

PAUL MCCARTHY: AIR PRESSURE

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UTRECHT BOTANICAL GARDENS

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by *simon castets*

UTRECHT Amongst the rose bushes and rosemary hedges of the Utrecht Botanical Gardens, 64-year-old, Los Angeles-based Paul McCarthy installed ten enormous, obscene inflatable sculptures. Most were created between 2005 and 2007, when the artist was invited to complete a similar project in Antwerp, Belgium. It says something about the taste of the commissioners and the extent of McCarthy's offensiveness that he was invited to repeat such a large-scale public project in a European context.



Air Pressure celebrates the local university's 74th lustrum (Latin for a quinquennial period; the institution is over 370 years old wanted to commemorate the occasion with the help of a leading contemporary artist). What the kind Dutch students and faculty got was McCarthy's self-curated public intervention, the centerpiece of which is a 51-foot-high, 110-foot-long, twisted pile of shit. *Complex Pile, Shit Pile* (2007) is the last of a three-part installation consisting of an equally towering black butt plug and a duo of pigs, the smaller of which climbs on its partner's back, its head sliced off. The artist, as he has for many years, uses bad taste to investigate the communicability of a work of sculpture; the simple, fable-like narratives provoked by the latter sculpture combine the fantasia elements of sculpture in royal gardens, and banal garden sculpture. Ultimately, it's the ability to make grand swipes at good taste in a picturesque, institutional setting that's the works' most disquieting aspect. If some mistake

McCarthy's over-sized ribbed butt plug for a tree, that's just room for imagination. (LEFT: BLACK PLUG, BUTT PLUG, 2007)

Paul McCarthy's coprophilic sculpture belong to a long trajectory of artists dealing tying abjection to cultural trends in taste, and political taboo. But his balloon effigy of George W. Bush is a silly pun on "hot air," and already an easy reason for a dart in the Netherlands. More insightfully, McCarthy blows up props that recur in his grotesque performances, among them bottles of Captain Morgan's Rum, Daddy's Ketchup, and packs of Newport cigarettes. Elsewhere, when McCarthy has emptied a bottle of ketchup on to his briefs, he's referenced Hermann Nitsch's bloody political actions, localizing that violence in the absurd play of infantile sexuality. Here, the bottle's huge labels sit well above eye level. What elsewhere was blood here transforms into a simulacrum of the peculiarly American artform of highway advertising, in which the copy is as crude as the original.

Inflatable sculptures recur as a medium in McCarthy's work since the mid-1980's—and have figured prominently since his *Blockhead* and *Daddies Bighead* (2003), two flesh-colored, inflatable exquisite corpses of toy-like components—were unveiled at

Tate Modern. Fabricated from thick, industrial-grade plastic and attached to the ground by cables and maintained upright by roaring motors connected to multiple valves, they're unwieldy machines that seem to threaten the real safety of the viewer. (Last year in Bern, Switzerland, *Complex Shit* took off for an unexpected 650-foot flight.) If Claes Oldenburg's anthropomorphic sculpture of gigantism invoke a psychological threat to the realness of a body; in McCarthy's public, that threat is tantamount to a physical assault.

For McCarthy's brand of transgression, success would seem to lie in a complete uprooting of behavioral norms. But according to the coffee stall clerk, "most people are here for the butterflies, but they really like it. It is meant to shock, but we are Dutch, we don't shock easily." But then what's more a testament to the transformative power of the art industry, and more potentially offensive, than an artist who repeats, and a business artist who adopts the vocabulary of transgression?

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