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RESEARCH

A Santa with a Butt Plug: Paul McCarthy and the Obliterating Violence of Positivity

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Kitsch is often seen as the denial of shit. Kitsch excludes from view everything that is unacceptable in human existence. In Paul McCarthy's oeuvre, there is no such dichotomy. For forty years, his scatological work – wallowing in shit, pissing on food, fucking mayonnaise jars, walking on broken glass, re-coding revered artworks as trash porn, and dropping huge piles of shit on cities – has dissected the violence of positivity. This article suggests that McCarthy's 1970s performance work, his 1990s interactive architectures, and his 2010s automated environments articulate three distinct stages of this violence: libidinal, participatory, and automated, as enmeshed with the spectacular, experience, and information economy, and the aesthetics of the interesting, the zany, and the cute (Ngai). Pinpointing the devastating working of the late-capitalist symbolic order-disorder—an order that perpetually disorders—I argue that McCarthy's oeuvre articulates the passage from biopolitics (Foucault) to smartpolitics (Han).

Introduction

In an early episode of the Italian comic *Dylan Dog* (Bonnelli, 1992) an exemplary family—parents, two children, a cat and a dog—lead the life of hospitable bed-and-breakfast hosts during the day, and torture, maim, rape, kill, wallow in blood, and excrement at night. No matter how unbridled the carnage the night before, in the morning, they spring back to life. They are their usual, hospitable selves without a trace of memory of the previous night's transgressions. Magnified to a larger socio-cultural scale, the rage and the violence that manifest variously as

gross bodily harm, torture, rape and murder are forms of transgressive behaviour that defy visible and invisible oppression, personal and social injury, which, like the above episode of *Dylan Dog*, begs the question: is violence, physical and symbolic, a necessary temporary disorder, a cruel form of regeneration leading to a renewed stability? Or, is stability only a temporary respite from the aggression and violence that rage in human hearts, due to relentless class, racial, gender, ethnic and economic oppression? The answer is, of course: neither. The question is nonetheless relevant to the specific brand of somatic-cultural disorder that forty years of Paul McCarthy's scatological work—wallowing in shit (*Shit Face Painting* 1974), pissing on food and walking on broken glass (*Sailor's Meat* 1975), re-coding revered artworks as trash porn (*Fresh Acconci* 1995), and dropping huge piles of shit on cities (*Complex Pile* 2013)—have exemplified with accuracy, one could even say elegance.

In the world around us, physical and social things organise themselves into patterns. Patterns create structures and structures create systems that produce negative and positive feedback. Negative feedback negates disturbances and creates stability; positive feedback amplifies disturbances and creates turbulence. Both are strictly temporary, however; neither is durable or fixed. Endeavours to create a stable order of any kind—and social order is no exception in this respect—are invariably fragile. They require an entire armature of totems and taboos, commandments and laws about the demarcation of existential territories and the punishment of transgressions. In fact, the sole purpose of such exaggerated demarcations is to impose a durable, *ordered schema* 'on an inherently untidy experience' (Douglas, 2002: 4). Amidst the chaos of shifting impressions, marked differences between 'above and below', 'within and without', 'with and against' (ibid.) organise, sequence, and format experience. They construct a stable world by somatically and culturally inscribing taboos and obligations that reinstate the symbolic order. The symbolic order is the sum total of all socio-linguistic structures that configure the field of inter-subjective relations. Formerly anchored in the master signifier—god, the state, national identity, the party, community, or humanity at large—it is a tapestry of mutually semantically ratifying social performances and inscriptions.

In neoliberalism, the demise of the symbolic order (as the meta-value on which all other values depend) is entwined with the imperialism of economy, which has no content. Values constitutive of the semantically controlling (secular or religious) societies are here 'social commodities' (Arendt, 2006: 32). They have 'no significance on their own, but, like commodities, exist only in the ever-changing relativity of social linkage and commerce' (ibid.). Rooted in the fetish idea of the market as a self-regulatory mechanism, which brings order auto-poietically out of disorder (Hayek, 1971), neoliberalism systematically desecrates (traditional and local) rules and regulations that stand in the way of expansion. As a recombinant order that perpetually *disorders*, neoliberalism grinds habit, deracinates stability, and proliferates ever-new 'existential refrains' (Guattari, 1995: 17). While we could say, with Žižek, that systemic violence is 'inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism', and consists of the 'automatic' creation of excluded and dispensable individuals from the homeless to the unemployed' (2009: 15), the last five decades have also witnessed a steady rise of invisible, medial, existentially refrained violence. This particular somatic-cultural violence, formerly dictated by the symbolic order, is succinctly summed up in McLuhan's famous phrase 'the medium is the message' (1964: 7), which does not refer to content (watching a football match, a news item, or a children's show on TV), but to the medium's *somatic* and *affective* working. Building on McLuhan, Guattari introduces the notion of 'existential refrains,' which refers to the emplacement, timing and patterning of relations that install themselves 'like a strange attractor' amidst the 'sensible and significational chaos', on 'the existential territory of the self' (Guattari, 1995: 17). Indebted to the theory of non-linear dynamics where a strange attractor is a perpetually changing organising principle that changes shape, direction, and velocity, yet remains clearly recognisable as a strange attractor (Hayles, 1990: 252), existential refrains mark the confluence of technical and perceptual forces that sediment as environment and behaviour. Moreover, they channel a very particular form of invisible violence, rooted in biopower.

