



“You like yoga ...we like speed”

Paul McCarthy

interviewed

Graham Ramsay & John Beagles

US artist Paul McCarthy was taking a break from the final adjustments to the installation of his first major retrospective show in the UK, at the Tate Liverpool. We joined him for a drink, along with Tracey Ruddell from the Press Office.

Graham Ramsay/John Beagles: How do you feel about the way your work is written about, specifically in terms of [Julia] Kristeva, ‘the object’ and that whole psychoanalytical take on it? It sometimes feels like a way for the writers to make your work intellectually respectable to themselves.

Paul McCarthy: It kind of goes both ways, there are people who just dismiss the work and just talk about it as being object and not trying to analyse it, but just being dismissive. Then there are writers who are more analytical about it. I’m into it both ways because that’s kind of how it’s made. I’m not trying to make it psychoanalytical but then at the same time...

GR/JB: We were reading a non-too-flattering article about your work by Donald Kuspit in which he accused you and Mike Kelley of lacking critical distance. Over the last ten years there have been a lot of artists who have also been accused of this. Artists who have wanted to have some critical purchase but at the same time have stressed their own entanglement and immersion within their subject.

PM: I remember that Donald Kuspit article and I was kind of into it, I was thinking this is pretty interesting (Laughter).

GR/JB: He was giving you a telling off. (Wags finger)

PM: Yeah, he was saying “You’re full of shit”, but that’s pretty interesting. I kind of like that article (laughs) but I was shocked that he wrote that much, and felt that he had to somehow put it in its place. But for me he just confirmed everything he said the work was not.

GR/JB: I get the impression it was written pretty quickly, with forceful typing and a certain amount of anger.

PM: Yeah, like he saw the show, ran home and was really pissed. “I gotta stop this now! They’ve gone too far! They’re making too much money!” (Laughs)

GR/JB: Can you speak about the way you use your performances, and yourself, within your work and how that’s changed from the 70s to the present day?

PM: Well, there was a period in the 70s when there were pieces about duration, repetition, task and all those kind of words that were used at that time. Those works were made in a room by myself. I was into repetition and this sort of obsessional stuff. In 72 I made a tape, “Ma Belle”, in which I make this laugh and there is this persona. It’s not like I was making these repetitive, minimal pieces until 78 and then switched over to these more theatrical works with personae or fractured narratives of some

sort. It was much more a case of these concerns overlapping. I had made narrative films in the 60s which dealt with personae, an established character of some sort and costumes.

GR/JB: Did those films involve just you, or actors as well?

PM: Me, and an actor friend who I was hanging out with at the time. One film featured two friends, a couple, in an apartment building and they are in this room carrying on with their daily life but they’re nude. The camera is always floating past them; the camera is always moving and panning across them. Then I made one where this woman puts on makeup, and I made another where this guy is a chicken. They’re kind of stupid but a lot of the films are lost. At the time I was making this work with the camera moving I didn’t think I was doing anything but making a film, but there was something weird about how I kept moving the camera. I don’t think it was by accident. It had to do with architecture and the camera kept switching to a window or a door.

GR/JB: It sounds similar to “Bossy Burger”, where the action is viewed from several positions and you often only get a glimpse of what’s going on.

PM: Yeah, and I don’t know if I’m reading something into it but I’m thinking about how I might film something now. At one point I’d seen a Dennis Oppenheim piece in the early 70s, which I really liked, where a conveyor belt is put right through a wall. The idea was you put a penny on one side and the conveyor took it through and dropped it on the other side. For me, it was this thing about passing through the wall, going through the wall, and I liked the way this conveyor belt interacted with the architecture. You never fucking see that piece anywhere. I made this piece where two cameras began by looking at two windows next to each other and then the cameras begin to move like this (circular motions). They follow lines on the floor, and the lines are marked at points where single frames are to be shot. Then the two films would be shown at the same time on two screens next to one another like two eyeballs. It begins like the head moving but the eyes go in different directions, click, and they go straight through walls, click, next shots on the other side. It’s as if the architecture has no substance, it’s just perceptual. These ideas of moving cameras, and cameras being

eyes, was something I was really interested in, and so the camera is also the performer. That body of work has never really been seen much, even in this show, whose total logic is that it’s someone else’s curating, but it’s also about the limits of the gallery space.

GR/JB: How much input did you have in the selection of works for this particular show, or when it was in LA and New York?

PM: Lisa Philips and Dan Cameron at the New Museum, New York did the initial curating. It was a kind of collaboration in that they had a list which had to do with their perception of my work, and it sort of passed through me, and then I was asked what I felt about it. There are pieces that I would have liked to have been included but part of that is the physical constraints involved, and the expense of moving them around. The show here stops with the “Santa Chocolate Shop”.

GR/JB: Have you any ambitions to maybe work in different spaces, such as commercial television or film?

PM: The thing about film is money.

GR/JB: And the people who run the business.

PM: Yeah, the film world is run by people who make decisions based on money, and who want to see a script. I don’t work with a script and so the idea of making a million-dollar film is pretty impossible for me.

GR/JB: What about a lower budget?

