

# You Are What (and How) You Eat: Paul McCarthy's Food-Flinging Frenzies

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Paul McCarthy's 1974 performance *Hot Dog* was an intimate affair, enacted before a small group of friends in his basement studio in Los Angeles. McCarthy began by methodically stripping down to his underwear and shaving most of the hair off his body. These opening routines, performed without acknowledging the spectators he had invited, served to immediately re-assert the privacy of his performance and its locale, leaving the audience in the awkward position of having gathered to witness someone consumed by his own personal habits. In what came next, McCarthy put his visitors' most fundamental standards of individual and social propriety to the test. Artist Barbara Smith later described the scene:

He stuffs his penis into a hot dog bun and tapes it on, then smears his ass with mustard. . . . He approaches the tables and sits nearby, drinking ketchup and stuffing his mouth with hot dogs. . . . Binding his head with gauze and adding more hot dogs, he finally tapes his bulging mouth closed so that the protruding mouth looks like a snout. . . . He stands alone struggling with himself, trying to prevent his own retching. It is apparent that he is about to vomit. . . . Should he vomit he might choke to death, since the vomit would have no place to go. And should any one of us vomit, we might trigger him to do likewise.<sup>1</sup>

McCarthy's actions were uncategorizable, a quality that has been central to the artist's oeuvre ever since. By blurring boundaries and mixing messages, such works effectively dislocate—and call into question—ideals and values that underlie some of society's most entrenched norms. *Hot Dog* was uniquely difficult to stomach, even within a mid-1970s California art scene teeming with provocative work.<sup>2</sup> In her survey of 1970s performance art, Linda Frye Burnham noted the abundance of frank sexuality, violence, death, cruelty, repulsion, masochism and masturbation, feces and dead fetuses; yet

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ralph Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," in *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Smith's own contemporaneous performances—including *Mass Meal* (1969), *Celebration of the Holy Squash* (1971) and *Feed Me* (1973)—regularly involved both nudity and food.

she singled out McCarthy's misuse of condiments and meat as being "impossible for many performance audiences to watch." As Burnham observed, the artist had only performed three times for the general public, and each time his actions were stopped either by the authorities, the audience, or the sponsors of the event.<sup>3</sup> By the middle of the decade, Chris Burden's 1971 *Shoot* (in which the artist literally had himself shot) had become a performance art classic, but McCarthy's unrestrained gluttony was still too much for audiences to take.

*Hot Dog* marked an important transition in McCarthy's career. While earlier works (for example, studies in losing control, like running pell-mell down a hill and spinning until dizzy, or parodies of artistic practice, like painting with his face and penis) were engaged with the body and social impropriety, and showcased the artist's penchant for absurdity, with *Hot Dog* McCarthy's art turned noticeably darker, more confrontational and discomfiting.<sup>4</sup> As he began to explore the ways in which American ideals of the body are instilled from infancy by social institutions, and how these ideals are reinforced through routine behavior, food became his medium, and a blatant, often childlike disregard for food rules became his primary tactic of subversion. In performances such as *Class Fool* (1976), *Grand Pop* (1977), *Doctor* (1978), *Contemporary Cure All* (1979) and *Monkey Man* (1980), McCarthy systematically soiled plastic dolls with a variety of condiments that stood for "dirty" body fluids. In *Baby Boy*, *Baby Magic* (1982), he dressed in a diaper and a giant baby-head mask and performed a host of infantile activities—spinning around until dizzy, banging his head into a wall and table, playing with dolls, rubbing his penis—as well as smashing his face in his food, eating with his hands, and "defecating" hamburger meat, all while limiting his vocabulary to grunts, groans, and gags.<sup>5</sup> In *Mother Pig* (1983), he simulated urination on a cuddly, bright-orange lion (squirting it with a ketchup bottle held at his crotch). In *Popeye*, *Judge and Jury* (1983), he fondled a floppy stuffed bunny, rubbing various food products into its increasingly grubby fur.

Such performances politicized both ingestion and the ingested. Or, more precisely, they exposed the already-present politics of food

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, "Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview" (1980), in *Performance Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art*, eds. Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1980), 419.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of McCarthy's early development, see: Linda Burnham, "Paul McCarthy: the Evolution of a Performance Artist," in *High Performance* 8:1 (1985), pp. 37-41.