Unlike ritual or sovereign violence—which is both explicit and explicitly related to the symbolic order—biopower refrains from overt violence: physical harm, torture

or killing. Instead, it disciplines through scientific knowledge, wellbeing, and care. As Oksala notes in reference to Foucault, '[w]ithout an understanding of the rationality of biopower it would be difficult to explain how we willingly partake in the profound and violent disciplining of our lives that characterises modern societies' (2010: 42). She goes on to state that 'biopolitical violence', which shapes somatic and affective habits, is 'more dangerous than sovereign violence because it is harder to detect and to regulate' (ibid.). Oksala could not be more right. In biopolitical violence, sociocultural mechanisms of subjugation, exploitation, and denigration are embedded in daily practices, media, and their pertaining existential refrains. Based on such notions as health, wellbeing, prosperity, and happiness, this 'positive' brand of violence is so powerful precisely because it is unrecognisable for what it is. McCarthy's work of the past four decades has consistently articulated the disordering effects of a socio-economic order-disorder that invisibly corrodes life while also marking a passage from the biopolitics of somatic violence to the smartpolitics of networked, avatar violence. More specifically, his 1970s performance work, 1990s interactive architectures, and 2010s automated environments bring to the fore three different phases of this violence—the libidinal, participatory and automated—as related to the spectacular, experience, and information economy.

Libidinal Violence in a Spectacular Economy

In 1974 McCarthy performed *Hot Dog* in a basement studio in Los Angeles for an audience of invited friends. After stripping to his underwear and shaving his body, he stuffed his penis into a hot dog bun, wrapped tape around it, smeared himself with mustard, stuffing more and more hot dogs into his mouth, drinking and squirting ketchup until he finally taped 'his bulging mouth closed so that the protruding mouth' looked like a 'snout' (Smith, 1979: 45). Describing the performance artist Barbara T. Smith writes:

> We [the audience] are agog with a wincing, dumb pain. [...] I struggle inwardly to control the impulse to gag. 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 (45–46).

The visceral bind of the mutually stimulated retching, disgust, yet endurance is, in this case, *not* mere audience support. In many Indo-European languages, the word for watching refers to holding or keeping as in the English 'be-hold', or the French 're-garder'. Holding by means of the gaze is something we do on a daily basis. When we see someone crossing the room with a coffee mug filled to the brim, we fix the person and the action in order to 'hold' the coffee in place. Even when not purposefully fixing, the gaze holds. The holding function of the gaze creates perceptual architectures, as can be seen from the fact that, on the internet, the most visited—the most looked at—websites appear at the top of the page. Holding by means of the gaze fixes spatial positions and orders perception. In *Hot Dog,* McCarthy locks his audience into a simultaneously exteroceptive (related to looking, hearing or smelling) and interoceptive (related to the body's inner, homeostatic functions) relationship by performing a seemingly serial action in a derailed way. The logic of serial, recursive artworks of the 1960s and 1970s, among which McCarthy's own 1970–75 *Black and White Tapes*, is entwined with the aesthetics of the interesting. Stemming, on the one hand, from the romantic notion of eclectic difference and novelty, and, on the other, from the informatics-saturated postmodern cognitive work, the aesthetic of the interesting is concerned with the 'relatively small surprise of information or variation from an existing norm' (Liu quoted in Ngai, 2013: 5). It marks 'a tension between the unknown and the already known' (ibid.). Ngai further notes that, in Russian, the word for 'interesting' is synonymous with 'pregnant'. One can say 'she is in an interesting state' which means that '[a]lthough she herself is one, there is another entity within her' (Epstein quoted in Ngai, 2013: 26).

