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**When is Ketchup just Ketchup? : Toward a Sociological Reading of Paul McCarthy's Early
Video Art**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In much of the scholarship about Paul McCarthy's video and performance work, the artist's use of food has been described in terms of its anthropomorphic qualities-its ability to masquerade as excrement or blood. Paul McCarthy's historical moment, though, prompts a different understanding of his work, specifically his use of food. The mid-70's saw incredible changes in the ways food was bought, sold and processed. It is the purpose of this thesis to resist the impulse to sensationalize his antics or frame them in terms of their psychosis in order to analyze how in McCarthy's work functions as a critique of the rapidly changing American food industry, specifically through McCarthy's treatment of ketchup and his use of meat. Through the use of commercial food products, this thesis also describes how an art historical connection to Pop Art can be made and provides several alternatives to art historical genealogies proposed for McCarthy's work.

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Toward a Sociological Reading: Alternatives to Psychological Understanding of Paul McCarthy's Early Video Art

In 1970, Paul McCarthy exhibited his first work using ketchup. The work was *Ketchup Sandwich*. The artist sculpted a cube out of double panes of glass. The two-ply glass had Heinz Tomato Ketchup pressed between the panes. He exhibited the cube with the sticky ketchup bottles that were used in the making of the object. This work has historically been read as a ruptured, bleeding Minimalist cube, as the work does have some formal similarities to minimalist sculpture—mainly the cube shape and lack of gallery pedestal. However, the similarities to Minimalism end beyond formal considerations. The cube is displayed with a plethora of ketchup bottles. Interpreting this work solely as a critique or reference to Minimalism is not satisfactory. It does not account for the glut of actual ketchup bottles displayed as a part of the sculpture. If minimalism was a movement focused on individual bodies and the phenomenological experience of the viewer, McCarthy's sculpture fails in its lack of self-referentiality to art-world discourses. The work points elsewhere, beyond the gallery and the viewing body to American consumer culture, particularly commercial food products. In a review of Paul McCarthy's installation *Paul McCarthy's Chocolate Factory* at Maccarone Gallery in Chelsea, Kate Taylor describes his use of food in the following way, "The artist Paul McCarthy has long employed food as a

material in his work-particularly viscous substances such as ketchup, mayonnaise and chocolate, which he has used as stand-ins for the bodily fluids they most closely resemble.”¹ In much of the scholarship about Paul McCarthy’s video and performance work, the artist’s use of food has been described in terms of its anthropomorphic qualities-its ability to masquerade as excrement or blood. The medium of many of his videos and performances often is consumer food items that resemble bodily fluids: ketchup, mayonnaise and chocolate. Scholarly interpretations of this work have utilized the critical tropes of psychoanalysis to explain this facet of McCarthy’s oeuvre. McCarthy’s frequent use of mayonnaise and ketchup certainly contains a distinctly pathological element that lends itself to psychoanalytic inquiry, which has prompted exciting scholarship. The grotesque, maddened sense of many of McCarthy’s projects is the proverbial car wreck-provoking both intrigue and horror, while exposing the most fundamentally frightening elements of the human psychology. While the work itself calls for a certain type of interpretation, McCarthy’s own personality plays a major role in the type of interpretations applied to his work. McCarthy’s persona (which may or may not be interpreted as a work in itself) calls for a scholarly response steeped in psychoanalysis. McCarthy often presents himself as an (at best) an eccentric and (at worst) a veritable madman. In an

¹ Kate Taylor, “Paul and the Chocolate Factory,” W Magazine, November, 2007. Accessed March 23, 2011. http://www.wmagazine.com/artdesign/2007/11/paul_mccarthy.

interview for Bomb magazine, when asked if he was happy with his career, McCarthy responded,

Sometimes I know why, how, this, that. Sometimes I don't. I collect telephones. Send me your phones. Some days I like my shoes. Some days I hate them. Not enough time to think about him or her. Pushing the wrong button signifies a squint. If you squint it muffles my voice—wipe yourself on the carpet, and yoga is good for you. Hold your knees and scoot forward.²

Because McCarthy has this particular ethos, and performs in many of his works, much scholarship focuses on the psychosis of the performances and the artist. The argument here is not that these aspects are absent, but that McCarthy's performances have a distinct sociological reading, that is complimentary to existing psychoanalytic interpretations.

Paul McCarthy began exhibiting his work in 1969, when he graduated from the University of Utah, and continued his study, receiving an MFA in film, video and the arts from the University of Southern California in 1972. The artist primarily exhibited on the West Coast for roughly the first half of his almost 40 year career. McCarthy has a large body of work, but did not enjoy a huge commercial success until fairly late in his career. McCarthy was first invited to show in the Whitney Biennial in 1997, after he had been exhibiting for almost thirty years. The first retrospective of his work was shown in 2001 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Jennie Klein writes in her essay, *Paul McCarthy: Rites of Masculinity*, "For the first time, then,

² Weissman, B., "Paul McCarthy." <http://www.bombsite.com/issues/84/articles/2564>.

McCarthy's impressive oeuvre has been more or less assembled in one place, leading the viewer to wonder why it has taken so long to recognize McCarthy's significance as a pioneer of performance and video art."³ Now, the segregation between the east and west coast art worlds seems inconsequential, as it is not uncommon for artists to show in multiple art worlds. But, in the beginning of McCarthy's career, that line was very much present and West Coast artists often enjoyed significantly less national recognition than their East Coast counterparts. When McCarthy finally made a formal arrival in New York via the Whitney, scholars and critics were quick to recognize the significance of McCarthy's body of work. Klein's essay on McCarthy is just one of many writings on McCarthy that cropped up after the Biennial. Because of the delay in national and international interest in McCarthy's work, most scholarship on the artist is very recent. Working on an artist who was mostly on the periphery of the New York art world for the majority of his career presents problems in terms of situating the work within an artistic tradition.⁴ As McCarthy gained popularity, he began to be discussed alongside artists working simultaneously in the 1970's such as Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and Allen Kaprow. Paint and plaster, along with McCarthy's physical body were the primary medium of these early performances. In an early

³ Jennie Klein, "Paul McCarthy: Rites of Masculinity," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* - *PAJ* 68 (2001): 15. Accessed April 10th, 2011.

⁴ Dan Cameron notes in his essay, *The Mirror Stage*, that McCarthy was very much in communication with the New York art world, and was influenced by other global artistic practices and groups. His work, according to Cameron, cannot be interpreted as operating in relative isolation prior to the Biennial. My argument, however, is that scholarly interest peaked after he gained institutional fame.

work, *Mountain Bowling*, McCarthy documented one of his early actions. The artist dropped a bowling ball down a mountain. The resulting work is a photograph documenting the event. Similar to Burden, the danger of this action is eclipsed in the photo. The resulting documentation is a bowling ball, in an outdoor setting. Other actions such as *Plaster Your Head and One Arm into a Wall* (1972) and *Whipping a Wall with Paint* (1974) inserted a bodily presence into spaces of consumption-storefronts and warehouses. The frenzied actions of the artist parodied artistic creation.

In the mid-seventies, a shift occurred. McCarthy's empty warehouse performances happened with less frequency. In a critical turning point, Paul McCarthy began using food as a medium, a practice that continues in his current work. As McCarthy began to use food more explicitly in his work, his work was compared less to Kaprow and Burden and more to Herman Nitsch and the Vienna Actionists, a comparison that McCarthy contested. The Actionists were concerned with ideas of Catholic ritual and sacrifice. Where McCarthy used ketchup, the actionists used real blood and live animals in trancelike performances. McCarthy states, "Vienna is not Los Angeles. My work came out of kids' television in Los Angeles. I didn't go through Catholicism and World War II as a teenager, I didn't live in a European environment. People make references to Viennese art without really questioning the

fact that there is a big difference between ketchup and blood.”⁵ The food, however is often read as if it is actual blood, semen or excrement. Included in this literature review are several highly cited articles and essays on the artist. They represent a sample types of interpretations that have been used to explain McCarthy’s work. All except Jennie Klein’s essay are taken from monographs and exhibition catalogues that were published in the last fifteen years (following the Whitney Biennial in 1997). Klein’s essay is included as an example of a scholarly psychoanalytic reading of McCarthy’s work.