<sup>5</sup> For McCarthy's own description of this performance, see: *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), pp. 123-25.

and food rules—the naturalized protocols that we instinctively follow, but which must be kept invisible in order to operate effectively. Self-restraint, especially with regard to food, is a hallmark of modern Western civilization. From the rites and prohibitions of Leviticus to modern standards of etiquette, food regulations have allowed individuals to distinguish themselves from the “primitive,” while basic table manners—maintaining control, not throwing food, using utensils, sitting properly—serve as important landmarks on the path from infancy to adulthood. Social success requires an instinctive, highly refined grasp of which foods can be eaten where, how much can be eaten, in what order, when and with what utensil.

The intense reaction triggered by McCarthy’s transgressions reveal just how off-putting the willful mistreatment of food can be. However, this acute sense of revulsion stemmed from more than simply hard-wired disapproval. As Mary Douglas points out, such transgressions can be profoundly threatening because food taboos comprise a subset of a fundamental symbolic system: a “total structure of thought” dependent on fixed categories essential to the conventions, institutions, and relations of a particular society. Boundaries and prohibitions must not only be established, but exaggerated in order to secure the proper classification of behaviors and substances. “Defilement is never an isolated event,” Douglas explains. “It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas.”<sup>6</sup> Eating the proper foods in the proper ways is therefore more than simply polite; it both expresses and ensures social stability. The intentional violation of this structure is disturbing because it denies the authority of the symbolic system itself, hinting at its artificiality and its fragility while revealing the crucial role such a system plays in maintaining order. McCarthy’s actions were so jolting because he foregrounded and relativized a system that must remain both invisible and naturalized to function properly.

In *Hot Dog*, this effect was amplified by the implication that McCarthy’s assertive, self-conscious act of regression was part of a highly deliberate, if eccentric, personal routine—suggesting an alternative order in which seemingly innate bodily norms do not apply. According to psychologist Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, this type of staged regression—a deliberate return to the “anal-sadistic phase,” in which basic categories of identity and distinctions between

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 41.

generations are dissolved—is the very essence of perversion.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Julia Kristeva argues that abject substances and acts activate a momentary return to a primal psychological state, threatening one's sense of self and the social-symbolic order that constitutes it.<sup>8</sup> Kristeva combines Douglas's approach to systems with Georges Bataille's notion of *l'informe*, which is also rooted in a disruption of order via the dissolution of categories—and, indeed, both Kristeva and Bataille are often linked to strategies of repulsion and debasement in contemporary art practice.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Bataille places particular significance on rituals of self-abuse, which he claims “have the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual, in the same way that vomiting would be opposed to its opposite, the communal eating of food.”<sup>10</sup>

Whereas such theories certainly shed light on McCarthy's engagements with the psychosexual dynamics of disgust or *l'informe*, they do not account for the specificity of his references, particularly in the context of post-1960s America. If McCarthy's performances can be linked to a certain tradition of scatological art, they also belong to the lineage of Pop. His principal materials—hot dogs and hamburger meat; ketchup, mayonnaise, and yellow mustard—are patently American, the popular favorites of American children and staples of American cupboards, lunchboxes, and family barbecues. Like Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup can, the common foods that McCarthy features are emblematic of broad cultural values, edible icons of Americana that are not only mass produced, but symbolic of mass production and consumption themselves. Their symbolism both complements and complicates his work, allowing it to be understood as pointed social critique. Abjection is not only an end in and of itself, but a means of facilitating critique.<sup>11</sup> Performances such as *Hot Dog*

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<sup>7</sup> Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Regarding Kristeva and contemporary art, see: Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones, Simon Taylor, and Jack Ben-Levi, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993). Regarding Bataille and contemporary art, see: Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Kruass, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Georges Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” in *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>11</sup> McCarthy has consistently pointed out the sociological significances of his materials and the ways in which his work functions as social critique. In a 1993 interview, for example, he explains: “There are times when my work has been compared to the Viennese Actionist school, but I always thought there *was* this whole connection to Pop. The ketchup, the hamburger and

did more than simply upend ideals fundamental to Western civilization. They expressly identified American consumerism as the system sustained by those ideals. In this sense, ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise are especially meaningful, for they make archetypal American foods more flavorful, easier to swallow. They are mediums of ingestion, lubricants for the mechanics of American consumption.

