



The Uncanny and the Sublime: The Collaborative Works of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Mike Kelley	4
Paul McCarthy	6
Collaborative Works	7
Family Tyranny: Modeling and Molding.....	7
Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone.....	8
Conclusion	9
Images	11
Appendix I	13
Bibliography	14

Abstract

This research functions as a survey of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy's collaborative works in relation to each artist's individual practice. The scope of the investigation ranges from an analysis of their collaborative works: *Family Tyranny: Modeling and Molding*, and *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone*.

Each collaboration increases in its complexity, making it imperative to study their chronological progression and how each work informed the next one. Authoritarian power structures, as well as social hierarchies are thoroughly analyzed, functioning as a common denominator throughout the work. Simultaneously, both Kelley and McCarthy receive individual attention that distinguishes each person's role within the artwork, as their collaborations reveal truths about one another, separating the infamous pair.

INTRODUCTION

"We are conditioned into our own reality" – Paul McCarthy¹

These immortal words spoken by Paul McCarthy underline the essence of his collaborative works with Mike Kelley. The duo, widely regarded as two of the most influential, if not polemic, artists of our time, has never ceased to shock the public. If not by the grotesque quality of their work, then by the disturbing attitudes their concepts carry, as more often than not, they ring an undisputed truth. Acting as "cultural anthropologists," Kelley and McCarthy expose the nature of our Capitalist society as an authoritarian power structure with an indoctrinating agenda². Most importantly, they deal with themes such as social hierarchies, the linkage between architecture and body, social theory, and memory. These themes are developed in their collaborative works: *Family Tyranny: Modeling and Molding*, and *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone*. It is important to note that each artist's role within the artwork is a reflection of his individual practice, making it imperative to assess both artists' backgrounds.

MIKE KELLEY

Mike Kelley (1954-2012) was born in Detroit, Michigan, to a Roman Catholic family. His father worked maintaining a public school, while his mother was a cook at the Ford Motor Company. Growing up, Kelley attended various Catholic schools that promptly instilled in him a trauma that would go on to inform a great number of his works. Most importantly, he was brought up with a heavy reliance on the ritual:

¹ "Transformation." *Art 21*. Executive Producer Susan Sollins. PBS, 2005.

² Monk, Philip. *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works*. Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000: 10.

“coming out of Catholicism, I have an interest in ritual...my interest in art has been to develop a materialistic ritual. I see all art as [this].”³ Kelley worked with virtually every medium and covered multiple themes; his work is both an insightful critique of the modern world’s epistemological manipulations (particularly American popular culture) and a self-effacing humoristic portrayal of what the art world wanted him to be. Kelley’s work is commonly viewed in association with his childhood trauma, which in reality was never the intention of the artist. His notorious stuffed animals were intended to respond to the 1980s commodity culture, yet it was misconstrued as a reference to child abuse and ultimately, his own abuse.⁴ The artist was amused by his audience’s interpretations and decided to make a great number of his works about his abuse, as he saw it as our “shared culture.” Kelley focused on the presumption that “all motivation is based on some kind of repressed trauma.”⁵ From here, the viewer forms an intrinsic part of his work, which Kelley feels responsible for. Kelley has said of his work:

“My entrance into the art world was through the counter-culture, where it was common practice to lift material from mass culture and ‘pervert’ it to reverse or alter its meaning... Mass culture is scrutinized to discover what is hidden, repressed, within it...I believe that art is socially useful. If it is destructive, it is constructively so... all art is not made for the same audience...I support an art of multiplicity... I like to think that I make my work primarily for those who dislike it. I get pleasure from that idea.”⁶

³ “Memory.” *Art 21*. Executive Producer Susan Sollins. PBS, 2005.

⁴ Isabelle Graw. *Mike Kelley*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999: 19-20.

⁵ “Memory.” *Art 21*. Executive Producer Susan Sollins. PBS, 2005.

⁶ Simpson, Bennett. “The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) presents Mike Kelley” The Museum of Contemporary Art. March 14, 2014.