In one seminal essay on McCarthy, from the Phaidon monograph on the artist, Ralph Rugoff describes McCarthy’s approach, “ McCarthy has cross-bred and recombined pop culture cliches, charting out a disorienting terrain where horror and absurdity, kiddie programs and psychosexual critique, are inextricably interlaced.”⁶ It is the tension created by the mixed metaphors in McCarthy’s work that construct meaning. The Disney-fied is coupled with the perverse; American kitsch is (sometimes literally) ingested and vomited back on top of itself. These are types of polemics that characterize Paul McCarthy’s body of work. Rugoff resists easy categorization of McCarthy’s oeuvre, noting that the work is often interstitial in nature. Rugoff discusses McCarthy’s performances as a space in which the physical

⁵ Magnus af Petersens, “Paul McCarthy's 40 years of Hard Work-an Attempt at a Summary,” In Head Shop/Shop Head, ed. Lars Nittve et al. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet Press, 2006), 20.

⁶ Ralph Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood,” In Paul McCarthy, ed. Kristine Stiles, Ralph Rugoff, Giacinto Di Pietranronio. (London: Phaidon, 1996), 32.

and psychological boundaries of the body are ruptured. Rugoff describes this process, “Whether erupting in mayonnaise ejaculations and ketchup hemorrhages or ingesting raw hamburger and puking real vomit, McCarthy not only assaulted taboos but shuffled cultural reference points with disconcerting disregard for the categories and distinctions that underlie our everyday notions of order.”⁷ Rugoff invokes the rhetorical tropes of scholarship about the body art of the 1970’s. Rugoff notes that many of McCarthy’s “characters”⁸ are ambiguous in gender and evade “sexual categorization, at times crossing from one gender to another-in mid-performance, the artist might cut off an artificial penis and implant a vagina-yet most of the time it would be more accurate to say his characters seemed between genders, as if occupying a third, transient sex.”⁹ The performative gendered body here, however, is not confessional or autobiographical. For Rugoff, the body is a metaphor for “systems and conventions that define our world.”¹⁰ In this context, McCarthy’s use of food products articulates cultural anxieties about regression and desublimation. The work is about the assault on the body, in all of its capacities-physical, social, intellectual and a regression to a “primal scene of arrested pleasures, spurting liquids, and polluted

⁷ Ibid, 33.

⁸ Rugoff uses quotations around characters several times in his essay. The quotes are present to indicate that these “characters” are not wholly characters, as they are almost always identifiable as McCarthy, himself. Because of this, many of the “characters” actions are interpreted as the performative actions of the artist, which warrants comparisons to the body art of the 1970’s, particularly feminist production.

⁹ Rugoff, 35.

¹⁰ Ibid.

boundaries.”¹¹ Rugoff provides a more nuanced account of McCarthy’s food based performances. In a discussion of McCarthy’s *Hot Dog* from 1974, Rugoff notes that much of the initial writing on the piece found precedent in either of two places: the ritualistic performances of the Vienna Actionists and Carolee Schneeman’s *Meat Joy* or Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty. He cites a 1983 Artforum essay that used what Rugoff deems “archaic and Dionysian terms”¹² to note a perceived lack of depth in the scholarship about McCarthy in the 1970’s and 80’s. Rugoff has two main points of contention. His first point is that his work have an obvious tie to concurrent feminist production of the same time period in California (Eleanor Antin and Lyn Hershman are his examples). The other point of contention is that the work has a lot to do with horror films. Rugoff is interested in the ways the McCarthy’s work is deliberately obvious about it’s artifice. In the work, the ketchup becomes an obvious stand-in for blood, a part of a larger interest in artificiality which is played out through cheap, drug-store masks and a low-fi aesthetic that points to the “twilight status of discount illusions.”¹³ In this case, the ketchup has some specificity in it’s origins, but mostly functions as an innocuous stand it for actual blood, meant to showcase artifice and not *ketchup-ness*. Rugoff states,

¹¹ Ibid, 36.

¹² Ibid, 45.

¹³ Ibid.

As with other material elements in his performances, the semantic value of ketchup continually rotates from reference to reference in a grisly and comic metamorphoses. There is no single 'truth' to this material, only an ad hoc emotional resonance that derives not from the inherent qualities of the condiments but from changing contexts and, ultimately out susceptibility to symbolic manipulation.¹⁴

In this context, the specificity of the medium is its flexibility in representation and the artist's manipulation of perception.

In a catalogue essay from a retrospective of McCarthy's work titled *Head Shop/Shop Head* at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Magnus af Petersens tackles McCarthy's interest in ketchup in a similar manner.¹⁵ Petersens discusses *Ketchup Sandwich*. He states, "Between the sheets McCarthy has poured ketchup that is squeezed out by the weight of the glass. Here, the hollow minimalist cube is replaced by a cube with its contents leaking-the ketchup most obviously symbolizing blood. This is the first work in which McCarthy uses ketchup, and ingredient was to become something of a trademark for him."¹⁶ Petersens is reading the ketchup in this work as a hemorrhage of the white cube-an indicator of a critique of minimalism. The author is confident in his reading of the ketchup as a stable signifier for blood. He doesn't account for why McCarthy would choose to exhibit the piece with the dozens of empty ketchup bottles that the "blood" came from.

¹⁴ Ibid, 46.

¹⁵ Magnus af Petersens, "Paul McCarthy's 40 years of Hard Work-an Attempt at a Summary," In *Head Shop/Shop Head*, ed. Lars Nittve et al. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet Press, 2006), 12.

¹⁶ Ibid.

While Petersens's reading of the ketchup is almost boringly literal, another essay from the *Head Shop/ Shop Head* catalogue takes a decidedly more metaphorical stance. For Iwona Blazwick, the use of the commercial food item offers an space for desublimation, in a Freudian sense. In her essay *Masks, Statues and Automata: Paul McCarthy as Figurative Sculptor*, Blazwick discusses the use of food in McCarthy's work as such,

The props are fetishes, symbolic of death and desire. Their infantilism is always defiled. Through assemblage some gain genitalia; all are spattered with liquid. Like dried blood, shit and indeed all organic waste; McCarthy's 'palette' always tends to varying shades of brown. His painted objects look desiccated, sticky, unhygienic. Their dopey appeal is transformed into abjection by their apparent encounter with excrement, the great taboo of the human body. Yet, at the same time, it is only ketchup, mayonnaise, chocolate sauce. McCarthy transforms these processed food stuffs into paint which in turn mimics bodily fluids. Their containers, also accorded the status of sculpture, are offered as analogues for the vagina(mayonnaise jar), the penis (squirty ketchup bottle) and the anus (chocolate syrup can).¹⁷

Blazwick's treatment of the condiment is similar to Rugoff's and Petersen's in the sense that the ketchup becomes blood, but in this case, the containers are also implicated in the transformation. The ketchup bottle, for instance becomes a metaphorical penis. It is the ideological confrontation of the private, bodily reality and societal taboos that these objects participate in a process of abjection. Blazwick notes that the object not only become genitalia, they have genitalia through a process of

¹⁷ Blazwick, Iwona. "Masks, Statues and Automata: Paul McCarthy as Figurative Sculptor." In *Head Shop/Shop Head*. exh. cat., (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2007), 28.

assemblage. She states, “McCarthy has used props to give birth and to enact both coitus and castration.”¹⁸ Blazwick approaches the material in through psychoanalysis, particularly through Kristeva’s conception of the abject. The material reality of ketchup and its stake as an emblem of a certain type of consumer object is not a primary concern for Blazwick, as the ketchup is used, in her opinion, as blood or excrement, and the bottle *becomes* the penis.

