

Paul McCarthy

(Salt Lake City, Utah, 1945)

Paul McCarthy's art is a pitiless and satirical portrait of contemporary society. Through performance, sculpture, and video the artist has created a language that, on the one hand, winks ironically at the expressive means coined by industry and by television and, on the other, demonstrates a strong affinity for crucial moments in art history.

His videos and installations reveal the accumulation typical of consumerism stimulated by industrial production, in performances that recall the tone of television soap operas and Walt Disney's animated cartoons. In a theatrical setting that is very close to Pop Art, McCarthy creates performances that are anything but reassuring; nightmares, perversions, and repressed violence are explicated in a theatricality that resembles Expressionist canvases and the gesturalism of body art. Like the Surrealists, McCarthy presents unpredictable oneiric associations, with the conscious intention of upsetting the public and provoking a feeling of discomfort and repulsion in the viewer when faced with these deliberately unpleasant works.

The videos *Tubbing* and *Sailor's Meat*, *Sailor's Delight* are emblematic of the artist's poetics; taboos one comes across in everyday life, such as sexual relationships or the relationship with food, are addressed with excessiveness and violence. Using ketchup, mayonnaise, meat, and plastic dolls, the artist acts aggressively upon his naked body. In *Sailor's Flesh*, for example, McCarthy exposes himself in a performance that is meant to demonstrate sexual ambiguity, wearing a blond wig thrown haphazardly on his head and black lingerie, he appears on an unmade bed, where a blue quilt is covered by pieces of chopped meat. Stereotypes of society are mocked with gaudily artificial and repugnant images and with horrifying and liberating actions that shock the viewer, who is unprepared for this sort of exhibition and hymn to degradation. The space of art allows McCarthy to stage hidden and repressed sides of the human unconscious that would otherwise remain unseen. (EV)