The aesthetic of the interesting is about potentiality. It reconciles the formal, the novel, and the systemic, as can be seen from McCarthy's filmed performances such as his 1972 *Painting Face Down* where he paints a white line on the floor with his face, dragging his body from one end of the studio to the other, performing a recognisable formal gesture. In the 1975 *Whipping the Wall with Paint* we see McCarthy pacing

through the studio space striking the walls with a sheet drenched in paint. Similarly, in the 1974 *Shit Face*, we see him shit onto a piece of white paper, smear the shit over his chest, groin, neck, and face, then drag his body over the soiled paper on the floor. This gesture, like those performed in *Painting Face Down* and *Whipping the Wall with Paint* is formal and systemic. Shit, like blood, urine, or semen, is, in formal terms, a bodily painting material. However, in *Shit Face*, as in *Hot Dog*, we also see a different kind of potentiality: the performative working of a *corporeal* speech act. In many everyday situations, shit is used to make a statement, often about endured or inflicted violence. Suffice it to think of the Northern Irish prisons in the late 1970s, where, during the Dirty Protest, prisoners smeared themselves and the walls of their cells with shit to show the guards how they felt they were being treated; or, more recently, of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, where the guards ordered the prisoners to smear their faces and bodies with their own shit. While the formal aspect of McCarthy's *Shit Face* articulates *iteration*, it also unfurls a complex doer-done relation: shitting, being seen as shitty, and, therefore, becoming shitty (due to the edifying power of the gaze). McCarthy's relationship to the aesthetic of the interesting is, in *Shit Face*, far more ambiguous than, say, Manzoni's, who, in his 1961 *Merda d'Artista* produced ninety cans of his own excrement, each with a signature and a serial number. Manzoni's piece was imitative of systemic and standardised production. McCarthy's *Shit Face* and *Hot Dog*, by contrast, combine a formal conceptual logic with excess and drive-based unstoppability, characteristic of the distinctly performative aesthetic of the zany, which, in the current age, manifests variously as hyperactivity, accelerated growth, pollution, and widespread environmental devastation. As Ngai suggests, 'highlighting the libido and the physicality of an unusually beset agent' (2012: 7), zaniness is unstoppably productive, or, in fact, *over-productive*. Stemming from commedia dell' arte's *zanni*—the perpetual odd-jobbing, intelligent yet precarious servant, single-mindedly committed to a(n often) absurd course of action—zaniness suggests both an ordered linear development (like the systematic logic of the interesting) and the possibility of derailment, injury, and catastrophe.

McCarthy's derailed seriality, his simultaneous over-production and over-consumption is closely related to biopower. All forms of power—from ritual

prohibition to biopolitics—regulate what goes into the body and what comes out of it: food, drink, sweat, urine, excrement, semen, mucus, blood, menstrual blood, and, finally, children. Apart from controlling the entrances and exits to the body, the biopolitical regime, which triumphed in the Fordist-Taylorist productivist-consumerist era with a simultaneous 'optimisation' of labour and the perpetual stimulation of unbridled consumption, socialises the body in its productive and libidinal capacities. In both cases, the emphasis is on 'the somatic and the corporal' (Foucault, 2003: 137). The violent over-writing of the body's libidinal-productive capacities was at the same time the reason why many of the 1960–70s practices—those of the Viennese Actionists, Gina Paine, Carolee Schneemann, to mention but a few—used bodily fluids as well as self-inflicted pain. Variously critiquing the societal move towards anaesthetisation, the glossing of pain and misery, and the aggressive suppression of non-linear, top-down knowledges, such as embodied female knowledge, these practices also articulated the increasingly invisible modes of biopolitical violence that were becoming steadily less visible and 'steadily more immanent to the social field' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 23). This is why it is important to look beyond the symbolic in McCarthy's work. In Rugoff's interpretation, McCarthy's 'one-man orgies with condiments that substituted for excrement, sperm and blood' are seen as symbolic of the infantilisation imposed by consumerism; as 'enact[ing] a *theatre of regression*' (1996: 33; emphasis original). But regression makes us think of a temporary or, at least, salvageable derailment, in the same way that the psychoanalytic treatment of trauma does. Anything that moves backwards is thought to be able to resume its forward journey. The problem articulated in McCarthy's *Hot Dog*, however, as well as in many of his other works, is rupture of an unpredictable and extremely violent kind that destroys the existing existential terrains and installs new and violent, drive-based refrains. McCarthy presents a temporal embroilment of actions that occur all at once, as in a state of panic, amok, or a nervous breakdown while simultaneously 'hacking' the exteroceptive-interoceptive realm in a way radically different from artworks that remain firmly in the realm of the aesthetics of the interesting, such as Manzoni's *Merda D'Artista*. By coupling over-production, over-consumption and near-destruction with the body's

productive and libidinal capacities, he brings to the fore the profound violence of economics—a disciplinary practice par excellence.