Jennie Klein notes in her essay, *Paul McCarthy: Rites of Masculinity* that it is McCarthy’s use of anthropomorphic materials that historically (albeit superficially, she notes) situated his work in relation to the Vienna Actionists. On the surface, the work resembles the work of Herman Nische, in its form, however Klein argues that the work of the Actionists is about a “mythological potential of (Catholic) ritual and blood sacrifice and the artist/ high priest.”¹⁹ Klein argues that the major conceptual thread through McCarthy’s oeuvre is in interested undermining a myth of a potent male genius. She states, “McCarthy’s performances of the mid to late seventies can be read as an outgrowth of his earlier concerns with exposing the seams of an otherwise seamless relationship between artistic greatness, artistic creation, and phallic potency.”²⁰ In this reading, McCarthy’s work is not acting in relationship to the psychology of the artist and viewer, but in relation to performance’s creation myth-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Klein, *Rites of Masculinity*, 15.

²⁰ Ibid, 16.

Abstract Expressionism. The work is about the history of a certain practice and its historiography, as opposed to mythological or psychological truths. Through this reading, the ketchup and food materials are ways of “transgressing painting and a painterly sensibility.”²¹ Klein notes that McCarthy was trained as a painter, like Kaprow. Kaprow and McCarthy had a long relationship, and Klein finds similar aims in McCarthy’s early performances and Kaprow’s Happenings. Both practices are inspired by the performative action²² of Pollock and responded in different ways. Klein sees a trajectory in McCarthy’s practice-starting with using paint in his performances as an obvious parody of Abstract Expressionism and later evolving into ketchup, mayonnaise and saliva. The materials here become a tool in destabilizing the male artist/genius. The ketchup is not wholly ketchup, or blood, or paint; the ketchup instead becomes a tool for disgust which ultimately intends to confuse art-historical truths about gender and art-making.

Another paradigm has also been useful in interpreting McCarthy’s actions.

Amelia Jones opens her essay *Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity* with an analysis of McCarthy’s 1984 performance *Inside Out Olive Oil*. In the performance, McCarthy slathered his body with mustard and ketchup and then crawled through a decapitated and limbless body made out of

²¹ Ibid, 14.

²² Klein notes that both artists were included in *Out of Action: Between Performance and the Action* in the spring of 1998 at LA MoCA. The show was curated by Lisa Phillips and Dan Cameron and emphasized Pollock’s role as “father” of contemporary performance.

plastic and wire. The artist squirmed and screeched in the body's interior, eventually lifting the body onto a table, and allowing it to birth him. The sounds of the artist were amplified by microphones inside the cavity of the body. Jones reads this act as a "rupture" of the coherent masculine self. McCarthy's performance functions as taboo because it exposes the ways borders and bodies rupture, collapse and become de-sublimated and regressed. For Jones, desublimation is a process by which the subconscious regressed behavior of an individual surfaces. The boundaries between the inside and outside of the body, performer and audience, self and other are simultaneously created and destroyed. The socialized subject, that is properly sublimated and repressed is exposed as opposite, yet one in the same. She states,

..he is the masculine 'doctor' who assists in the difficult delivery, the 'baby' expelled from this giant plastic 'womb' and the 'mother' herself, instigator of this procreative act. Covered in what appear to be bodily fluids (but smell like ball-park food), he is the fetal interior to this architectural womb, while he also, a Dr. Frankenstein, controls it from the outside, making it cry out in pain. ²³

Jones does not provide an explanation as to why the artist uses condiments to symbolize bodily fluids, except to note the smell. The smell does situate the viewing body in an interstitial space. The body is both in the interior of the performance space, yet transported through familiar smells to a larger public space. The use of food also points to Jones's framework of inside/outside. The process of ingestion is a literal

²³ Amelia Jones, "Paul McCarthy." In Paul McCarthy, N. Museum. (New York, Hatje Cantz, 2000) 257.

transportation of food from the exterior to the interior place of the body. The process of desublimation is the process by which the instinctual is replaced by a more socially directed form of interaction. It is because of this that food so easily is able to articulate sublimation. Taboos related to ingestion and civilization are firmly entrenched in the civilized psyche. In other words, the primitive, instinctual ingestion of food is in stark contrast to the type of civilized dining that characterizes modern society. It is the sublimated psyche's fear of the primitive, the object that reinforces taboos related to eating and to food. McCarthy's performances expose the cultural anxiety about what lurks behind a civilized facade and what happens when the most basic of actions reverts to instinct. In Jones's analysis, the ideas of food and ingestion is important. However, she is not so much interested in what specific foods they are, besides the chosen materials ability symbolize internal and psychological rupture through their likeness to bodily fluids.

The variety and depth of analysis that McCarthy's work has generated certainly speaks to the complexity of the work, both conceptually and materially. However, in the light of all of the important and interesting scholarship about McCarthy's work, a question still remains. When is ketchup just ketchup and what interpretive possibilities does that open in regards to McCarthy's work?

The two subsequent chapters of this thesis explore these questions. In Chapter 2, Paul McCarthy's early videos are discussed in relationship to major changes in American food politics following World War Two. Four early works by the artist are

used as evidence of McCarthy's engagement with the particularities of a national food history. This chapter will argue that the developments in the production and marketing of food in America from the 1950's onward had a distinct impact on ideas about food, and that McCarthy's work may be specifically engaged with these issues.

The third chapter of this thesis will explore the ways in which McCarthy's work has been framed in art historical terms, and contests several proposed lineages for his work. This chapter argues that McCarthy's use of television in his work aligns him more with Pop than other art historical traditions he has been linked to. This chapter plots out specific ideological moments of overlap with Pop art, and discusses the ways in which McCarthy may be engaged in Pop practice.

Ketchup, Meat and the American Food Industry

Ketchup is a trademark material for Paul McCarthy. From first piece he made using to material (*Ketchup Sandwich, 1970*) to his present work, the gooey condiment has been a staple in McCarthy's videos, performances, sculptures, drawings and photography. As discussed in the previous section, this material has been understood as a signifier for blood, a stand in for the bodily that simultaneously exposes the abject and a Disney-esque fantasy of American consumerism. This chapter will explore the significant developments in the marketing, sale and production of food in the post-war period and posit a potential influence on McCarthy's work from the same period.

The implicit understanding of ketchup as Americana is unilaterally accepted; there is a particular American-ness to Heinz Ketchup. It is true, tomato ketchup is an American phenomenon which is as ubiquitous as it is tasty. There is a particular history of ketchup however, that lead to the condiment's fame. Roland Barthes states in his essay *Toward a Psycho-sociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*,

When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. That is to say that it is not just an indicator of

a set of more or less conscious motivations, that that is is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication.²⁴

In the Barthesian sense, food becomes a sign for a cultural situation from which it emerges. Food can be understood as an emblem of a system of communication, that is a discursive system that encompasses many arenas beyond the substantive. There is a cultural specificity to tomato ketchup that developed out of and comes to represent a complex network of post-war food politics. Tomato ketchup is able to become the complex web of signification it is in McCarthy's work because of specific political and economic conditions that emerged after the second world war.

After the second World War, peacetime prosperity and the aggressive pursuit of the American Dream pushed returning veterans to produce consumer goods at an impressive rate. American G.I.s were eager to being their lives that had been put on hold during the war-time. The American public was also eager to return to a peacetime existence. The "baby boom" generation began to assert different needs than the generations of the past, and the war-time productivity quickly morphed into a national push for prosperity, domesticity and convenience. Jobs expanded after the war and government programs such as the GI Bill prompted upward mobility through education and job training. Many young families had children when the soldiers returned. Suburbs developed as a utopian place to raise a family, outside of the close

²⁴ Roland Barthes, "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." in *Food and Culture*. ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2008), 29.

quarters of the city and promised room for yards and swimming pools, all facilitated by the affordability of the automobile. Suburban sprawl put new emphasis on automobiles and a new type of store emerged-the supermarket. An increase in refrigerator sales also allowed consumers to purchase more food at one time than ever before. The manufacturers of appliances and automobiles adapted their patriotic war-time themes to praise of middle-class domesticity, which had become the core of the mass-market. Women, who had held independent, industrial jobs during the war-time effort, had a new job of re-binding family ties through a return to the duties of the home, and food preparation was a large portion of that. Media of the time, particularly sitcoms, articulated this new view of the domestic sphere. Harvey Levenstein notes in his book *Paradox of Plenty*,

“Harriet Nelson, co-star of “Ozzie and Harriet,” seemed to hardly ever leave the kitchen. She spent much of each program surrounded by gleaming new electric appliances manufactured by the sponsor, Hotpoint. Wearing a particularly frilly apron to make the point that this required no hard work at all, she would confidently bake cookies or prepare lunch while calmly holding conversations with manic children or commenting on her husband’s latest harebrained scheme-no mean feat in the days before video tape.”²⁵

²⁵ Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 103.

