

Legs Spread, Mask On: Reflections on Snow White, Deleuze, and Late Capitalism

Ross Simonini

I believe abstraction is closer to truth.

—Paul McCarthy

Paul McCarthy is among of great ids of contemporary art. Over 50 years, he has celebrated the grunting, humping perversity of the human animal. He's dumped his impolite perversions and stuttering neuroses into films, performance, sculpture, painting, and sound work, creating a full sensorial orgy of media. His early, low-fidelity videos of seedy, private performances have developed into massive cinematic events. His sculptures, originally ragged leftovers from his performances, now include 80-foot-tall Santa Claus statues, swaying in city centers, each of them gripping shiny new butt plugs. This interview was conducted shortly after his wild spectacle of an exhibition, *White Snow*, at Park Avenue Armory Museum. McCarthy filled the hangar-sized space with a depraved retelling of the Snow White myth, including a collection of eleven films, many of them pornographic and violent, and one of which was seven hours long. At a particularly dark moment, Walt Disney is raped by the seven dwarves with a broomstick, which they leave in his dummy body for viewers to observe. Among the Armory were the remnants of this party gone wrong, including the film sets on which they were shot (modeled after McCarthy's childhood home) and an 8,800 square foot forest with 24-foot-tall trees. I met

McCarthy in New York City at the Dieter Roth Bar in his gallery, Hauser & Wirth, shortly after the show opened.

—Ross Simonini

RS: Would you say that you began as a painter?

PM: Yes. There was a period of student work—drawings and paintings and all that—but then I had a kind of turning point. And it was during the period of minimalism and hard-edge painting and all that shit. And I discovered experimental film. And experimental music. And also Yves Klein. But there was very little information about him then. I didn't even see a picture of his work. I only knew about it. Someone had told me about him jumping into the void. And that's all I knew. I was living in Utah. I knew nothing about Viennese Aktionism. I knew British Pop but I knew nothing about, say, Dieter Roth.

RS: So what was the turning point?

PM: I had a breakthrough. There were three things that happened. One was I found a dead duck in the desert and I started making drawings of this dead duck. I took the duck home. Then there were these Indian mummies that were in Salt Lake City, in the Natural History Museum. They were American Indian mummies, which was very fucked up, and by the 70s [a decade later] they were gone and there was no talk of them again. But they were in this museum in this glass case. And finally, I started making drawings of Karen [McCarthy's wife] with her legs spread like in an *Étant donnés* [by Marcel Duchamp] position. Purely just, like, "Wow, let's draw you with your legs spread. Yeah, fuck, okay." And these three things happened right at the same time. And then I discovered Ad Reinhardt and the black Reinhardt paintings. But I never talked about the duck paintings.

RS: Why not?

PM: I didn't like them. You know, artists do that. They don't talk about their shit. I was quite young when I did them. I was probably 21, something like that. These things were like 8 feet x 12 feet. And looking back on it, I realized they were all architectures. They're all squares and circles with tubes, so they were like rooms. Looking back on it, I was making structures that were room-like, and boxes and rooms and enclosures and figures in a room. And it wasn't so noticeable at the time, so ten, fifteen years ago I dismissed that body of work. But now, looking back, the motif of the female with the legs spread, or the motif of men in masks in a box—all that just keeps coming back in my work. And then I started burning them. They were sheets of Masonite and I could cover it with gasoline and throw a match on it. I would burn them until they were coal black.

RS: So you destroyed the image.

PM: Yeah. And in the end, the last five or six were all black. And they became like big minimal paintings, but they were burnt surfaces. And so, normally when I talk about these paintings, I'll talk about the black paintings. But I never talk about the period before the black paintings. The ducks.

RS: You said that the men were masked. Masks are all over your performances from the beginning.

PM: I always like a mask. I made that piece Skull Card, which is a sheet of cardboard with two round holes that you look through.

RS: Right. That was the beginning of the masks.

PM: But then, I start doing performances that were very much about a task. Like spin for an hour. One action repeated over and over. I started using liquids in the performances, and that changed things. I was covering the head with tape or ketchup. Or, in one of the earliest ones, "Ma Bell," you never even see my head. I told the cameraman, "Don't look at my head." And it all came out in those early works.