PAUL MCCARTHY

Paul McCarthy (1945) was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, to a middle-class family. As a kid, he was often involved with constructing huts and houses, instilling in him an attention to architectural constructs. For McCarthy, the use of architecture is “associated with constructing a place, framing, objectivity, and existence, ordering, substitutes, necessity and absurdity.”⁷ The scope of his work ranges from multimedia installations, to sculptural puppetry, to performance pieces that ridicule popular culture, “polite” society, and authority. In his interview for PBS’ *Art 21*, he refers to the practice of making art as a way of tearing down and opening up conventions. As opposed to Mike Kelley, McCarthy is not interested in satisfying the viewer; his responsibility is to the idea itself, and the cathartic process of creating something ephemeral.⁸ McCarthy’s work is often criticized for its use of “gratuitous violence,” however, the artist rejects this notion, stating that this imagery is not only a mockery of film and television, but a “symbolic expression of my own fears and memories which are both unconscious and conscious...performance for me lies within the fact that I’m the action itself.”⁹ He often incorporates valued American icons and myths such as Walt Disney, B-movies, soap operas, and comics into his work, depicting these traditionally “innocent,” or “pure” icons with a sense of malice.¹⁰ When talking about authoritative figures (such as politicians), he states that “these individuals that affect the world are in a way real and in another way, I see them as Mickey Mouse of Santa

⁷ Kristine Stiles. *Paul McCarthy*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996: 17

⁸ “Transformation.” *Art 21*. Executive Producer Susan Sollins. PBS, 2005.

⁹ Kristine Stiles. *Paul McCarthy*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996: 22-23

¹⁰ “Transformation.” *Art 21*. Executive Producer Susan Sollins. PBS, 2005.

Claus...as fabricated sculptures; pieces that recycle into other pieces...[purity and] hygiene [are] the religion of Fascism.”¹¹

COLLABORATIVE WORKS

In the essay *A Twisted Pedagogy*, critic, writer, and curator Philip Monk addresses the underlying principles threaded throughout Kelley and McCarthy’s collaborative works. He begins by describing the emergence of American popular culture as a product of its capitalist development. He posits that this expansion is characterized by a methodical imposition that rules over daily life, inhabitation structures and commerce, meaning that its people function systematically, rather than by traditional values. American “freedom” is an illusion; we are free to function within the set parameters of the Capitalist regime. Further, he states that in America, “the entertainment industry has assumed the task of education...socialization proceeds through seduction...instruction becomes indoctrination...America is a Skinner Box of behavioral manipulation.”¹² Both artists take up repressive family structures as their starting point to critique society’s conditioning, as submission to authority starts with the subjugation of son to father.¹³ This notion of submission to conditioning was then extended to other institutions and cultural representations, particularly mass media, public schools, and even the military. Their work is structured through the complex interactions and dialogue that make up their collaborative process.

Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy first collaborated in a performance piece titled *Family Tyranny: Modeling and Molding* (1987) [figs. 1-3]. It is a videotape inspired by

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Monk, Philip. *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works*. Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000: 10.

¹³ Ibid. 11

1950s television shows, and it consists of an improvised performance by the artists where the roles of submission and authority, i.e. father and son are questioned. At the time it was made, McCarthy was already an established artist who, impressed by Kelley's musical and performative strategies, asked the latter to perform in his work with the only instruction being: "I am the father, you are the son."¹⁴ Throughout the performance, McCarthy (the father) enacts a series of punishments to his radical son (Kelley) whilst stating: "my daddy made me do this; you can do this to your son."¹⁵ Here, the artists are admonishing authoritative structures by not merely submitting to them, but by assuming both roles. McCarthy saw this performance as a way of breaking away from this condition, as a way of extrapolating himself.¹⁶ On role-playing, Kelley states that "I was getting quite a bit of pressure from my father to 'act more normal'...to spite him I took up sewing- not because I had any interest in it but just to piss him off."¹⁷

The first "true" collaboration between Kelley and McCarthy, *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone* (1992) [figs. 4-5], consists of an architectural construction and a performative videotape. It appropriates the Joanna Spyri's children's story of *Heidi* (see Appendix I). Adopted by Hollywood with the 1937 film version starring Shirley Temple, *Heidi* "has been transformed in the

¹⁴ Monk, Philip. *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works*. Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000: 11.

¹⁵ Ibid. 11.

¹⁶ "Transformation." *Art 21*. Executive Producer Susan Sollins. PBS, 2005.