However, financial reality set in for many families in the 1960's.²⁶ Many middle class families discovered that the increasing cost of the American Dream required many women to go (back) to work. Women's household duties did not decrease, so food companies began marketing new types of convenience foods. In many ways, the convenience food became an emblem for American ingenuity and the ability to save labor time through technology, even in the kitchen. Another aspect of the post-war industry's structure was a drive to increase the value of goods through shelf-stabilization. This was made possible through "prepackaging, processing and precooking."²⁷ Levenstein notes that when the president of Campbell's Soup was asked why people wanted processed foods he stated, "To save trouble. The average housewife isn't interested in making a slave of herself. When you do it day after day [cooking] tends to get a little tiresome, and the young housewife is really less interested in her reputation as a home cook today...She doesn't regard slaving in the kitchen as an essential of a good wife and mother."²⁸ The growing interest in "designer" foods also made use of the chemists who were involved in the war-time effort. The initial ideas of using army technology to reduce all foods to powders and capsules never really caught on, but scientists played a crucial role in food production

²⁶ This assertion is much more complicated than this paper allows for. Much of the financial reality was related to many women returning to jobs that paid them much less than their male counterparts.

²⁷ Ibid, 108.

²⁸ Ibid, 109.

starting in the 1950's. Levenstein notes a "Golden Age" in American food chemistry from 1949-1959 where chemists developed over 400 food additives to aid in processing and preserving foods. This research reached the general public in the 1960's when the market began desiring foods that were more convenient and quicker to prepare. The new use of science to manufacture food allowed for greater flexibility and variety in the types of foods that were available to American consumers. The ability to nutritionally enhance foods also changed the landscape. Chemists, now able to isolate nutrients, and transfer them to other foods ushered in the age of the "enriched food."²⁹ Levenstein notes that in this process, taste became secondary to economy of production. He states, "At the producers' level, everyone involved in breeding, whether of animals or plants, understood that there had to be trade-offs for gains in economy, appearance, or ship-ability, and taste was the most easily traded-off quality."³⁰ The types of foods that were produced during this period were designer, in every sense of the word.

The popularization of commercial food products that occurred after the second world war was largely indebted to television. While the new kitchens of the 1950's promised convenience and ease to the housewife in meal preparation, the television promised a new type of leisure and relaxation, affordable to the rapidly growing middle class. The television also multiplied opportunities for commercial advertising.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

The TV dinner was introduced along with the television boom of the 1950's. In 1947, one of the first cooking shows, *In the Kelvinator Kitchen*, hit the airwaves, providing the housewife with simple recipes, all prepared using Kelvinator appliances. By the 1960's, the cooking show, in its modern incarnation, was born. Favorite programs included *The French Chef* (with host Julia Child), *Joyce Chen Cooks* (the first person of color to host a broadcast cooking show) , and *The Galloping Gourmet* (who was more well-known for his innuendo than recipes). This type of programming began in the 1950's and became pervasive in the 1970's, when programming expanded through the development of cable television.

In many ways, art from this period reiterated the values of late capitalism present in the redesign of the American food market. Paul McCarthy began using food in his performances around the same time many of these major changes were occurring. In one early performance from 1974, Paul McCarthy performed a piece titled *Heinz Ketchup Sauce* at the University of Southern California Medical Center. At the start of the performance, McCarthy opens the bottle of ketchup with his mouth. He sucks the cap into his mouth, keeping it there for the duration of the performance. He empties the bottle of ketchup into a small white dish and begins to rub the ketchup onto his naked body with the ketchup. He begins with his legs, then travels upward, spending a considerable amount of time rubbing his exposed genitals with the ketchup. He moves his body into a variety of positions (kneeling, squatting) on the

table. The table is covered with a white table cloth. He writhes on top of the table, effectively dirtying the tablecloth. The artist's slow heavy breathing combines with the clicking sound made by the bottle lid moving around in McCarthy's mouth. Saliva begins to drool out of McCarthy's mouth as he tenses his body in an animalistic fashion.

This performance occurred in the same year as *Ketchup Sandwich* and marks the beginning of a significant trend in McCarthy's work. The artist uses ketchup here in a specific way. The ketchup, a known symbol of American capitalism, interacts with the body. The industrial setting of the piece is familiar, and has a precedent in earlier McCarthy videos such as *Face Painting-Floor, White Line* (1972) and *Pissing, Microphone* (1972). In these pieces, the action was contained by an industrial space, a practice that was common in the 1970's as storefront and warehouse space became readily available in urban areas. McCarthy's earlier works often focused on bodily fluids (spit, urine mostly) or on art-world materials such as paint and plaster. *Heinz Ketchup Sauce* is McCarthy's first video using food. This piece is rarely talked about but provides interesting insight into the way in which ketchup began to be used in McCarthy's work.

The ketchup here is named. It is Heinz Ketchup, not to be confused with blood, paint or any other material. The artist specifically names the product, effectively incorporating its commercial heritage into the performance. The thick

condiment, which is loaded with cultural significance, intermingles with McCarthy's body. Ketchup has become increasingly industrialized and removed from human means of production. In *Heinz Ketchup Sauce*, McCarthy takes the commercialized food product and brings it to his own body.

The history of the condiment is of importance to the understanding of this performance. The Heinz Corporation (a favorite bottle for McCarthy) was one of the first ketchup companies to commercially advertise tomato ketchup. As early as 1926, the Heinz Corporation advertised in print media such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies Home Journal*. Heinz also advertised on the radio. Culinary historian Andrew F. Smith notes in his book, *Pure Ketchup: A History of America's National Condiment* that Heinz Ketchup advertised three main virtues. The first was the "professional and thorough approach that that Heinz took in preparing its ketchup." The second was the slowness with which the ketchup came out of the bottle—a virtue in that other ketchups (the European kind implied) came out quickly, thus had less tomato in them. The third virtue was the popularity of Heinz brand ketchup. Smith notes that by "1935 the company announced that it was not only the largest-selling ketchup, but it was 'The Favorite Ketchup of 110 nations!'" Heinz tomato gained popularity steadily from the commercialization of the product around the turn of the century, only briefly interrupted by the "salsa challenge" of 1993 when salsa briefly out-sold tomato ketchup. Ketchup quickly became a symbol for the rapid

entanglement of the food industry and the government. In 1981, US President Ronald Reagan's budget director, David Stockman, proposed classifying ketchup as a vegetable as part of Reagan's budget cuts for federally financed school lunch programs.

Ketchup was named America's national condiment in 1896 by the New York Tribune. The H. J. Heinz company, which had made its reputation on pickles and horseradish, announced that there was no condiment that was more widely liked than ketchup. Ketchup never caught on in other nations, although it was available there. The British version was thinner than the American variety. Americans consumption of tomatoes increased significantly around the turn of the century, and canning enabled tomatoes and tomato ketchup to be eaten year-round.