Arising as a form of emancipation from the corrupted nineteenth-century religious institutions, the economic whole of the production, reproduction and distribution of wealth, retained the exact same logic, that of a single organising principle governing the 'cosmic clock's workings' thus homogenising all existing relationships (Gorz, 1989: 112). Predictive organisation, its chief tool, forces the heterogeneous principles of exchange and perpetual biosocial transformation into a method that *guarantees conformity* and insulates the strictly economic from all other spheres of life. This makes economics into a disciplinary practice which dominates all spheres of life by imposing a dichotomous structure where one part of the binary functions to alleviate the strictures of the other. Presciently, McCarthy equates excess with *necessity*, choreographing diminishing manoeuvrability in two pieces that poignantly articulate the spectacular economy's libidinal disciplinarity: *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing.*

Both were performed live and simultaneously filmed in a hotel in Pasadena, California, in 1975. In *Sailor's Meat*, we see McCarthy lounging on a bed, nude, wearing a blonde wig and blue eye shadow. After putting on dainty black lingerie, he smears red paint on his penis and buttocks, throws raw meat and spills ketchup all over his body and the mattress, licks the ketchup-drenched raw meat, then fucks it using an artificial penis, clumsily strapped to his own. After shoving the artificial penis into a mayonnaise jar, he lies on his back pushing the now detached penis further and further down his throat to the point of gagging, after which he moves to the nearby table, urinates on a sausage, licks it, smashes both the ketchup bottle and the mayonnaise jar onto the floor and walks barefoot over the broken glass. *Tubbing* is similarly overladen with libidinal refrains sampled from advertising. In a half-full bathtub, we see McCarthy slathering himself with cold cream, kneading ketchup-drenched minced meat, alternately eating and fucking it, retching, and, finally, washing himself in filthy bathwater. The spectacle of sensuality, and its signified— orgasmic bliss—is here taken to the extreme with the aid of, on the one hand, very real physical violence (McCarthy shoves an artificial penis down his throat to the point

of gagging), and, on the other, the violence of the spectacle—the soft porn staging—which re-organises existential refrains by installing engineered drives. In both *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*, the entwinement of real, visible, and symbolic, invisible violence, is mirrored in the parallel use of live performance and film. Physical violence is, of course, concrete and locatable. Symbolic violence is elusive to such a degree that 'those exposed to it' tend to 'question themselves', rather than the cultural codes that produce it (Morgan and Björkert, 2006: 448). Despite the fact that audiences do not usually interrupt live performances, the possibility of interruption and intervention is implicit in the medium. Film, by contrast, renders this possibility abstract and elusive, as only qualified individuals—film editors—usually intervene in the filmed (i.e. sequence-locked) course of action. A similar embroilment of concreteness and abstraction is present in McCarthy's use of actual bodily fluids, urine, accidental ones, blood, and condiments like ketchup. In his later work McCarthy will increasingly use the all-American brand Daddies Ketchup, adding yet another layer of spectacular-incestuous violence to his repertoire of bizarre sexual activities. An amateurish stand-in for blood, or, better said, a stand-in for a stand-in, ketchup derails the logic of signification, just like McCarthy's pansexual treatment of objects and products derails the logic of eroticism. Both bear a striking semblance to the theory of marginal utility. In this theory, objects and products have no intrinsic value. They derive their value from the subject. Moreover, their value diminishes with every unit of consumption (Cross, 1993) creating a form of consumerist abjection. For Kristeva, the abject, such as urine or excrement, has an unsettling effect precisely because it is *neither subject nor object*, yet is linked to both (Kristeva, 1982). In the theory of marginal utility, the falling rate of satisfaction and the corresponding accelerated production of new commodities *binds* the object to the subject, and, conversely, the subject to the object. The engineered demand-and-supply loop creates a simulacrum, a communicational system in which the consumer's conception of reality, their identity, as well as their *function* within that reality, is forged in the incestuous cross-pollination of spectacles that form part 'of the endless, libidinally violent stream of signs' (Baudrillard, 2001: 41).