RS: How does drawing function now for you? Are you drawing all the time?

PM: Yeah, and it's all kinds of drawing. It goes all over the board, from preparatory to figuring out storyboards to just goofing around, drawing for hours and hours and losing myself in the drawing. I draw a lot in conversation; I draw a lot while I'm eating. I forget what I'm drawing. For large drawings, I do them in a persona or in a character. So the drawing's all over the place.

RS: When you're performing, are you trying to get lost in it? Or do you keep it pretty detached?

PM: Do I keep detached? Well, I'd say yes and no. You start feeling really drunk. And drunk means where boundaries are sort of crossed. You kiss somebody that you wouldn't have kissed before. You hug somebody you wouldn't. You tell somebody you love them or you tell somebody they're a fucking asshole. You cross these boundaries. And then you have boundaries—you know, there are layers in boundaries. It's pretend, a fake. And, at the same time, you enter a state that becomes more real. You're in a kind of trance, but you're in a trance that's actually very much in the present. I'm aware that I'm doing something. I stay pretty focused that I'm making a work of art, or I'm making an image. But I also know that if I can

get myself a little more disconnected, the image can get pretty interesting. So it's this kind of edge of control. You're feeling like you're really that person, you're really that thing.

RS: Does that state affect your life outside of performing, or can you keep it separate?

PM: I can. I seem to be much better at it now. But if I go too long at it, for too long a period, it can get pretty fucked up. I have a hard time coming out.

RS: Is performing cathartic for you?

PM: I never think of it that way, that I'm getting better. It's kind of like this thing like somebody asked me one time, "Are you influenced by L.A.?" And I said, "No, I think that I could make this work anywhere." But I don't think that's true anymore. I actually believe that really has made a difference that I've been in L.A. And so, when you say, "Is the work therapeutic?" I could say, "Nah, I don't think so." And then on the other hand, I would maybe say yes, it probably is. It's just not as measurable. I can't put my finger on it.

RS: You work with a lot of children's stories. *Heidi*, *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*. Do you study the original fairy tales?

PM: Oh, that's less interesting to me. The actual story of Snow White was less interesting. Like I think I was ten days into shooting *White Snow* before I ever looked at the whole animated version of Walt Disney's. I just didn't care.

RS: It's more about your memory of it.

PM: I was much more interested in reading [Gilles] Deleuze than watching Walt Disney's animated cartoon. And, you know, my mother always reminded me of Snow White—I mean she was very pale-skinned and had dark hair. But really, it was just, one day I thought, "Whoa! *Snow White*! That one's full of stuff." Or what I knew of it. You have this group of men and then you have this childlike woman. And then the fact that she resembled my mother; the fact Walt resembled my father; and that whole era of the thirties and forties...

RS: There's a lot of mommy and baby talk in your work.

PM: I'm interested in all that. And I'm interested in playing with all that.

RS: But on the other hand, Deleuze.

PM: I'm interested in abstracting Deleuze. I'm interested in creating an abstraction out of what he says, and what he thinks. And take it in bits, and combine it illogically.

RS: Misreading.

PM: Reading abstractly.

RS: Your work is so body conscious. What events in your life would you say have made you conscious of your own body?

PM: Well, some of that's very private. I mean, I think that we could give it a try, but I don't know how far I'll go with it. I think that epiphanies happen. I think that existential moments happen where you become shocked and you're aware of things in yourself or in reality that you didn't see. And what causes them can be a number of things in my experience. They're sometimes moments when you find yourself in a place where there's no way out. You've all of a sudden crossed through a door, like, making a decision, and there's no way out. And you're gonna realize something. And then there's moments that I've had where I'm just walking in the street and something happens and you find yourself in a catatonic state for three months, you know, because of what you just realized.

RS: Really? Just based on sort of a momentary epiphany?

PM: Yeah.

RS: Wow. Can you put it into words, what that was?

PM: No.

RS: I think it's interesting to hear where you draw this line between private and personal, since your work is so exposing.

PM: Well, it's not that I wouldn't illustrate it.

RS: You would put it into art, you just wouldn't want to discuss it blatantly?

PM: Yeah.

RS: Do you think language is ill-suited to the experiences that you try to address in art?