¹⁷ Graw, Isabelle. "Mike Kelley." In *PressPlay: Contemporary Artists in Conversation*, 380-395. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005: 380

American popular consciousness into a chain of nostalgic signifiers.”¹⁸ As McCarthy puts it: “Heidi becomes Americanized in a sort of dysfunctional horror film.”¹⁹ The choice of this particular story functioned as a vehicle for the artists to address contrasting notions, such as urban versus rural; nature versus culture; health versus sickness. In this light, the artists juxtapose European ideals with American nostalgia, parting from the idea that “this condition (nostalgia) comes from an ache for but disdain of origins, a national Oedipus complex regarding European traditions and motifs, particularly those pertaining to family life and individuality...we can perpetually market these...to ourselves. We collect them, admire them, reject them.”²⁰ Family disfunctionality is also addressed, as the roles of father and son from *Family Tyranny* are mimicked here by Grandfather and Peter. Furthermore, *Heidi*’s ultimate moral tale of nature as “good,” and city as “bad,” speaks to McCarthy’s criticism of the American ideal of beauty and hygiene. Heidi is the quintessential embodiment of purity, of childhood innocence, with an “insistence on the role of beauty as correctness, we are still in the realm of instruction and, ultimately, discipline.”²¹

CONCLUSION

As two of the most polemic, influential, and revered artists of our time, it comes as no surprise that Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy’s collaborative works posed a disturbing critique on the nature of our modern, hyper-Capitalist society. Addressing

¹⁸ Martin, Timothy. *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works*. Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000: 22.

¹⁹ Monk, Philip. *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works*. Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000: 14.

²⁰ Martin, Timothy. *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works*. Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000: 22.

²¹ Monk, Philip. *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works*. Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000: 13.

themes such as social hierarchies, authoritative power structures, and memory, these artists remind us that “we are conditioned into our reality.” American popular culture and entertainment have become the nation’s *a priori*; the source of all truth. Both artists come from differing backgrounds, using art as a means to come to terms with personal traumas. However, it is important to note that their collaborative work transcends their individuality into a grander statement that goes beyond what each artist is “about.” This renders the act of contrasting them fruitless, as their very differences are what make up the work, and what make it so compelling.

REFERENCED IMAGES



Fig. 1) McCarthy, Paul; Kelley, Mike. Family Tyranny: Modeling and Molding. 1987
Source: moma.org



Fig. 2) McCarthy, Paul; Kelley, Mike. Family Tyranny: Modeling and Molding. 1987
Source: moma.org



Fig. 3) McCarthy, Paul; Kelley, Mike. *Family Tyranny: Modeling and Molding*. 1987
Source: moma.org



Fig. 4) McCarthy, Paul; Kelley, Mike. *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone*. 1992
Source: www.art21.org



Fig. 5) McCarthy, Paul; Kelley, Mike. *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone*. 1992
Source: www.art21.org

APPENDIX I

The orphan child *Heidi* first lives with her aunt Dete, but Dete would like to concentrate on her career. So she brings Heidi to her grandfather, a queer old man living in an alpine cottage far from the next village (he is therefore called Alm-Uncle, *Alpöhi* or *Almöhi* in German). Alm-Uncle is good-hearted but mistrusts anybody and wants to keep the child from all evils of the world. So he refuses to send Heidi to school; instead she goes to the pastures, together with Peter, a shepherd boy looking after the goats (*Geissenpeter* = goat-Peter in German). This (all too harmonious) alpine idyll finds a sudden end when aunt Dete comes in again and brings Heidi to Frankfurt (Germany) where she shall stay with Clara, the paralyzed daughter of a rich family, and learn something.

Thanks to the grandmother of Clara, Heidi learns to read but she can't get acquainted to the strict discipline in a bourgeois upper class house (personified by governess Fraulein Rottenmeier). She is very lonesome and gets depressed by the gray anonymous city. Heidi becomes ill of *homesickness*, she starts to walk in her sleep. Miss Rottenmeier is alarmed, not because of the fate of the poor child, but rather because she thinks that there are ghosts in the old house. Finally Clara's father Herr Stresemann and the sympathetic doctor of the family decide to stay up till midnight and find out about the ghosts. When the doctor sees Heidi walking around in her sleep, he finds the right diagnosis and sends her back to the alps.

Next summer, Clara visits Heidi there. They go to the pastures and Heidi shows Clara all the beauty of her world. Peter gets terribly jealous, and in a moment when he feels unobserved, he pushes the empty wheelchair down to the valley so it gets smashed. Clara wants to see the flowers and is forced to walk - and her desire is strong enough that she overcomes her handicap. Healings at body, spirit and soul in that healthy Alpine world - end well, all well.

*Summary taken from: <http://heidi-children-story-books.all-about-switzerland.info/>

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