The Violence of Participation

As Foster notes in *The Return of the Real*, the 1990s, the dawn of the digital age and new and steadily proliferating forms of connectivity, were marked by two distinct tendencies in art: abjection and socially engaged practices. The category of abject art, in which McCarthy's work is usually placed, challenges 'cynicism with abjection' (Foster, 1996: 123). The cynicism that Foster is referring to is related to two factors: the obligatory 'happy subject', which, as Ahmed argues, has spurred the need to create the 'unhappy object', often found in abject art (2010: 47), and the Baudrillardian simulacric 'floating signifier', which, as Piet notes in *The Emotions Market*, no longer signifies objects, but signifiers (2006: 56). The appropriation of the signifying chain places the consumer in the position of a cultural DJ who ceaselessly samples and recombines fashion and cultural items to create new semantic tapestries. For Foster, the abject art of the 1990s employs 'imbecilism, infantilism, or autism [in a] paradoxical defense of the already damaged, defeated, or dead' (1996: 124). It is a form of public outrage as well as mourning. McCarthy's work of the 1990s undoubtedly continues in the zany, playful-cynical mode while simultaneously revealing the claustrophobic enclosure of the socio-economic system the cynical attitude is a reaction to. The early 1990s were the beginning of globalisation, standardisation and accelerated recombination. Many of the works McCarthy produced in this period were remediations of his previous works; appropriations of Disney's characters, such as *Pinnochio* and *Heidi*, or re-enactments of radical performance art, such as that of Acconci.

Although the cultural move towards resurrecting the past—not as personal experience but as a commodity—was clearly noticeable in the early 1990s, in McCarthy's work, this remediating tendency goes back to the 1980s, a time when he retired from performance. Having produced a sculpture entitled *Trunks*, which consisted of suitcases with objects he had used in his performances between 1972 and 1983, McCarthy integrated *Trunks* into a 1991 installation titled *Assortment*. Among other items, *Assortment* contained a 1982 body-as-object sculpture called *Human Object*. Made from a wooden box, the object was 'a shapeless gaping "mouth"' attached to 'a penis and vagina and interior plumbing that led to a type of anus, which could be plugged up or left unplugged' (Ruggoff, 1996: 54). When exhibited, the visitors

were asked to feed *Human Object* and dispose of its excretions. Unlike the above-described derailed filmed performances, the simulacric enclosure of consumption and excretion is here embedded in participation. The turn to interactivity, a hallmark of the 1990s, could also be seen in *Bossy Burger* and *Pinnochio*. A grotesque improvisation on a television cooking show, and a re-enactment of a famous fairly tale respectively, *Bossy Burger* and *Pinnochio* were both shown as videos within the sets where they were shot. This double use of the set, as found object, reiterated the claustrophobic bind of the retro (existential) refrain, spatially and temporally embedded in an interactional architecture.

McCarthy often uses the phrase 'architecture of the body' to refer both to the body as architecture—a container of organs—and to his remediated performative architectures, remnants of past works, such as *Trunks*, or found objects, such as those used in *Bossy Burger*. This twofold function of architecture is perhaps most obvious in McCarthy's 1991–2 *Rear View*. A plaster sculpture of a headless and limbless body, placed atop a wooden table, *Rear View* entices the viewer to peer into the body's anus where a miniature model of a Swiss village is displayed. As Rugoff notes, 'to peep into the work one has to bend over in such a manner that one's own rear end is pointedly exhibited, transformed into a spectacle for others' (1996: 73). A similar recursive articulation of the body as a somatic-relational architecture is at work in *Bossy Burger* and *Pinnochio*, both of which are reduced to a confined space, as are the viewers. Both works articulate the repetitive refrains of the (supposedly innovative) experience economy and its attendant therapy culture. First theorised by Pine II and Gilmore in the eponymous book, experience economy treats experience as a 'genre of economic output' (1999: 2). A logical sequitur in the progression from the commodity, to the service, and, finally, the experience economy, it is defined as 'a series of memorable events that a company stages—as in a theatrical play—to engage him [the consumer] in a personal way' (23). This is done by 'inging the thing' or 'experientializing the goods' (30). Combining participation, multisensorial interaction, and total immersion, experience economy creates entire fictitious worlds woven of entertainment and escapism in order to create a branded, optimally competitive, and thus ultimately refrain-able experience. Like *Sailor's Meat* and

Tubbing, *Bossy Burger* and *Pinnochio* use tattered modes of representation, those that are already in circulation—television in the case of the former, participatory performative structures in the case of the latter.

