

**Written on the occasion of the opening of Air Pressure
on July 3d, 2009**

Figurative public sculptures and artworks in the public space usually are heavy, sturdy, permanent, made of stone or bronze, and quite big.

Paul McCarthy's inflatable sculptures are even bigger, but light, filled with compressed air, a bit unstable, temporary, often brightly coloured and to some viewers abject and shocking in what they depict or represent. The subtitle of the show 'Air Pressure', here at the University Complex at the Uithof, reads: 'The McCarthy exhibition at the botanical gardens is no picnic! Or is it?' This subtitle underlines that McCarthy's inflatables claim a status as public sculpture – the works are intended to be seen by various kinds of audiences that will experience them in the public space. But the phrase suggests too that the works for some might be considered 'heavy stuff', possibly problematic or shocking in terms of iconography, subject matter and content - 'No picnic'...

To me it is an enticing idea to unfold a blanket and have a picnic at the university gardens, since McCarthy's inflatables installed here are of a truly remarkable nature and unmistakably provide us with 'food for thought'. Whereas, in terms of content and subject matter these inflatables cover themes and express issues long central to McCarthy's activities as an artist and sculptor and are clearly meaningful and significant within his oeuvre. They also, for their mastodontic scale and spectacular appearance, often bright colours and use of unexpected soft materials and compressed air, appeal to widely diverse audience groups.

Nothing is more difficult for an artist to do just that: bringing together these two realms – public sculpture which seeks to communicate with a large audience, which - at the same time - remains sincere to one's core intentions and artistic practices.

This convergence is a rare quality, which artists only seldom successfully and convincingly achieve. To work in an innovative, original way for the public space and for a varied general audience, is something special – and very different from the activities of artists working in the more autonomous, 'private' sphere or in the neutral museum space, without the considerations of how large, mixed audiences will react to them.

In the public space an artist has to relate to a wide range of audience groups, with different degrees of understanding of what art is, what it aims at, and what it wants to express.

Some people may even think of some of the inflatables at the Uithof as props for the entertainment industries, made to advertise certain products or events. Thus linking them up with the ever increasing plethora of images that are distributed worldwide by large entertainment conglomerates. The works thus are not perceived as being part of the visual arts. And neither would the visual processes be recognised that the artist has implemented, to lift his visual material from the commercial arena, and transcend it into the realm of sculpture.

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PRESSURE
PAUL
McCARTHY**

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Others perhaps recognize the artistic signature of McCarthy, but they might take offense to what is being represented or proposed by the artist. Not everybody will immediately be aesthetically carried away or make sense of a huge inflatable sculpture representing a butt plug, or of a monumental garden gnome carrying such an item. Perhaps they will not recognize McCarthy's references to earlier modern sculpture. Or his play with the artistic ideas of the found object, the ready-made, the montage-technique, and the associative connections these allow him in his artistic strategies.

One of the more obvious qualities of the oversized vinyl coated nylon inflatable sculptures is – I think – McCarthy's use of paradox. The paradox of these sculptures being much bigger than usual, and lightweight at the same time.

Or the paradox that they can be perceived as innocent and funny, and at the same time as disturbing and controversial.

The fact that McCarthy's inflatables often combine the lightweight and playful with the abject, is central to his practice as an artist. The inflatables can be situated very much within the core domain of what can be considered typical for McCarthy's work in general.

McCarthy's quite diverse oeuvre is a form of research into the multiple mechanisms of contemporary western culture, the symbolic – and less symbolic – aggressive practices of corporate culture and its political allies, mass media manipulation and blunt in-your-face advertising.

Since more than 40 years McCarthy has underwritten his critical insights into contemporary western culture with a rich body of performances, videos, installations, kinetic objects, sculptures, assemblages, paintings and drawings. These present bizarre and haunting tales, fiercely transgressive by their relentlessly zooming in on deviant behaviour, sex and violence.

By doing this McCarthy seeks to uproot and unmask the false realities of politics and commercial practices. He takes a provocative pleasure in subverting the language of Disney- and Hollywood-films, commercial advertising and folkish kitsch, which present us all too often with the values we might like to believe in. In McCarthy's universe however, there are no wide-eyed Pocahontas, singing fish or Toy Stories, but dirty cooks, porn stars, savage sea captains and rude Santa's. Bozzie Burger and Heidi are messing around in the studio and kitchen with ketchup and mustard. With such metaphors of bodily fluids all over the place, McCarthy presents us with an absurd, often morbid world of pleasure and pain, without any of the certainties that we seem so sure of in our over-regulated daily lives. McCarthy captures a disturbing, mad and dangerous world in which the scenes acted out by his protagonists make clear that we may seem in charge of the world, but actually – his message is – we only vaguely know what we are up to. We are manipulated endlessly, not only by the false idols of consumer society, but also by our own subconscious desires.

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In his performances, videos and multi-media installations McCarthy presents us with a burlesque cast of characters who are the slaves of their grotesque phantasies. They are roaming around autistically in a world, unpenetrable and unknowable to themselves.

McCarthy in essence is a sculptor. From the beginning of the seventies, when he started to venture out into the area of performances and video, he has been transforming the protagonists of his performances, videos and installations into sculpture. In his sculptures he often uses the technique of assemblage. By creating a dynamic interplay between a quite heterogenous range of found objects he is able to narrate an ambiguous content.

Rotterdam's by now famous black bronze *Santa Claus* - with its Christmas tree *cum* butt plug - is a case in point. This six metre high bronze sculpture - devised as a model in 2001, enlarged in 2003, and since November 2008 placed as a monumental gaudy apparition at Eendrachtsplein in the city centre - is partly derived from McCarthy's video performances *Tokyo Santa* of 1996 and *Santa Chocolate Shop* of 1997. The Rotterdam bronze itself was the model of the 25 meter-sized inflatable *Santa Butt Plug* of 2007, now on show here at the Uithof.

The formal relationships of butt plug and Christmas tree certainly are an amusing and subversive insight, as much as the unexpected modernist Brancusi-like perfection of the shape of a butt plug can be noted. It was the coincidental parallelism of butt plug *cum* Christmas tree, combined with a small ready made ceramic Santa figurine in his studio that brought McCarthy to the powerful act of fusing them together. A messy Santa with an ambiguous Christmas tree - not your everyday garden gnome. This new ensemble, in its blunt reference to items of the sex industry, to bad taste and kitsch, to low culture and a hedonistic lifestyle, is provocative and clearly is not what everyone would like to face, but which in many respects are realities of our times.

McCarthy's work is an imaginative, tight knitted network of references and interrelations. The visitors who will venture out in the botanical gardens this summer - whether students or others - will at least get some idea of the phantasmagorical originality of McCarthy's practice. Whether they will have a picnic or not - they will certainly have a ball.

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