McCarthy's approach evokes two competing sociological theories of contemporary consumption—theories that informed, and continue to inform, the evaluation of Pop, but which also had particular resonance in the mid-1970s, when McCarthy first turned his attention to food. On the one hand, the explosion of mass production in the 1960s has been seen as having dissolved the rigidity and restrictiveness of consumption patterns, ushering in an age of individualization and informalization, of increased freedom and a loosening of class divisions via the surfeit of product choices available to virtually everyone in supermarkets everywhere.<sup>12</sup> As Warhol famously observed:

What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too."<sup>13</sup>

Though such statements can hardly be taken at face value (and a work like Warhol's 1963 *Tuna Fish Disaster* certainly suggests an alternative view), the cultural politics of Pop generally involved an affirmation of mass production and consumption, at least in terms of their standardizing potential, their ability to level hierarchies, and thus contest the status of (high) art.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, this leveling effect has been dismissed as a grand illusion. Mass production and consumption are here seen as generators of extreme homogenization, of uniformity and social control under the guise of democratization—

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also the movie world. I was really fascinated with Hollywood and Hollywood Boulevard. I started using masks I'd bought on Hollywood Boulevard. One I titled *Grand Pop* intentionally, 'grand Pop'" (Paul McCarthy, "There's a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood," interview with Marc Selwyn, reprinted in *Paul McCarthy* [London: Phaidon Press, 1996], 128).

<sup>12</sup> Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste: Culinary Antinomies and Commodity Culture* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 100.

<sup>14</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "The Cultural Politics of Pop," in *Post-Pop Art*, ed. Paul Taylor (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 46-47.

what George Ritzer has called the “McDonaldization of society.”<sup>15</sup> As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, consumer society is founded upon this illusory “freedom of choice,” which compensates for new constraints. “The search for freedom,” Bauman contends, “is reinterpreted as the effort to satisfy consumer needs through appropriation of marketable goods.” Yet this satisfaction is always fleeting: appetites must remain insatiable for the system to perpetuate itself; consumers must always want more. The endless quest for freedom through consumption not only ensures continued economic growth, but imprisons the individual within the system, within his or her own desires. Overconsumption is therefore the key to social stability, achieved through unceasing individual crisis. For Bauman, this impossible but inescapable condition “is the major structural fault generative of an ever increasing scale of contradictions which ultimately this kind of society is incapable of solving.”<sup>16</sup>

Bauman’s view is particularly relevant to McCarthy’s performances, in which eating is always compulsive, excessive, and perverse. Eroticized force-feeding in his work is a metaphor not only for American (over)consumption in the general, economic-materialist sense, but for the imprisonment of the individual, for the forcible inculcation of consumer values by a society in which such consumption is so often equated with sexual satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> Food is especially suited to explore the darker aspects of consumerism, since not only is eating a universal, mundane, and polyvalent activity, but unlike the kinds of purchases typically marked with social significance—cars, clothes, and so on—food consumption is largely inconspicuous. And yet, as sociologist Alan Warde explains, “it concerns physical and emotional needs, is a site of domestic conflict and a key aspect of family formation.”<sup>18</sup> Whereas Pop Art embraced, and often accentuated, the shiny new industrial surfaces of American commodity culture, McCarthy has repeatedly torn open its packaging to reveal the vulgar, hazardous mess lurking inside. In *Hot Dog*, the

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<sup>15</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “Industrialism, Consumerism, Power” (1983), reprinted in *The Consumption Reader*, eds. David B. Clarke, Marcus A. Doel, and Kate M. L. Housiaux (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 58-59.

<sup>17</sup> As John D’Emilio and Estelle Friedman point out in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, the entanglement of material consumption and sexual satisfaction has been central to American consumerism since the 1960s. This alignment has, they explain, “placed the weight of capitalist institutions on the side of visible public presence for the erotic” (John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Friedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* [New York: Harper and Row, 1988], 358).