A marked trend in the socio-economic climate of the 1990s was a shift in responsibility from institutions to individuals (Salecl, 2011: 16–17). On the one hand, this was the result of what Beck has termed the 'risk society', a 'systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced […] by modernization itself' (1992: 21). Fuelled by hyperproduction and the increasing levels of complexity, the risk society manifests as the attribution of all hazards to human decisions, which makes these decisions 'politically reflexive' (183). On the other hand, problems such as unemployment, precarity, and social isolation are increasingly interpreted through the 'highly individualized idiom of therapeutic discourse' (Furedi, 2004: 24) where 'the internal world of the individual' is 'the site where the problems of society are raised and where it is perceived they need to be solved' (ibid.). As Ehrenberg suggests, the invisible violence of frenetic activity and experience overload is inseparable from the tyranny of participation. Participatory management, participatory expression groups, even participatory entertainment 'constitute new ways of enforcing authority', 'founded on [individual] initiative', 'motivation and flexibility' (Ehrenberg, 1998: 199) that result in 'a notable increase in psychosomatic disorders and depression' (ibid.).

Disorders and depression are the obverse of the disciplinary imperative of enjoyment and fun-ification. Although Foucault repeatedly called for new uses of the body (1988), the steadily proliferating methodologies of fun-ification produce increasingly mechanical and therefore depressing forms of 'fun'. This is nowhere more evident than in McCarthy's 1992 *The Garden* the set for which was borrowed from the American 1959–1973 television show *Bonnanza*. In *The Garden*, the viewers enter an environment inhabited by two figures, a father and a son. At irregular intervals, the father and the son are seen—or heard—fucking trees. Their movement is smooth, mechanical, perfectly organised; having fucked one tree, they move to another. Enjoyment is here work; work is enjoyment. Both are utterly exhausting. As an aesthetic category zaniness is synonymous with the worker

performing 'dedifferentiated labor' (Ngai, 2012: 9). In the increasingly precarious global conditions, the worker is the victim of 'the casualization and intensification of labor' and 'the creeping extension of the working day' (10). The imperative to increase productivity at all costs is here enmeshed with the biopolitical violence of overexertion. Unlike the spectacular economy's exhaustion of eroticism through advertising, the experience economy's zaniness turns spatial structures and objects into (fun-ified) activities. Frenetic activity is here coupled with the multiplication of existing product lines through endless variation as can be seen from such products as Nestle's coffee with the taste of tea.

The re-purposing of the product, the aim of which is to create wider appeal, expand into new markets, and increase the profits, can also be seen in McCarthy's 1995 collaboration with Kelly on a remake of Acconci's 1970s works *Focal Point*, *Claim*, and *Theme Song*, entitled *Fresh Acconci*. In the original works, Acconci performs alone, in front of the video camera, exploring the relationship between the camera and the viewer; in *Contacts* and *Pryings* he is joined by Kathy Dillon. We see Acconci blindfolded, trying to guess the location of Dillon's hand, which is moving over his body. In *Pryings*, he makes repeated attempts to pry open Dillon's closed eyes. However, in *Fresh Acconci*, McCarthy and Kelly do not semantically reconfigure Acconci's work. They transplant it to another genre hiring porn actors to perform Acconci's and Dillon's actions. This is very different from much of the re-performed performance art, for example, Abramović's 2005 *Seven Easy Pieces*, in which she re-performed the work of Beuys, Valie Export, and Acconci, among others. Re-performing Acconci's *Seedbed*, she re-interpreted the work by assigning a differently gendered body to the action of masturbating under the gallery floor. McCarthy and Kelly do no such thing. Instead, with reference to Barney, they state that the bodywork of the 1990s 'performs the function of a specialized sub-cultural erotica for the artworld despite its deconstructive pretensions' (McCarthy and Kelly in Monk, 2000: 16). By outsourcing the performance of a revered artist's work to a traditionally devalued sub-genre—soft porn, which, unlike hardcore porn, can be shown to a much wider audience—McCarthy and Kelly both 'ing the thing', and employ strategies commonly used by global corporations to outsource menial work

to the so-called 'third world'. McCarthy's cultivated 'lowbrow' attitude to his work whose 'blatant idiocy soil[s] the philosophical integrity of many of his predecessors' (Levine, 2013: 26) as well as his remediating practices—which consist of potent gestures, such as the objects deposited in *Trunks*—but also of sheer recycling, point to the era of the smartpolitics of 'like' (Han, 2017: 35). The perpetual re-styling and re-tailoring of products and services to suit every single taste, enables both a new technology of power and a new form of violence, which does not seek to discipline or guide, but to please. The smartpolitics of engagement, based on ceaseless interaction and recursive communicational arborisations of likes and followers, creates new relational architectures and installs new existential refrains.