The packaging for tomato ketchup changed significantly in the 1960's and 1970's and greatly increased sales. The H. J. Heinz Company introduced the Vol-Pak, a plastic bag filled with ketchup. Designed for foodservice operators, restaurants placed the bag on a rack and refilled plastic bottles. The Vol-Pak soon replaced cans. During the 1980s, two additional packaging revolutions occurred: the single-serve ketchup pouch, for which production increased from half a million cases to five million cases in just ten years and the squeezable plastic ketchup bottle, which was easier to use, and

almost unbreakable. By the 1990s, sixty percent of all U.S. ketchup was sold in plastic containers.³¹

Tomato ketchup has undergone its own shifts in manufacturing and marketing. Materially, tomato ketchup was made directly from fresh tomatoes, combined with vinegar sugar and seasonings. Tomato ketchup underwent a drastic change in the mid-1970s, when the sugar was replaced by high-fructose corn syrup and corn syrup. The vinegar has even been replaced in some brands by acetic acid. Ketchup was also historically seasoned with fresh onion, is now made with onion powder. These shifts reflect the changing food economy in several ways.

Corn syrup was patented by Japanese scientist Yoshiyuki Takasaki in 1971. Corn syrup is made by a chemical process in which corn starch, which is not sweet, is treated with enzymes to deconstruct the starch molecule into increasingly smaller pieces. The process yields corn syrup. Corn syrup is sweet, but not sweet enough to be used a sugar substitute, so chemists add more enzymes which convert the glucose from the starches to fructose. Fructose metabolizes differently than sucrose. It has been posited that corn syrup is a leading culprit in America's obesity epidemic, as obesity concurrently rises to the consumption of corn syrup. The United States government began subsidizing corn production in 1981, which created a larger supply of corn. The production of corn syrup became more economical than sugar. As a

³¹ Ibid, 131.

result, corn syrup became a preferred sweetener to sugar in the mid-1970's onward. In 1975, because of a low profit margin on Heinz Tomato Ketchup, the CEO of the company, Anthony O'Reilly acquired the Hubinger Company, a major manufacturer of high-fructose corn syrup. Quite un-coincidentally, Heinz began to use corn-syrup in their ketchup the same year.³²

Paul McCarthy's regional locale (California) is a hub for organic farming and healthy eating. The chance that Paul McCarthy may have been exposed to certain debates and critical concerns about diet and food production is highly likely, and manifests itself in the work. In *Heinz Ketchup Sauce*, the artist uses ketchup but chooses to name the product. McCarthy marries Pop practice interested in consumer goods with the body art that many performance artists were interested in this time period. The cultural significance of ketchup is brought to bear on the individual and the results are terrifying. The pristine food object, carefully crafted (through the scientific and marketing advances discussed earlier) is now fodder for grotesque actions-vomiting, salivating and defecating, which devalues the good.

In another early video using ketchup titled *Karen Ketchup Dream, Edit #1*, a naked female body is seen laying across a white piece of fabric. The hand of a man (the artist) caress and smear the ketchup over the body of the woman. The camera becomes the eye, moving over the action of the scene, viewing the ketchup being

³² Andrew Smith, *Pure Ketchup: A History of America's National Condiment* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), 124.

smearred over her legs and torso, up to her head, which are covered in the condiment. The man's hands continue to smear ketchup over her head, throat, and hair. The camera begins to view the room, scanning along a few boxes and a mirror. The industrial materials present a clear point of overlap between this work and McCarthy's earlier industrial warehouse performances. The eye moves back to the woman who is lying on a white piece of cloth, similar to McCarthy in *Heinz Ketchup Sauce*. The camera examines her body carefully, moving up to her face once again. The woman sits up and the video ends.

In *Karen Ketchup Dream, Edit # 2*, the audience sees the torso of a woman, laying on a flat surface being rubbed with ketchup. The hands of the artist pour ketchup directly onto her body, with the bottle's label visible in some frames. The woman arches he back slightly, lifting her body as the massaging hand moves down her frame. The woman's feet are made visible, and the camera returns to her upper body, now evenly covered in smooth ketchup. The audience sees her face and eyes. The artist's hand covers the woman's face with more ketchup. The camera pans out and the length of her entire body is shown. Following the wide shot of her body, the camera moves back to a segmented view of her torso, a shot that is shown repeatedly throughout the film. In the final moments of the film, the woman draws up her legs, puts them straight again, opens her lips, and then relaxes into a static pose for a time. She lies quietly for a time, then sits up and the film ends.

In both incarnations of *Karen Ketchup Dream*, McCarthy makes the commercial fetishisation of ketchup more explicit, through an implicit comparison to the fetishization of womens' bodies. The camera lingers over individual body parts, severing them from the whole body. These partial objects are then coated in a thick, sticky coat of ketchup. McCarthy conflates the condiment with the nude female body. As it is coated over the woman by the man's hands, the audience is alerted to the sensuousness of the material ketchup. The material properties of the substance in this film reflect the increased appeal of commercial advertising in the 1970's. As supermarkets became more popular, products began to need more visual presence. By manipulating the ketchup over the nude woman, a dual focus emerges: the sensuousness of the material and the psyche of the woman. The audience is told the nude woman is dreaming in the title (a key component in Freudian psychoanalysis). The work points to an inner psychosis of the woman but also outward to American popular culture. Her body becomes a metaphor for sex appeal and a new found visuality in commercial packaging.

In order to understand the complex relationship between women and food presented in *Karen Ketchup Dream #1 and #2*, the complicated gendered food politics of the era needs to be examined. After WW2, roles and responsibilities shifted significantly. Women, who had been a large part of the homeland war effort, were ushered back into their household duties, which was a stable role for only a brief time.

New financial demands on families now required a significant amount of women to work outside of the home. A crack was growing in the facade of post-war prosperity and happiness promised by moves to perfect suburbs and glossy appliances. Women's disillusion with the distribution of work (many women working out of the home and carrying on the same level of domestic responsibility) was the first step in a sharing of household duties. A "barbecuing boom" resulted, which was heavily promoted by beef and other food producers.³³ A surge in lawn furniture and barbecue grills signified a small shift in domestic responsibilities. Men, it seemed, now could cook, but only on the weekends and outdoors. Levenstein argues that the traditional division of gender roles remained firmly entrenched. Barbecuing involved simply prepared foods, and created an exponentially larger market for the hot dog. The "real cooking" of the household was still Mom's job, but for one day a week, the responsibilities for food preparation were lifted from female duties. Levenstein states, "The kitchen still rested safely in Mother's hands, for the smokey ritual took place out of its confines. It was also understood that only the most easily prepared foods would be served, mainly hot dogs and hamburgers, accompanied by a range of purchased foods such as canned beans, cole slaw, potato salad, macaroni salad, ketchup and relishes-nothing that could threaten the female monopoly over real cooking."³⁴ Ketchup and hot dogs became a

³³ Levenstein, *Paradox*, 43.

³⁴ Levenstein, *Paradox*, 103.

way for men to begin to participate in food production-another significant layer in reading the material.

In an effort to cater to a new class of busy working mothers, supermarkets adapted to the ways that people shopped. New shopping practices emerged, based on market research that investigated what women wanted out of their shopping experiences. A large rise in “impulse” purchases occurred as a result of the supermarket. No longer was the shopping experience mediated by salespeople, butchers, bakers, etc. The supermarket provided an unmediated shopping experience between the consumer and the product. Brand loyalty based on the advice of shopkeepers and word of mouth recommendation was quickly replaced by this new, direct mode of consumption. Consumers were now presented with a multifarious selection of goods, all promising similar convenience and health benefits. This bounty of product created a need for packaging that was significantly more aestheticised than the products of the past. Levenstein notes that this shift was evidenced by a shift in the selection of leadership for food producing companies. He states,

When General Foods, the largest food conglomerate, selected a new top officer in 1954, it chose not a production or financial specialist but a marketing expert...In 1956 Unilever hired W. Gardner Barker, a market researcher, from Simoniz Wax to be in charge of new products at its Lipton subsidiary. Three years later he was chosen to head the company, where his distinguished career was highlighted by the successful introduction of Cup-a-Soup.³⁵

³⁵ Ibid.