<sup>18</sup> Warde, 180.

mass-produced embodiments of this culture were not only rammed down the throat, but sealed in: he could not vomit them out if he needed to.

Such works followed a defining period in the history of US food production and consumption—which also explains Pop’s persistent focus on the subject in the 1960s. By the mid-1970s, cooking schools were springing up all over country, cooking shows had made celebrities out of chefs like Graham Kerr (the Galloping Gourmet) and Julia Child, gourmet shops had proliferated, and the American restaurant scene had exploded. Dining and grocery shopping seemed ever more consequential too, as activists aligned mass-produced food with worker exploitation and imperialism, and consumers became more aware of the dangers of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and fillers.<sup>19</sup> In 1969, Ralph Nader appeared before the US Senate’s Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs to draw attention to the “manipulative strategies” of a food industry that, in his estimation, prioritized profit over nutritional value. Nader cast mass-produced food as an agent of bodily violence and death—and he specifically called out the hot dog, or “fatfurter,” claiming it to be “among America’s deadliest missiles.”<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, non-corporate food markets and macrobiotic, organic, and vegetarian diets became popular forms of counterculture resistance. As Harvey Levenstein points out in *Paradox of Plenty*, his history of eating in the United States, this move toward alternative modes of eating was bound up with America’s more general obsession with food and filth. “A constant theme in counterculture thinking about food,” Levenstein explains, “was the necessity to purge oneself of the dirty things modern eating put[s] into one’s system.”<sup>21</sup> Mainstream Americans were also focusing more on nutrition and dieting at this time, and appetite control increasingly became a sign of cultivation. Where food is especially abundant, “bad” eating is that which is done solely for pleasure, in excess. With the exception of designated times and places in which stuffing oneself is acceptable—Thanksgiving, for example—overeating is a primary taboo, enforced through a ratcheting up of self-regulation and social pressure seemingly at odds with the American capitalist compulsion to over-consume. By the early 1970s, this antimony between self-control and indulgence was

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Iggers, *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex and the Hunger for Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 23-24.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 171.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

set; since then, it has only expanded and intensified.<sup>22</sup> Normalcy has become a state of perpetual conflict, as individuals are torn between the ceaseless drive to consume, perpetuated by ever more invasive and unrelenting marketing strategies, and the need for restraint, imposed by ever more intricate social norms. Eat as much as you can, but never eat too much.

Playing the buffoon, the enlightening ignoramus, McCarthy has routinely underscored this contemporary conundrum by acting like someone without the ability (or the inclination) to manage his own cravings. It is as though his characters took too literally the unyielding bombardment of advertisements urging us to consume all that we can, as quickly as we can. Again, McCarthy's choice of unmistakably American foods is especially significant: founded as it is upon an improbable mix of capitalist consumption and puritan moderation, American culture is arguably more contradictory in this regard than any other.<sup>23</sup> (To Bauman, the clearest reflection of this crisis is the fact that the two types of books most likely to make it onto bestseller lists in the US are cookbooks, which encourage consumption, and diet books, which prohibit it.)<sup>24</sup> And, as Mary Douglas makes clear, the greater the internal contradiction within a particular social system, the more sacred its rules become—and the more dangerous their violation.<sup>25</sup>

With *Hot Dog* and several other contemporaneous performances, McCarthy rendered explicit the erotic undertones of consumption, and the implicit correlation between material and sexual fulfillment. In *Tubbing* (1975), he sat in a bathtub and performed oral sex on a sausage; in *Meat Cake* (1974), he used mayonnaise and margarine as masturbatory lubricants; in *Heinz Ketchup Sauce* (1974), he performed an extraordinary range of sexual activities with a bottle of ketchup. These works culminated in McCarthy's 1975 video *Sailor's Meat*. Here, the artist performs as the female protagonist of Russ Meyer's soft-porn film, *Europe in the Raw!* (1963).<sup>26</sup> Done up in black lace lingerie, heavy makeup, and a seductive expression, he meanders across the room, methodically exposing different body parts, accentuated by cropped close-ups. Yet

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<sup>22</sup> Warde, 92.

