to demand a further interrogation of what is at stake in McCarthy's presentation of an apparently self-reflexive criticality as a dominant mode of art making, when this approach increasingly appears to be compromised.

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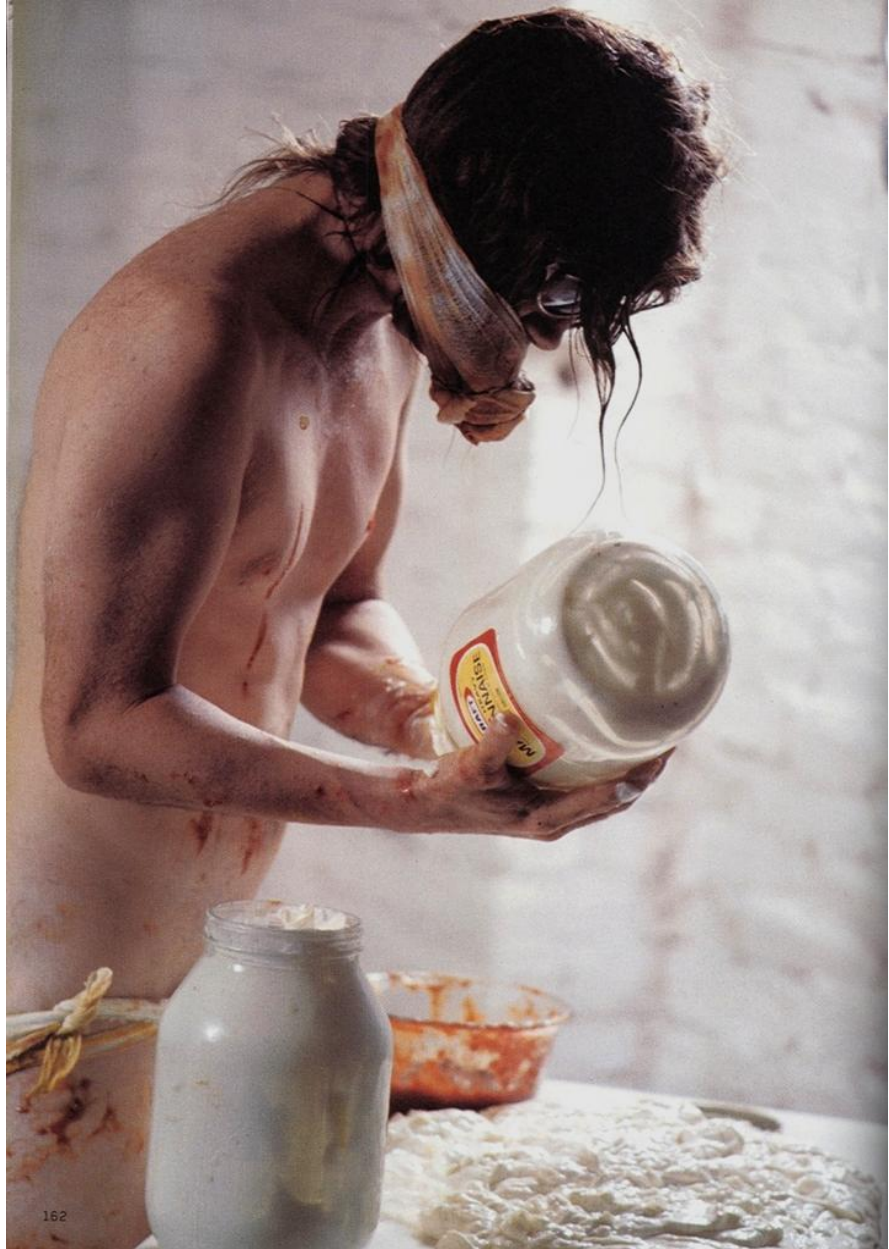
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**Image 1**



**Image 2**





**Image 3**



**Image 4**



**Image 5**



**Image 6**



**Image 7**



**Image 8**



**Image 9**



**Image 10**