Psychologists made their way into the process, doing market research on what types of packaging was appealing to people and what was not. Top brand executives concluded that vibrant reds and yellows appealed most to consumers, red particularly appealing to women. It is this entanglement of women, desire and food that comes to bear on this interpretation of *Karen Ketchup Dream*. The women here, much like women of 1970's becomes the point of contact between the body, the home, food and commercial advertising.

In another performance from 1975, titled *Sailor's Meat-Sailor's Delight*, the viewer sees a tubular metal bed with a metallic mattress in a dark room, with curtained windows. The artist lounges on the bed, naked except for a platinum blonde wig and blue eyeshadow. The artist then clothes himself in transparent black woman's lingerie. He squeezes red make-up out of a tube then smears it on his penis and buttocks. He then begins to introduce various foods into his bodily space. He inserts a small sausage into his anus, then smears his entire body with ketchup. The bottle is made visible here. He removes the top he has donned and smears the food substances over his chest and trunk. He begins to penetrate the pile of food, thrusting repeatedly into the file and then dipping his face into it. The sexualization of food products is made literal. He wrapped adhesive bandages and gauze to his thighs, then attaches the rubber topper to a crutch to his penis. He smears the appendage with a mixture of ketchup, meat and flour, groaning and panting while doing so. He begins to thrust the

meat and ketchup covered appendage into a jar of mayonnaise, first holding it, then placing it below him on the mattress. The crutch pad becomes detached, and McCarthy removes the bandages and begins to penetrate the sticky mass on the mattress. He then turns over, and begins to put the crutch pad into his mouth, moaning and salivating while doing so. McCarthy then dons a transparent robe, standing and rocking back and forth slowly. He gets off the bed and pulls over a small white table with a sausage on it. He then urinates on the sausage. He licks the sausage then lies on top of it and the table. In a final destructive action, the artist drops the bottle of ketchup and the jar of mayonnaise on the ground and walks over it over and over again. McCarthy's choice of foods is obvious in its Americana. Ketchup and mayonnaise at this point were American household staples, and the barbecue boom of the 1960's had peaked commercial interest in tubular meats. The gendered aspects of food preparation are also present in *Sailor's Meat*. McCarthy dons blonde wig during this performance, enacting stereotyped womanhood. The "woman's" body is used to irreverently use the food products. The food and the gendered aspects of food preparation are contested through the disgusting imagery.

Following a similar trajectory to ketchup, the commercial meat industry became similarly entangled with the government in the mid 70's. The revised *Dietary Goals for the United States* was released in 1977, which advocated "Eating less red meat."³⁶ According to Marion Nestle, "Cattle ranchers, egg producers, sugar

³⁶ Nestle, M. *Food Politics*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

producers registered strong protest at the very idea that the government might be telling the public that their products were bad for health.”³⁷ The cattle industry demanded an immediate withdrawal of the manual. The meat and egg producers demanded a hearing, which was met with a compromise by Senator Robert Dole (R-KS). Instead of the phrase “decrease consumption of meat,” the Dietary Goals would state “increase consumption of lean meat.”³⁸ A revised edition of the report was issued in 1977 with a replacement, “choose meats, poultry, and fish which will reduce saturated fat intake.”³⁹ This moment marks a significant shift. The *Dietary Guide* was intended as an impartial, scientific document concerned with the health of the general public. It became subject to the desires of special interest groups by the submission of the government to the desires of cattle ranchers at this time.

One of the strategies to get people to eat more red meat is the practice of a “check-off” fund. This process, managed by the USDA, entails taxing beef producers at the rate of \$1 per cow for “generic marketing campaigns.” This money is used for advertising campaigns disguised as “education” advocating eating more beef. The increased revenue from these “check-off” funds paid for advertising campaigns such as the highly visible “Beef: Its What’s For Dinner.” The check-off fund represents an intersection of politics, food production and mass media that in unprecedented in such

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

a cohesive fashion. The Beef Board states that its “educational campaigns” or commercials are “directed to nutrition professionals and aim to increase consumer recognition of beef as lower in fat, higher in essential nutrients and lower in calories and cholesterol”⁴⁰ than chicken or pork. The employment of the media to manipulate health information (beef is not lower in calories than chicken, first and foremost) is emblematic of the new struggles and modalities of the American food industry in the period Paul McCarthy is working.

McCarthy’s seemingly random selection of the hot dog in *Sailor’s Meat* has specific ties to emerging practices of food advertising in this period. The meat is a symbol, perhaps of a penis on one level, but also of a new cooperation between the government and food producers.

The historical circumstance of these works’ production is particular. In the 1970’s food and food preparation changed rapidly. The commercialization of food products left many feeling uneasy and these anxieties about food, eating and commercial developments in food manufacturing are exploded in McCarthy’s work. The historic lineage of these products situates McCarthy’s work in one genealogy: the development of commercialized food in America. But, this was not the only sphere this work is relevant to and does not provide an art-historical understanding for the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

work. In the following chapter, Pop Art is argued as a potential framework for understanding McCarthy's video art.

Paul McCarthy's *The Painter*: Between Complicity and Critique

In the 1970's, McCarthy's work pointed towards the cultural phenomenon of commercialized food, at a time where the most radical changes in the American food supply were occurring in homes all over America. In the mid-1990's, McCarthy's work began to become increasingly nostalgic, often recreating the low-fi aesthetics of his early work like *Sailor's Meat*. His work took on a new self-referentiality, often invoking the look and even theoretical issues at play in his earlier work. Perhaps the critical distance allowed for new inquiry. It is the argument of this chapter that the critique of television present in this later work is illuminating in comparison with McCarthy's early interest in the critique of consumer culture. The profound ambivalence of McCarthy's work is something that has interested scholars and complicated the classification of his work for many years. McCarthy's work always had a relationship to Pop Art, but was not explicitly stated by McCarthy until much later in his career. In a sense, pieces like *Bossy Burger* and *The Painter* are McCarthy revisiting the 1970's, with a clear view of what was at stake in his work and how it was actually functioning. Because McCarthy formally revisits the 1970's in his video production of the 1990's, the work provides perspective regarding what critical issues

were latent in McCarthy's early work. In particular, how *Bossy Burger* and *The Painter* help to clarify some of the visual, theoretical, and sociological issues present in McCarthy's early work.

In *The Painter* (1995), A bumbling man, equipped with an oversize paintbrush meanders onto a stage set. The set reeks of an era gone by. The wood-walls and low lighting are all clear signs that this setting is not a current one. Inside the artificial set structure are the necessary supplies for the action: two grossly oversize tubes (one labeled black and the other labeled shit), a jar of mayonnaise, a bottle of ketchup and a large canvas. The protagonist, clothed in what appears to be a hospital gown-turned-smock, is also outfitted with an audaciously large prosthetic nose and two equally disproportionate rubber hands. He begins to address the camera, "Okay, what I want to think about here, is try to listen."⁴¹ His voice is comical, the type of voice one might use if mocking someone. His gestures are slow and dopey, almost exaggerated in their clumsiness. The set, in combination with the mode of direct address the artist chooses, references a specific phenomenon in television's early history-the instructional television program. The "host" begins to paint, wildly gesturing and noise making, smearing the paint with body and paintbrush. The wildly silly actions of the performer (McCarthy) signify a parody or critique of the genre that is emulated.

⁴¹ Paul McCarthy, *The Painter*, 1995.

The historical antagonism between mainstream forms of entertainment, such as television and Hollywood, and avant-garde moving image production is self-evident and well-documented. Yet, in this piece, McCarthy cannot be read as simply rejecting the conventions or power of mainstream entertainment. While the character makes a mockery of the creative act, even going so far as to ridicule what can be understood as the center for artistic creation, the painter's hands, he still directly engages with and utilizes capital-driven mainstream modes of address.

In the following scene, the painter interacts with an art dealer. The painter comically reiterates variations of the phrase, "You owe me money, I want all the money, all the money, right now, right now right now,"⁴² adding some erroneous comments such as, "I have shown in Europe, Europe, Europe" and "I have a big catalogue, big, big, big catalogue."⁴³ Cut back to the set, the painter is back to work, rubbing the giant Oldenbergian⁴⁴ tubes of paint all over the canvas, struggling with their weight and volume, in another clowning routine.