PM: I think that's why I make art. Even when I include language, it's about

abstracting it in the art. I have a hard time wanting something to be linear. I believe abstraction is closer to truth. I mean, I was severely dyslexic most of my life which probably affects it.

RS: Your distrust of language.

PM: I like the use of language. I just like it in abstraction. I couldn't exactly define the limits of the abstraction, or what it could be. It could be a lot. Or it could be a little. I know at one point I tried writing essays about other artists.

RS: Really?

PM: And I realized I could do it. I wasn't bad at it. And the writing got better and better. I think what did happen is that I realized that I preferred to make the writing the same as I would make a drawing. I would just treat my writing in the same way that I treat drawing or sculpture.

RS: Like the prose poems you've written as press releases.

PM: That's how I write. I mean, art is a resistance to normality. Why would I think that I should write correctly? I think I go through life accepting normality, which I'm not sure is what I should be doing.

RS: Do you live a normal life outside of your work?

PM: I got pants on.

RS: I'd say that's true.

PM: We're sitting at a table. I'm having a cup of coffee.

RS: Have you ever considered—

PM: I cut my hair.

RS: ...trying to reject normality in daily life?

PM: It's probably really a smart idea. Smart meaning a creative idea. But I don't know whether I will. I like creating the situations in which I can enter a pretend world. And then that becomes a type of normality for me. I can just live in the pretend world.

RS: Forever?

PM: Sure.

RS: But then it's not pretend anymore, right?

PM: No, I think it is.

RS: I wouldn't be able to recognize pretend if I didn't have reality to contrast it against.

PM: I'm not sure of all that, because I really think we are in an out-of-control spectacle, Western capitalism culture, and that it affects a huge population of the world, which is on this ball floating through this void, and we have this whole view of what reality is and we're caught up in it, in Western capitalism, in the privilege. And that is normality for us, you know. And that normality really seems like it should be questioned and resisted. But it's not evil. I don't even believe that it's pleasurable. I don't even think it answers our desires. It doesn't even function. It's just a fucked-up system that's evolved. It's simple. It's all caught up in our psychology, of who we've become. And, so it makes sense that normality should be questioned and resisted.

RS: You started off outside of of the capitalist normality bubble.

PM: Yes.

RS: Now you're working with some of the highest profile galleries in the world.

PM: I am deep in the privilege, but I never sold a work of art until 1990 or something.

RS: Your mid 40s.

PM: And I didn't sell a work to an American museum till, I think, the mid 90s. So, you know, I never sold a work from '66 till '90. But yet, I had some support. I got an NEA grant, I think I got two of them. I traveled in Europe making pieces but never made money doing them; making performances. For nothing, you know. But yet I was part of the underground in the performance art world, and people knew my work. I was in the Bologna biennial, but I was never in Documenta, and I never was in any big major shows up until maybe the 80s. And then in the mid-80s, I actually became part of a gallery. But didn't sell any work. And then the 80s is where the bubble of money happened in painting. And then in the 90s, sculpture begins. You had Jeff Koons and Mike Kelley and Charles Ray and I come up at the same time as Matthew Barney and Damien Hirst and all that. And I was influenced in a lot of ways

to make particular kinds of sculptures. I was interested in Disney-type fabrication. And there was a phase in there where I tried to make these refined Disney-Koons sculptures. There was a tomato head, and a few other pieces, with stuffed animals and bears. And they did have connection to performance and to the work I've done in the 70s, but they were a sort of breakaway. And they existed in some ways in the art world, and had a place in this sort of resurgence of sculpture that was going on. But in a lot of ways, they fail for me. I was looking for something, but I realized I was actually interested in something more fucked up. And by fucked up I mean more abstracted, dirtier. Not such a clean thing.

RS: You were resisting that normality.

PM: Yeah.

RS: Are you still resisting?

PM: I'm pretty much inside normality like everybody else. In art and life. Unless you're insane, you know. Unless you've stepped out of it. I mean, it's like I made this piece in which [George W.] Bush fucks a pig. But really, it's my body with a mask of Bush. It's a disguise, in a way, with Bush as the icon of the Western spectacle, of capitalism. The body inside of Bush is me. We're all inside the icon of Western capitalism, the image. We're the body of it.