<sup>23</sup> Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 119.

<sup>24</sup> Bauman, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas, 157.

<sup>26</sup> As noted by Eva Meyer-Hermann, the character is specifically based on a publicity still from *Europe in the Raw* (Eva Meyer-Hermann, ed., *Paul McCarthy: Brain Box Dream Box* [Eindhoven, The Netherlands: Van Abbemuseum, 2004], 70).

the work quickly deviates from standard realms of sexual fantasy, devolving into something unexpectedly abnormal. Having thrust a hot dog up his ass and smeared himself with ketchup, he positions himself on all fours and “goes down” on a slab of glistening raw meat, burying his face in it, taking it in his teeth, drooling and spitting on it, and finally rubbing it over his body. He then adds ground beef to the mix, spreading it across the bed along with the steak, hot dogs, and ketchup and thrusting his body back and forth with increasing agitation, as if simultaneously humping and being humped by it. Such antics continue for nearly 45 minutes.

Though instituted in the 1960s, the use of overt sexual imagery and innuendo to sell products fully flowered in the 1970s.<sup>27</sup> It also became increasingly nuanced. For example, overeating or eating the wrong (i.e. fattening) foods—already established as generally bad—began to be represented in advertisements as risqué or “naughty,” as an occasional (sexually) satisfying indulgence.<sup>28</sup> Complementing this sexualization of commerce was an equally intense commercialization of sex at this time, fueled by a series of Supreme Court rulings against censorship that proved a boon to producers and distributors of pornographic material.<sup>29</sup> By the mid-1970s, middle-class Americans were consuming their version of “free love” via a deluge of sex-advice books, erotic novels, sexually explicit theater, and soft-porn films, as sexual “liberation” became a sign of bourgeois urbanity much like food erudition did. (Alex Comfort capitalized on this convergence, modeling his 1972 bestseller *The Joy of Sex: A Cordon Bleu Guide to Lovemaking* on the cookbook form, naming its chapters “Starters,” “Main Courses,” and “Sauces and Pickles.”)<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, proponents of social constructionist theory were challenging the Freudian opposition between “natural” desire and “cultural” repression upon which the so-called sexual revolution was founded. In 1973, sociologists John H. Gagnon and William Simon examined “the ways in which the physical activities of sex are learned, and the ways in which these activities are integrated into larger social scripts and social arrangements where meaning and sexual behavior come together to create sexual conduct.”<sup>31</sup> Their approach was reinforced

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<sup>27</sup> D’Emilio and Freedman, 328-29.

<sup>28</sup> Warde, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, “Introduction,” in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003), xxiv-v.

<sup>30</sup> Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex: A Cordon Blue Guide to Lovemaking* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

<sup>31</sup> John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1973), 4.

by the later, more broadly influential work of Michel Foucault, who linked such arrangements to entrenched power structures and biopolitical systems of control.<sup>32</sup> Like the abundance of food now offered in supermarkets, the expansion of sexual choice and access was seen as enhancing, not challenging, such systems of control.

*Sailor's Meat* collapses food consumption and sex consumption, sexualized commerce and commercialized sex, literalizing a pervasive underpinning of post-1960s consumer culture and thus rendering it perverse. Both sex and eating are circumscribed by an elaborate array of protocols that determine appropriate times, places, and persons. Both depend on self-regulated, invisible, symbolic, and contradictory sets of rules, and both are controlled by a marketing industry that stimulates desires which are then restrained by the limits of propriety. Crucial to the proper functioning of each social system is the sense that such protocols, rules and limits are absolute. Food and sex can tolerably be mixed, but only under certain conditions and in certain contexts, which explains why eroticized food advertisements—or cookbook-style sex guides—are perceived as not only acceptable but ordinary, while McCarthy's food-fucking is almost unbearably offensive.