The film cuts from the interior of the set, becoming increasingly more paint splattered and frantic, with the painter becoming growingly violent towards the canvas

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ I am reading the tubes of paint present in *The Painter*, as a reference to Oldenburg, which McCarthy has never stated as the influence for the size of the tubes. However, McCarthy has stated an affinity for Pop Art and categorized his work as such, particularly in the interview "There is a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood, cited later in this chapter.

and himself, at one point stabbing himself repeatedly in the rubber hands, to the office scene which is also growing more chaotic. The painter has taken control of the office, destroying the art hanging on the walls of the office, despite the chastising from the dealer, who states "You artists are all the same."⁴⁵ In the closing of the film, another television set is introduced, where an interview is taking place with two comically self-important art collectors, with hazy British accents discussing their art collections. The film returns to the painter who coarsely runs his hands through the open tube of the substance. The artist and the floor are covered in the material labeled "shit." The film closes with the dealer opening the door to her office to allow the collector to come in to sniff the painter's bare rear. "I thought you would like that,"⁴⁶ the dealer remarks and the lyrical credit music enters. This work is illustrative of several problems in dealing with McCarthy's work. McCarthy's work cannot be read as directly antagonistic to, or complicit with television and capitalist modes of artistic dissemination. McCarthy's work sets up an unclear mash of seemingly contradictory elements. This chapter will examine how Paul McCarthy's later video work operates in an interstitial space between a complicit reiteration of the values of late capitalism and a directly antagonistic, satirical response to capitalistic modes of address such as television, as articulated in early video art. In a similar way to his treatment of food in the 1970's, it is difficult to understand what this work is intended to do. Paul

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

McCarthy's work *The Painter* directly engages with the forms of television, both critical of and complicit with their existence, in a constant act of confirmation and denial, disallowing mastery and categorization.

Early moving image production's relationship to mainstream entertainment was one of antagonism. In *TV against TV: Video Art on Television*, John Wyver states, "Even when television wasn't the explicit subject matter, the forms of early video (such as the use of extended duration or feedback loops) and its functions (including the documentation of causes and cultural groups denied to broadcast) meant that video was framed by and, crucially, against the dominant moving images of the moment."⁴⁷ Artists reacted to growing consumer access to cable television. Two distinct strategies emerged: art on television and art about television.⁴⁸ The growing number of public access channels provided a utopian vision of television's possibilities. In 1969, a televised anthology of video production titled, *The Medium is the Message*, premiered on public television station WGBH, featuring early video artists Peter Campus and William Wegman. The first PBS broadcast of video art occurred in 1974 under the title *Video: The New Wave*.⁴⁹ David Joselit notes in his book *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*, "Many activist tactics directed at the commodity were developed

⁴⁷ John Wyver, *TV against TV: Video Art on Television*, ed. Stuart Comer (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 125.

⁴⁸ Wyver, 124

⁴⁹ Wyver, *TV*, 126

in the 1960's"⁵⁰ While some artists embraced the utopian promise of television, other artists working in video resisted what they saw as the totalitarianizing forces of television. In one seminal example of this type of work, Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People*, text scrolls on the screen, similar to a public service announcement as stock Muzak plays. The text contains such messages as "In commercial broadcasting, the viewer pays for the privilege of having himself sold."⁵¹ and "You are the product of t.v."⁵² Serra's work functions as a critique of mass-media. Like many early video artists, Serra saw television as an instrument of social control. Serra asserts that the only beneficiaries of television are the advertisers and corporations that maintain the broadcast, a shared concern of many artists working on or with television at this time.

Artists such as Richard Serra and Dara Birnbaum, responded to television negatively, either engaging with direct critique as in the case of Serra or critical parody in the case of Birnbaum. In May 1969, an exhibition titled *Television as a Creative Medium* opened in New York's Howard Wise Gallery. This exhibition, considered one of the first thematic exhibitions of video work, showed pieces by such artists as Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Paul Ryan, Ira Schneider, Frank Gillette, and Eric Siegel. The critical approach of these artists to television can be seen in the brochure text from the exhibition. It states,

⁵⁰ David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 71.

⁵¹ Richard Serra, *Television Delivers People*, 1973.

⁵² *Ibid.*

The machine is obsolescent. Magazines, books, newspapers and other publications making use of the written word as we know it are threatened. Education will be revolutionized, schools transformed if not eliminated (why interrupt your child's education by sending them to school?) TV is the cause, or at least the root of the cause, of all these changes transforming our society.⁵³

The exhibition focused on the use of physical television screens, but the nihilistic attitude toward television's effect of cultural consciousness is consistent throughout the exhibition text. In a chapter titled "The Future of Television: Some Theoretical Considerations" from a book published in 1975 titled *Video Art*, John McHale discusses the fear of television's totalitarianizing effect on consciousness:

In reiterating the commonality and the 'global sharing' of sets of images and symbols, we should, however, qualify the term mass culture as applied most typically to television. Mass culture and 'mass society' are concepts which grew out of the dystopian vision of standardized cultural forms, and their widely shared sets of common values which were presumed to lead to a society of increasingly uniform lifestyles, aims and purposes.⁵⁴

McCarthy's work, although some years later, could perhaps be seen as a part of this second strategy, and is often framed as such. It employs similar techniques of early video production. It parodies television, likens it to human excrement. *The Painter's* low production quality also reiterates stylistic concerns of the genealogy described.

⁵³ Howard Wise Gallery, exhibition brochure, TV as a Creative Medium, (May 17th-June 19th, 1969)

⁵⁴ John McHale, *The Future of Television: Some Theoretical Considerations*, comp. Suzanne Delehanty (Philadelphia: Falcon Press, 1975), 101.

Using the modes of television, it could perhaps be created to dismantle them.

However, McCarthy's work has a degree of complicity with television, previously resisted by artist engaging with television, through the moving image.

McCarthy's incomplete resistance to television's modes can be seen formally and conceptually. Formally, it is to be noted that the instances of direct parody of television are structural. The opening and closing music, a lyrical tune reminiscent of 1950's sit-com lead-ins, ala *Lassie*, stands outside of McCarthy's mad subject. Additionally, the stage set, which reveals its own artificiality acts as a container *for* the madness, as opposed for a subject *of* the madness. The wood panel walls are only complete on one side, obviously a set. At moments, the painter could destroy the set, as he destroys his own hands, the dealer's paintings etc. He does not, respecting the confines of the television set. The walls, the very item that marks this space as one of a television set, remains safe. Formally, the structure of the television show enables the subject to continue, and rarely becomes the subject of critique. Mockery is there, this is not reverent.

Johanna Drucker discusses video's relation to television, in her book *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*, stating,

Contemporary art activity supposedly provides an alternative to mainstream media culture-with its profit driven, industry standard, formulaic productions. 'Art' represents itself as the activity of individuals making works motivated by the spirit of

imaginative creativity, political urgency or emotional impulse."⁵⁵

However, this work, contending artistic creativity and emotional impulse through the use of parody and clowning, does not work antagonistically through this definition. Drucker states, "The slapstick grotesquerie of his approach to performance and installation is far from intellectually distant terms of aesthetic negativity or careful critique. Viewers are also made into complicit participants."⁵⁶ McCarthy in effect allows for participation in this farce, humor and buffoonery function in similar ways to the television sitcom, disallowing this work to be read as just a mockery or parody. Through both Wollen and Drucker's framework, McCarthy's work is an inadequate critique, if it is to be understood to be a critique at all.

Another lineage of artistic production may serve as an appropriate framework for McCarthy's video production. McCarthy's use and hedonistic celebration of pop culture elements could easily tie his work to Pop Art. Certainly his use of commercial food items has an obvious connection to Warhol. Additionally, his use of television and Hollywood motifs has a tie to Pop Art. Warhol spoke about the pervasiveness of television, stating "Right when I was being shot and ever since, I knew that I was

⁵⁵ Joanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 106.