The Automated Violence of Self-Exploitation

McCarthy's work of the last decade, *Pig Island*, which took seven years to complete, 2003–2010, and was first exhibited in 2011, just like his 2011 *King*, the 2013 *Complex Pile*, and the 2014 *Chocolate Factory*, are increasingly cute. To be sure, *Pig Island* and *The King*, exhibited at Hauser & Wirth in London in 2011–2012 as *The King, The Island, The Train, and The House*, are chaotic environments. *Pig Island* is essentially the waste that gradually accumulated in McCarthy's studio over a period of seven years, including recycled body parts, those of the various fairy tale creatures such as the seven dwarves, his own, and characters like George Bush, who, in the exhibition, is seen mechanically sodomising pigs like a well-functioning *perpetuum mobile*. Everything is in a process of steady decomposition, demolition and unstoppable—because automated—injury. The distinctly zany aesthetic of his former participatory works and body architectures is here cutely de-formed. As an aesthetic category, cuteness is characterised by the desire to merge with the familiar and the gratifying, if un-formed or de-formed object; it speaks to the need 'to inhabit a concrete, qualitative world of use as opposed to one of abstract exchange' (Ngai, 2012: 13). The fetishism of cuteness is both a way of 'resisting the logic of commodification' and its most 'symptomatic reflection' (ibid.). As a cultivated aesthetic of powerlessness, cuteness is both pacifying and sub-textually aggressive. Cute objects evoke pre-individual bliss dissolving the subject's linguistic

proficiencies into gurgling and cooing sounds. Unlike cool, which is defiant, even sacrilegious—consider the 'distressed' jeans' late-twentieth-century appropriation of the Jewish *kriah*, a mourning custom in which clothes are cut or torn as an expression of grief—cute is likeable, and, above all, familiar.

In *The King*, a life-size model of McCarthy seated on a throne returns to the scene. In the video that accompanies the installation, *Cut Up King*, we see McCarthy cutting into the model with an electric saw in an effort to manipulate the figure from a corpse-like position into a sitting one. The figure jolts and shudders under the persistent, noisy attacks of the electric saw. McCarthy slices through a part of the genitals creating a vagina-like opening; the figure now has both a penis and a vagina. In the installation, the hermaphrodite figure is naked, wearing a long, disheveled, blond wig, reminiscent of the wig worn in *Sailor's Meat* and *Tubbing*. In the surrounding gallery space, hardcore pornography is displayed. Despite the fact that there is no lack of carnage, porn, and a typically McCarthyian humor, a sense of calm permeates the space. Anyone familiar with McCarthy's work has seen him butcher the various casts of his body many times before. Ever since the 1980s, he has continually mutilated his own and other bodies. Despite this McCarthyian tradition, this is the first time that the butchered body is an avatar, or can be seen as referring to the practice of possessing multiple (digital) incarnations. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the realm of socio-economic violence is no longer biopolitical. It has moved beyond the body, into the digital zone, where violence is algorithmic and additive, and where it emanates from media yet unrecognised as media, such as big data.

Foucault's 'technologies of the self', defined as 'intentional and voluntary actions by which men [sic] seek to change themselves in their singular being [...] to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (1988: 19) which, for Foucault, was an emancipatory gesture of resistance against the biopolitical regime, have long been appropriated by neoliberal smartpolitics. Combining the 'technologies of the self' with the responsibilised 'dividual'—to borrow Deleuze's prescient phrase that refers to divisible and replicable, rather than indivisible or unique beings (1992: 3–7)—informational capitalism has

turned the subject into an auto-exploiting entrepreneur of herself. The combination of digital acceleration and global standardisation (of communication, desires, and drives) has transformed the subject into a project. As a project, the subject is *expulsed* from the space-time it occupies, since to project means to launch, both in space and time. In this existential exile, '[t]he auto-exploiting subject' is ensconced in 'its own labour camp' where 'it is perpetrator and victim at the same time' (Han, 2017: 61). This is exacerbated by two other problems: the disappearance of truth as certitude—the stability of basic assumptions—and contra-temporality. Due to the increasing acceleration and disappearance of the semantics of the path, a form of becoming associated with distance, effort, and expectation, now flattened into the instantaneous availability of all things and people, contra-temporality creates a sense of failed or broken connections despite the hegemony of informational connexionism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). By repeatedly hauling back past moments, digital recorders have erased the thresholds between the familiar, the barely recognisable, the semi-forgotten, the deeply intimate, and the so distant as to be unthinkable (Han, 2014: 58). This is why, for Han, 'there is no structure to the experiential world' (ibid.), only a chaotic flickering of images. Chaos here is *not* creative turbulence; it is a state of confused direction-less-ness caused by the 'the infinite speed with which every nascent form vanishes […] a void that is *virtual* and contains all possible particles and forms' which 'appear fleetingly and disappear immediately, without consistency or reference, without consequence' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 118).