Taking the established metaphors of routine advertising at face value—not by binging, as he did in *Hot Dog*, but by actually having sex with his groceries—McCarthy exposes the precariousness of these metaphors, the instability and fluidity of the seemingly eternal and unambiguous categories that allow marketers to safely align material satisfaction with sexual satisfaction. His conversion of meats and condiments into fetishistic body parts and grossly sexualized fluids prompts a destabilization of signs, as mainstream materials are rendered marginal. Ketchup becomes blood, mayonnaise semen, and meat genitalia through processes of simple displacement. *Sailor's Meat* disrupts the process of placing meaning upon particular substances, exemplifying Douglas's contention that "dirtiness" is not some intrinsic state of being, but rather a condition entirely dependent upon context. As she explains:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing. . . . In short, our

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.<sup>33</sup>

Rather than simply “leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing,” McCarthy’s grotesque confluences reflect a twofold strategy of dislocation and relocation, by which he coaxes viewers to draw lines and make distinctions that are then rendered problematic. The quotidian foods work to desexualize the performance, while the explicit sexual acts render those same foods disgusting. *Sailor’s Meat* evokes both the supermarket aisle and the porn shop, but is at home in neither. As in all of his performances and videos, McCarthy renders the true identities of his materials obvious—the ketchup is taken directly from its bottle, the mayo from its jar, the meat from its shrink-wrapped packaging—and consequently viewers must oscillate between mutually exclusive readings: mayo as cum, mayo as mayo; deviant sexuality on the one hand, wholesome Americana on the other.

McCarthy’s performances suggest the intractability of a social order sustained to a large extent by the intricacies of food rules and sex rules, a message with particular relevance in the wake of the 1960s, when both material and sexual consumption were seen by some as liberating. His protagonists appear so utterly possessed by their sexual and gastronomic compulsions that all other concerns, including their own physical well-being, fall by the wayside. These characters are eternally trapped by their uncontrollable hungers, generated by a system of indoctrination that often runs counter to one’s self-interests. Indeed, consumers must be trained to participate in a system that cannot be sustained solely by “natural” desires; one must acquire the need for excess, for the enhanced sensations and “freedoms” promised by commodities.<sup>34</sup>

In more recent performances and videos, McCarthy has focused on the nuclear family and the media as perpetrators of this conditioning, which he always represents as either sadistic or masochistic. Physical imprisonment connotes psychological captivity, as his characters desperately try to escape their situations, but to no avail. Yet, arguably, McCarthy’s scenes of force-feeding himself are even more harrowing, since such works locate responsibility in the individual: we stuff ourselves; we submit to acculturation willingly and enthusiastically. As Bauman concludes, the power of Western

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas, 35-36.

<sup>34</sup> Bauman, 60.

culture's system of social control is that its abusive constraints are self-administered:

Consumerist freedom drags behind it a huge shadow of its slave origin. To satisfy itself it does not need to break the manacles. It satisfies itself by locking the manacles with its own key. . . . On the whole, it is a condition of consumption that the body is trained into a capacity to will and absorb more marketable goods, and that routines are instilled, through self-inflicted drill, which make possible just that.<sup>35</sup>

In the twenty-first century, McCarthy's work is more relevant than ever. The recent economic collapse—and the highly publicized “crisis in consumer confidence” that accompanied it—has revealed how crucial overconsumption is to the American system, and how precarious that system may actually be. Meanwhile, American culture today is obsessed with both what we eat and how we eat, from the latest diet fads and health trends to the ethics of genetic modification and the politics of globalized food production. As the balance between consumption and moderation grows more elusive, our increasingly intricate eating standards help convince us that we are in control of our bodies and our surroundings. Acting like someone who has not learned the rules, or has simply chosen to ignore them, McCarthy smashes the double illusion of control—self and social. The reaction that audiences have had to his work confirms just how unsettling such a realization can be, made especially disconcerting by the suggestion that there is nothing much we can do about it. It is certainly enough to make one nauseated. Yet, just as often, the queasiness and categorical confusion produced by these performances and videos elicit another visceral response: laughter. They are very funny. Though seemingly at odds with each other, both vomiting and laughing are convulsive reflexes caused by internal conflict. Both are involuntary, uncontrollable, and potentially dangerous outbursts. And both remind us just how little power we have over ourselves and our world.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 60-61.