⁵⁶ Drucker, 109.

watching television. The channels switch, but its all television."⁵⁷ Warhol articulated the ways culture is available to everyone when he famously said, "You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke too."⁵⁸

The term Pop Art, was originated by Lawrence Alloway and meant as a "description of mass communications, especially, if not exclusively, visual ones."⁵⁹ It describes the process of extending aesthetic considerations to mass-media and appropriating mass-culture to the service of fine art. Alloway refers to the process as "expansionist,"⁶⁰ widening the scope of accepted artistic practice.

Alloway believed that, "Pop Art was a polemic against elite views on art,"⁶¹ and was achieved by the use of appropriated materials. Pop art is a reactionary movement which recognizes and capitalized on the antagonism between fine and popular art, which he defined as, " the sum of the arts designed for simultaneous consumption by a numerically large audience." ⁶² Consumer culture is distributed

⁵⁷ Andy Warhol, "Untitled Statements (1963-87)" , in *Contemporary Art: a Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 344.

⁵⁸ Warhol, 341

⁵⁹ Lawrence Alloway, "Pop Art: The Words," in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Ann Mahsun (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press), 176.

⁶⁰ Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art*, (New York: Macmillan Press, 1974), 5.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

through the means of mass production. The post war period ushered in a new view of art, one more aligned with "history and sociology that with tradition and aesthetics."⁶³ The emerging importance of the everyday created a market for images of subjects that had previously been alienated from artistic representation. Alloway states, "As an alternative to an aesthetic that isolated visual art from life and other arts, there emerged a willingness to treat our whole culture as if it were art."⁶⁴

However, Alloway did not view Pop art as complicit with consumer culture, rather as a means to demonstrate a signification process. He states, "The attitude of Pop Artists toward the sign and objects that they use is neither one of simple acclaim, celebrating consumer goods, nor of satirical condemnation of the system in favor of some humanistic norm of conduct. On the contrary, they use the objects of the man-made environment with a sense of meaning in process, an experience based on the proliferation and interpenetration of our sign and symbol backed culture."⁶⁵

McCarthy's oeuvre can be characterized by an interest in American clichés from Santa Clause to Pirates of the Caribbean. In *The Painter*, McCarthy's use of television in a way that entertains the viewer similarly to a situation comedy or a Hollywood film. In another tie to Pop Art, McCarthy's protagonist carries around a giant stuffed tube of paint, a nod to Oldenburg's soft sculptures. In an image of

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 47.

Oldenburg from 1970⁶⁶, the artist poses with a soft sculpture of a tube, similar to the one in *The Painter*. The painter's locale, in a television set, which is uncontested formally in the piece, could tie this work to the largely uncritical celebratory relationship between Pop Art and capitalism. McCarthy situates his practice in the Pop tradition in an interview from 1993, titled *There is a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood*. McCarthy states, "There are times that my work has been compared to the Vienna Actionist School, but I always thought there was this whole thing with Pop. The ketchup, the hamburger and also the movie world. I was really fascinated with Hollywood and Hollywood boulevard."⁶⁷

Perhaps another way to situate McCarthy in terms of art celebrating consumer culture is through Jeff Koons, who was exhibiting widely at the time of *The Painter*'s creation. Koons states in *Full Fathom Five*, "I think it's necessary for the work to be bought, that I have the political power to operate. I enjoy the seduction of the sale."⁶⁸ McCarthy's own description of his work echo's some of the themes present in Koon's work, stating "The more overt interest in Disneyland and television happened in the early 1980's-not just Disneyland but in the whole artificial Shangri-La of shopping

⁶⁶ Getty Images, Photograph of Claes Oldenburg, 1970. <<http://www.gettyimages.com/Search/Search.aspx?assettype=image&artist=Keystone>>

⁶⁷ Paul McCarthy "There is a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood," in Paul McCarthy (New York: Phaidon Press, 1996)

⁶⁸Jeff Koons, "Full Fathom Five," in *Contemporary Art: a Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 380.

malls-the commodity world. Ketchup and mustard and grocery items had always been part of my performances.”⁶⁹ McCarthy’s quote illustrates a self-conscious interest in food for the purpose of critique. But McCarthy diverges in one critical way. Where Pop Art claimed to reveal American life, it failed to accurately account for the nastiness, the ugly realities of the American middle-class as it emerged after World War Two. Pop aestheticised the everyday, even when it claimed not to. McCarthy’s work is disgusting because of the truth it represents.

While Warhol, Koons and Oldenburg use recognizable, easily digestible imagery in their work, McCarthy perverts them but using the object to reveal anxieties about the mis-use of these items-effectively tapping in to cultural taboos of ingestion. McCarthy's work holds the viewer in a state between fascination and disgust, forcing the filth onto the viewing subject. In McCarthy’s video, the painter’s physical appearance is the first site of this revolt. The artist has made the figure look frightening. His large nose and ears are grotesque. In the painting process, the painter begins to smear ketchup and mayonnaise in a revolting combination. In another particularly sick moment, the painter is splashing about in the contents of the tube labeled “shit.” The final moment of revolt occurs as the artist bends over and allows the collectors to sniff his exposed rear. The use of this grotesque imagery resists the

⁶⁹ Paul McCarthy "There is a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood," in Paul McCarthy (New York: Phaidon Press, 1996)

slickness attributed to Pop. A work this foul and retched does not make for an easily digestible object, for an art audience or a commercial one. In a sense, McCarthy's work is true Pop-actually reflecting the horrors of American culture-in all of their terrifying glory.

McCarthy's use of disgusting imagery in his work had commercial effects, in addition to the effects on audience reactions. McCarthy's work was not a commercial success until much later in his career, partly because of the foul and disturbing imagery present. Although McCarthy began working in 1970, he did not quit his day job as a construction worker until 1984.⁷⁰ He received an NEA grant in 1987, almost twenty years after he began producing.⁷¹ He did make a major sale until 1992, when Paul Schimmel gave McCarthy \$10,000 to execute the Garden for MOCA's famous *Helter Skelter* exhibition. The work impressed Jeffery Deitch, who purchased the work and still owns it today. From this point forward "McCarthy had no shortage of exhibition opportunities, but his sales were still sticky."⁷² In the April 2008 issue of *Artforum*, Sarah Thornton cites dealer Jeffery Poe (of Blum & Poe Gallery) as stating, "It's hard to sell work that is so fucked-up, so naked, so messy, and scary."⁷³ The record auction price for a McCarthy video is \$108,000, a far cry from Koon's fetching

⁷⁰ Sarah Thornton, "Paul McCarthy." *Art Forum*, April, 2008, 320.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

prices.⁷⁴ This discrepancy shows the reward for complicity. Koons is self-consciously complicit with the market, which has monetary rewards.

Paul McCarthy operates in a space that is neither entirely complicit with, nor wholly critical of capitalistic modes of address, such as television. It is for that reason, that attributing his work to any specific genealogy is so difficult. Ralph Rugoff notes this difficulty in Mr. McCarthy's neighborhood, stating:

Like a Dr. Moreau of the art world, McCarthy conducts a strange surgery that sutures together allusions and genres into uneasy composites. From the early performances in which he married motifs of cross dressing and self-mutilation with cartoon personae and B-movie effects, to his video tapes, sculpture and multi-media installations of the 1980's and 1990's, McCarthy has cross-bred and recombined pop culture clichés, charting out a disorientating terrain where horror and absurdity, kiddie programs and psychosexual critique and inextricably interlaced.⁷⁵

Paul McCarthy's *The Painter* is both reactionary and celebratory, resisting simple interpretations. Rich with polemical elements, McCarthy's work references and critiques itself, the institutions it both needs and hates and carves out an interstitial space between acceptance and rejection of television and popular culture's

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ralph Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," in Paul McCarthy (New York: Phaidon Press, 1996)

totalitarianizing effect on consciousness, while simultaneously resisting classification within discrete art historical practices and schools.

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