Moreover, the accelerated passage of information, with its obsessive 'innovative' value-creation destroys social knowledges and precludes their 'emancipatory potential' (Pasquinelli, 2008: 93). As a continuation of repurposing and recycling, the recombinant semiocapitalist machine subjugates through the 'exhaustion of mental capacities' and 'information deluge' (Berardi, 2016: 68). In a crisis of overproduction, both 'economic and psychopathic'—since mental landscapes are saturated with signs that create 'continuous over-excitation' (Berardi, 2011: 111)—semiocapitalism is inseparable from economics, both in the sense of the increasing financial abstraction, and recession. However, economics can no longer understand 'the depth of the crisis' as underneath 'the crisis of financial exchange there is the

crisis of symbolic exchange' (ibid.) manifesting as 'panic, depression, suicide, the general decline of desire and social empathy' (ibid.). The problem evident in this collapse is so radical as to surpass 'the economic conceptual framework' altogether (112), yet without a viable replacement for the myth of the self-regulated market. Much of McCarthy's recent work titillates the artistic palate by creating recombinant chains of signification similar to the semiocapitalist ones. For example, his iconic *Santa Holding a Butt Plug*, initially exhibited as a semi-site-specific sculpture in Rotterdam in 2001, was, in 2014, turned into edible chocolate. Priced at a $100 a piece, the miniature chocolate Santas were mass-produced at a fully operational chocolate factory erected at La Monnaie in Paris. Apart from articulating the imperative of innovation through variation and cutification, the miniature Santas are also epistemically enlightening. They suggest a new relationship between the anus, the organ of capitalist accumulation par excellence, and the (libidinal nature of the) economic imperative, seen as a commandment that *cannot be disobeyed*. Etymologically, commandment, ruler, and anus, all stem from the same word: *archos*, which also means origin (Agamben, 2019).

Today, global capitalism makes use not only of 'political institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization' but also of these institutions' 'military enforcement of political decisions' (Berardi, 2011: 113). This means that '[f]ar from being self-regulated, the market is militarily regulated' (ibid.). The market is an *arche*-commandment that cannot be disobeyed. As any form of opposition to the invisible but palpable social, economic, and cognitive violence seems increasingly impossible, despair and the relentless straining of nervous energy push people to a radical form of 'passage a l'acte', mass murder and suicide (Berardi, 2016: 71), of which the recent years have seen many examples.

And yet—apart from such irruptions of 'inexplicable' violence, there is no violence to be seen. In smartpolitics, the politics of the 'like', based on over-positivity, the 'dividual' deteriorates into 'the genital organs of Capital' (Han, 2017: 6), or is relegated to 'waste'. Referring to the example of Acxiom (a company that trades in the personal data of about 3000 million US citizens) and divides people into such categories as 'waste' and 'shooting star' (65), Han points to the obvious fact that big

data (the new, enlightened statistics) is creating a new and extremely violent social order whose violence is more invisible than ever. Promises of a cyborgian existence here stand in stark contrast to the innovative forms of violence and control. Data, and their multiple arborisations, have become new existential terrains. Yet, at the present moment in time, this region is as unfathomable as the working of the gods in traditional societies.

Despite the fact that the info-semiocapitalist oppression is uncontestable, it is mysterious, which is why it has the strength of an inverted symbolic order, one that operates as an (analogue photographic) negative that shows the contours of what is not there. In this realm, where the body is obsolete, and where the position, shape and speed of the steadily proliferating existential refrains can be neither located nor identified, McCarthy's work, a perpetual flow of recombinant variation, has a pacifying function. Dropping huge inflatable piles of shit on Hong Kong—a work that, in an environmentally aware gesture, he comically titled *Complex Pile*—or manufacturing cute little chocolate Santas—betrays a nostalgia for a familiar set of rules such as the sequential mapping of time; spatial, temporal and semantic surveyability; a difference between pathology and non-pathology; professionalism and cretinism. For forty years, McCarthy's serial, derailed, re-mediated, manically repetitive work has articulated not only the ambivalent aesthetic of late capitalism – simultaneously interesting and boring, productive and manic, infantilisingly cute and perversely aggressive – but also its obliterating, ceaselessly innovative, forms of violence.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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