PM: Well that’s really feasible. I’ve already shot in 35mm, 16mm, Betacam, and it’s part of what I’m doing now in a film project with my son. And you know there have been a couple of times when I almost made rock videos. I was interested in it. I would get these letters, “We want you to do something wild!”, and so I’d tell them my ideas and just never hear from them again. (Laughs)

GR/JB: Which bands got in touch with you?

PM: I don’t recall the name but someone told me they’re really big? (Laughs)

GR/JB: Rage Against The Machine?

PM: I would have done that in a second. I really like ‘em. Now I remember the others, it was Suicidal Tendencies, and also The Butthole Surfers. I was gonna do it and I was really into it but they backed down, or somebody backed





down. (Laughs) You never know who's backing down, right? There are so many managers, agents and these people in between who are trying to sell an idea so you don't know whether it's the band you're dealing with or what. It's been going on about once a year for the last five years and I always say, "Yeah, I'll do it", and nothing ever happens!

GR/JB: Do you have a few ongoing collaborations, such as those with Mike Kelley?

PM: I've collaborated with a number of people over the years, and with Mike it is definitely ongoing. In a peculiar way we're working on a piece right now, we've talked about certain ideas and next year we'll start work on this thing we've been thinking about for a while.

GR/JB: It's a good way to work, and it's good fun.

PM: Yeah, and it's never really like we say, "It's time to collaborate". I mean, with "Heidi" or "Fresh Acconci", for instance, we were just talking on the phone and the idea just happened in a conversation. This new one has been in the works for some time, just developing in our heads.

GR/JB: Did you find that it changed the nature of your work when you became a father?

PM: I think it did. I made pieces about fatherhood, or something. (Laughs)

GR/JB: I guess when you've gone through the birthing experience, and then all the shitting and puking, you can look at your art and think that's not so extreme after all. Maybe I can push this a little further. This is nothing.

PM: (Laughs) In the 80s my two were real young kids, and so you have to take care of them and change the art production thing.

GR/JB: It's a balancing act.

PM: Yeah, and it takes care of the money real good too! (Laughs)

Tracey Ruddell: Are you going to do a new performance of "Bossy Burger" here?

PM: I did it already. But it's not really a performance because nobody saw it and there's no camera. It's just a way of setting up. Each time I do it—nine or ten times now—it's different, sometimes it takes four hours, sometimes an hour and a half. Depending on the mood.

GR/JB: So you get locked into the gallery alone to perform?

PM: I usually do it at night when nobody is around. In the original there were about five bottles of ketchup and some milk and stuff. Now there are about twenty-five different ketchup bottles, all at a different stage of decay, and there are nine bottles of turkey bones and eighty-nine cartons of milk. You look at the floor and there are dark brown stains of ten-year-old ketchup and new stains.

GR/JB: It's a history of ketchup ... it will start to stink after a while.

PM: Oh yeah, and a lot depends on the kind of turkey bones I use. (Laughs) This one here is going to really stink! (Laughter)

GR/JB: I was looking at the "Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma" installation in the gallery, and I was wondering about the times you made the audience wear Pinocchio costumes when viewing the work and why that isn't happening for this show?

PM: When the videotape is being shown separate from the set, you have to wear a costume to watch it. There are ten costumes in all. When it was first shown in London viewers put on a costume in one room and then entered the installation in another but the videotape has never been shown on its own without the audience wearing costumes. It's a pretty inconsistent strategy (laughs) but I think it's interesting to watch the tape with the costume on. I like that.

GR/JB: It's a good strategy to immerse the viewer in the artwork.

PM: Yeah, and it's a weird thing to watch it through these holes. But, you know; now I look at those Pinocchio costumes and they didn't turn out the way I wanted them to. That just has a lot to do with technically not being able to figure out how to do it. I'm always amazed by people who can make such great looking pieces. I sometimes feel a little fucking dumb. I had this idea that there would be big plastic buttons, and the mask would be different, but it all turned out to be kind of stupid. That's OK, because stupid can be good... (Laughter)

TR: What prompted your decision to get into using materials like rubber and plastic?

PM: Well, I wanted to make real solid rubber parts but I had a tough time figuring it out but there was no excuse it was hardly a new technology ten years ago! Somehow I just couldn't get it together. The "Spaghetti

Man" has a new noodle, or penis, which is silicon but I still have the original urethane noodle, which travels with it. I like the rubber because it feels like the body although some of the pieces, like "Alpine Man", are pretty crude, very thin latex. That piece is the original "Tree Fucker" and its over twelve years old now. It has to be constantly repaired and the machinery breaks down but I kind of like it that way. It's dumb technology, like me trying to make Disney in my garage.

GR/JB: But you're getting more technically advanced recently.

PM: I made a rubber Michael Jackson that weighs six tons and you can't move it. (Laughs)

GR/JB: How was your New York show received?

PM: Well, pretty good but I get this bad boy stuff all the time, you know, every time someone writes, "Bad boy artist" or "Bad boy LA artist". Then it's "Old hippy bad boy LA artist!" What the fuck! Some New York writers always want to point out that somehow they are the Velvet Underground and LA is...

GR/JB: Jerry Garcia.

PM: Or, this is Donald Judd and that's Larry Bell. You like yoga...

GR/JB: ...we like speed.